



Report

for receiving a Travel Grant

Countries visited:

Albania, Kosovo & Macedonia

Period:

8 May – 20 June 2015

Topic:

European integration – an answer to the Albanian National Question?

The fact or fiction of an increasing “Greater Albanian” nationalism in the Western Balkans and the role of the EU’s enlargement policy

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Berlin, 9 October 2015



Poster with the outlines of “Greater Albania” and the word “Autochthonous” (“indigenous”) in the window of a sports bar in Saranda, southern Albania, 19.06.2015

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1. Research Topic

The European Championship qualifier between the men's national football teams of Albania and Serbia on 14 October 2014 in Belgrade was supposed to be a symbolic step towards reconciliation in the Western Balkans. Both teams had not met since 1967, and the match was held in the immediate run-up to a historical meeting between the Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, and his Serbian counterpart, Aleksandar Vučić – the first visit of an Albanian head of state to Serbia since shortly after the Second World War. Instead, following its abandonment in the 41st minute with the score at 0-0 due to a brawl between players and a violent pitch invasion by a number of Serbian fans, the match became a stark reminder to the international community, above all to the European Union (EU), of the lingering potential for interethnic conflict in the region and the fragility of the rapprochement process for the states of the Western Balkans.

What exactly happened in Belgrade? The atmosphere had been tense already in the run-up to the match; due to safety concerns, the governing body of European football, UEFA, barred Albanian fans from the stadium. In the 41st minute, a remote-controlled drone appeared above the pitch with a flag depicting two key figures of the Albanian independence movement, Ismail Qemali and Isa Bolentini, and the outline of "Greater Albania", i.e. the borders of Albania as drawn along ethnic lines. Beyond Albania's current territory, these include Kosovo (nearly 90% Albanians), Western Macedonia (approx. 25% Albanians), and ethnic Albanian-majority territories in Southern Serbia and Montenegro.¹ The flag was grabbed by a Serbian player, then wrestled away by two Albanian players, whereupon Serbian fans invaded the pitch and led to the abandonment of the match.

The immediate repercussions of this incident were significant and particularly remarkable for their cross-border dimension: an Albanian group from Skopje was quick to take responsibility for the drone, and the abandonment was heralded as a victory not only in Albania, where the national team was enthusiastically greeted by

¹ After Albanian nationalists towards the end of the 19th century had unsuccessfully demanded autonomy for territories predominantly inhabited by Albanians within the Ottoman Empire, Albania declared its independence in 1912 with the outbreak of the First Balkan War. At the London Conference of 1912-1913, the European great powers subsequently agreed to the creation of an independent Albania but assigned large parts of present day Kosovo to Serbia and Montenegro. In 1921, the borders of Albania were changed once again, and again to its disadvantage, with the result that almost half of the territories inhabited by Albanians remained outside of Albanian state territory, with Albanians dispersed among several states.

several members of government and thousands of supporters at Tirana Airport, but in Kosovo as well. At the official level, Rama and Vučić exchanged blows on Twitter, and Rama's visit to Serbia was postponed.

For me personally – at the time completing a traineeship with the European Commission in Brussels – it was this incident, widely covered by the international media, which provided the impetus to examine in greater detail the link between the so-called “Albanian National Question” and the European integration of the Western Balkans, ultimately culminating in my trip and this report.

1.1. Preliminary Research

In my preliminary research, conducted in the first months of 2015, I came to three main impressions. First, the October 2014 incident in Belgrade is part of a wider increase of nationalist rhetoric and inter-ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans in recent years, not least since the celebrations on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Albanian independence in late November 2012 in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Then Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha from the right-wing conservative Democratic Party (PD) complained of “*Albanophobia*” in the region, which must be met with a “*process of [Albanian] unification*”, and promised passports for ethnic Albanians living abroad.² In light of polls in recent years which indicate strong, partly overwhelming public support for national unification among Albanians in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia,³ even Berisha's more moderate successor Edi Rama from Albania's Socialist Party (PS) has repeatedly toyed with the idea; in his first address following his victory in the 2013 parliamentary elections, Rama called on Albanians “*to advance as a unified nation towards the place in united Europe, which the Albanians of Albania and Kosovo deserve.*”⁴

Meanwhile, inter-ethnic tensions in the region have increased. In the most recent and notable incident prompting concerns over regional stability, eighteen people were killed and almost forty injured in a shootout between Macedonian police and a group of gunmen in the ethnically mixed northern Macedonian town of Kumanovo on 9-10

² Cited in Ivanji, Andrej: Der albanische Traum (03.01.2013), URL: <http://www.taz.de/!108163/> [Accessed: 11.02.2015].

³ Balkan Insight: Poll reveals support for 'Greater Albania' (17.11.2010), URL: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/survey-greater-albania-remains-popular> [Accessed: 04.10.2015].

⁴ Cited in Reljic, Dušan: Die ‚albanische Frage‘ nach der Wende in Tirana (03.07.2013), URL: <http://www.swp-berlin.org/de/publikationen/kurz-gesagt/die-albanische-frage-nach-der-wende-in-tirana.html> [Accessed: 07.01.2015].

May 2015, in what Macedonian authorities claim was an armed insurgency led by ethnic Albanians from Kosovo.

Second, the incident at the football match in Belgrade draws attention to a somewhat paradoxical situation: On one hand, none of the major Albanian political parties' programmes mention pan-Albanian unification as a concrete political objective – in fact, the party that explicitly campaigned on this issue, the nationalist Red and Black Alliance (AK), received barely over 10,000 votes (0,6%) in the 2013 elections and is said to no longer be a political factor. On the other hand, it is hard to deny that lasting peace and stability in the Western Balkans is closely linked to finding a definitive answer the Albanian National Question, i.e. to convincingly allay concerns among Albania's Slavic-Orthodox neighbours regarding an expansionist "Greater Albanian" political agenda. As a case in point, the incident on 24 October 2014 demonstrates that despite the appeasing rhetoric of Albanian foreign policy and progress on the path to reconciliation in the region at official level, the Albanian National Question remains a significant and potentially explosive political factor due to both the positive response that the idea of pan-Albanian unity meets with in Albania and the sense of threat it evokes among Albania's neighbours.

Third, there is a clear link between the European integration of the Western Balkans and the Albanian National Question. Significantly, the accession of Albania – granted EU candidate status in June 2014 – and the surrounding former Yugoslav states to the EU would mean that for the first time since Albania's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, all Albanians would be part of the same political unit, with the ability to trade with each other unhindered by economic barriers and to move freely across state borders. Thus, the EU's enlargement policy undoubtedly has the potential to diminish significantly the explosivity of the Albanian National Question and permanently change the political dynamics of the entire region; seemingly, it provides the solution to the Albanian National Question by peaceful means. While Albanian politicians have thus generally emphasised that the unification of Albanians can only occur peacefully as part of the wider integration of the region into the EU, this link has also been made with overtones that are considerably less conciliatory. Most notably, Rama himself stated in an interview with Kosovar television on 7 April 2015 that while "[Albania and Kosovo] advocate unification through membership in the EU", if the EU continues to close its door to Kosovo, "the two countries will be

forced to unite in a classical way."⁵ Although Albanian officials were quick to clarify that Rama merely intended to emphasise the close association of Albania and Kosovo on their path to European integration, one thing seems certain: Further protraction of the EU integration process of the Western Balkans threatens the EU enlargement policy's credibility and thus increases the likelihood that pan-Albanian nationalism gains an upper hand.

1.2. Questions

In order to examine critically the impressions gained from my preliminary research, I condensed my research interests in two groups of questions:

1. To what extent is the political idea of pan-Albanian unity appealing to the wider Albanian public and particularly to young Albanians in their late teens and twenties?⁶

To what extent are they concerned with the situation of Albanians in neighbouring countries? What priority do they assign to the Albanian National Question with respect to economic and social questions? How do they perceive the way in which national politicians deal with the issue? To what extent do young Albanians have the impression that nationalism is increasing in their respective country and in the region, and how do they explain a possible increase?

2. What is the opinion of young Albanians on a future accession of their respective country to the EU, and to what extent do they view accession in association with the Albanian National Question?

To what extent do they view EU membership as a means to an end – to greater prosperity, or perhaps even to the (peaceful) achievement of Albanian national unity? Has the EU become less attractive in their eyes due to the lack of an immediate prospect of membership? To what extent do they relate possible disappointment with the EU to any increase of nationalism in politics and in the general public?

⁵ Cited in EurActiv: 'Greater Albania' statement awakens old ghosts in Balkans (10.04.2015), URL: <http://www.euractiv.com/sections/enlargement/greater-albania-statement-awakens-old-ghosts-balkans-313685> [Accessed: 29.09.2015].

⁶ The opinions of this age group carry particular weight in Albania and the surrounding states due to the demographic situation in these countries – nearly 40% of Albania's population is below the age of 25, and about 44% in Kosovo.

2. Preparations

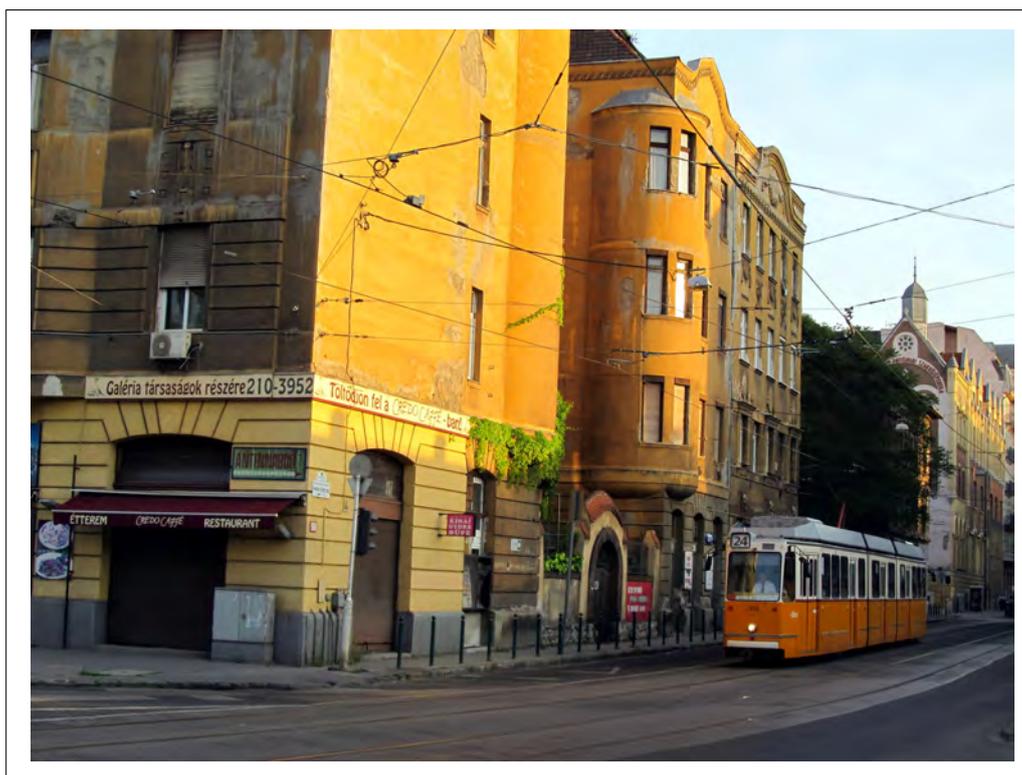
Although my main travel motivation was a fascination with Albania in particular, I quickly realised in the course of my research that in order to do justice to the cross-border nature of the research topic, I needed to extend the scope of my enquiry to include the neighbouring states Kosovo (about 1.71 million Kosovo-Albanians) and Macedonia (nearly 530,000 million Macedonian-Albanians); I realised that the immediate comparison of responses from Albanians living in different states to the same questions would constitute a significant added value.

My primary objective was to enter into personal conversations about my topic with as many Albanians in these three countries as possible, particularly with young Albanians. Subsequently – aware of the sensitive nature of some of my questions, which could potentially evoke strong emotions – I pursued a two-pronged approach in my detailed preparations in the month before departure.

On one hand, I decided that the most fruitful method to pursue the research topic would be to conduct my conversations as dialogues which I flexibly adapt to the respective situation rather than as standardised interviews based on a pre-determined questionnaire. I therefore arranged meetings with only four interlocutors prior to my departure, which I hoped would prove to be multipliers and refer me to further local contacts. Theresia Thöglhofer, an Associate Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) specialising on EU enlargement and the Western Balkans, was particularly helpful in providing me with the names of think tanks and recommending specific interlocutors to me in the countries in question. Additionally, I acquired two contacts in Albania from my father, who had previously undertaken several work visits to the region, albeit as a research geologist; these proved very helpful not only for my research but also as points of contact for general orientation during my travels. Furthermore, I built on my preliminary research by keeping up-to-date on developments relevant to my topic and conducting a phone interview on 24 April 2015 with Dušan Reljić, Head of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs' (SWP) office in Brussels, who has published widely on the topic.

On the other hand – aside from these detailed preparations – I came to the conclusion that it would be most expedient to meet young people spontaneously. Consequently, I drew up my preliminary itinerary to include in particular larger

university towns, where I hoped to find interlocutors in libraries and other relevant student venues. Furthermore, since public transport in all three countries is very cheap by Western European standards, I planned to travel frequently and, with a few exceptions, spend no more than 2-3 nights at each destination rather than longer periods in fewer places, thereby gaining ample opportunity to make new acquaintances on the road. However, apart from buying in advance a bus ticket Berlin-Budapest at the beginning and a plane ticket Corfu-Berlin at the end of my trip, I purposely made no reservations or bookings in order to maximise my flexibility.



Budapest, Hungary, 09.05.2015

3. Itinerary

The following table contains the detailed itinerary of my trip as carried out between May 8 and June 20, 2015, including the places visited, the corresponding dates, and, if applicable, the means of transport as well as a comprehensive list of the names and corresponding organisations of the people with whom I had extensive conversations about my research topic. The latter is not, of course, intended to be an exhaustive list of all the people I talked to over the course of my travels; in fact, I gained many impressions and insights from people with whom I conversed only briefly and whose contact details I consequently did not note.⁷

Regarding my travel route, I proceeded generally from north to south, initially travelling by road and rail from Berlin via Belgrade to Ulcinj, the southernmost town in Montenegro, which is inhabited predominantly by ethnic Albanians. From Ulcinj, I crossed over the border to Shkodër, the economic and cultural centre of northern Albania, and subsequently proceeded to move eastward towards Kosovo, where I visited the country's second largest city, Prizren, as well as the capital, Prishtina. Inbetween, I briefly returned to Albania's relatively remote and mountainous north and visited the small town of Kukës close to the border with Kosovo. Subsequently, I spent a week travelling through Kosovo's southern neighbour Macedonia, visiting, inter alia, the capital Skopje and the unofficial capital of Macedonia's Albanian-majority region, Tetovo. Following Macedonia, I spent the rest of my trip in central and southern Albania, particularly in Tirana, where I had the longest stay of the entire trip (6 nights). After visiting the UNESCO world heritage site Berat, I drove southwards via Vlora along the beautiful southern Albanian coast to Saranda, a tourist town in close vicinity to the Greek border. Finally, I crossed over to the Greek island Corfu by ferry and caught a plane back to Berlin.

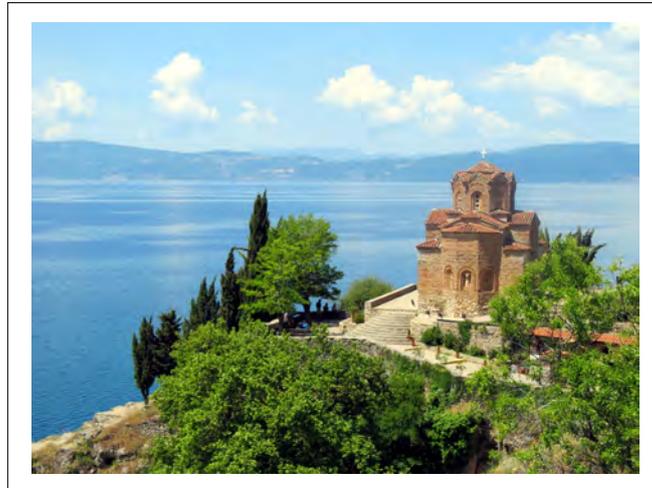
Throughout my trip, I had the great fortune that most of the places that I deemed worthwhile visiting from a research point of view were equally attractive from a tourism perspective. Consequently, I did not have to make many detours along the way in order to accommodate both research and sightseeing. The few significant exceptions, marked with an asterisk (*) in the table, were (1) the Valbona valley in the Albanian Alps, which I visited for two nights on my way from Shkodër to Kosovo –

⁷ For further explanation regarding the number of interlocutors (or, in some cases, the lack thereof) at my various destinations, please see Chapter 5 on "Difficulties and Challenges".

also so I could take the stunning ferry ride from Koman to Fierzë; (2) the route through Prilep, Bitola, and especially Ohrid in Western Macedonia, which I preferred over the quicker but less scenic connection from Skopje via Tetovo and Gostivar to Struga; and (3) two nights I spent camping at a remote beach on the Albanian Riviera close to the town of Himara, which stands as one of the trip's highlights.



Valbona Valley
National Park,
Albania,
18.05.2015



Lake Ohrid,
Macedonia,
01.06.2015



Livadh Beach,
Himara, Albania,
18.06.2015

Table: Detailed Itinerary 08.05.2015-20.06.2015

Date	Place	Interlocutors Name, Organisation if applicable
Fr. 08.05.2015 – Sa. 09.05.2015	Berlin, DE – Budapest, HU (bus)	
Sa. 09.05.2015	Budapest, HU – Belgrade, RS (train)	
So. 10.05.2015	Belgrade, RS	
Mo. 11.05.2015	Belgrade, RS – Ulcinj, ME (train/minibus)	
Tu. 12.05.2015 – We. 13.05.2015	Ulcinj, ME	Dijana , Owner, Hostel Pirate
Th. 14.05.2015	Ulcinj, ME – Shkodër, AL (minibus)	
Fr. 15.05.2015 – Sa. 16.05.2015	Shkodër, AL	Ada , European Union Information Center (EUIC) Shkodër Behxhet Shala , Associate Professor, Faculty of Geosciences, University of Prishtina Maldi Domnori , Recent graduate
So. 17.05.2015	Shkodër, AL – Valbona, AL (ferry/minibus)	
Mo. 18.05.2015	Valbona, AL*	
Tu. 19.05.2015	Valbona, AL – Prizren, XK (minibus/bus)	
We. 20.05.2015 – Th. 21.05.2015	Prizren, XK	Fatos , Student Marigonë Drevinja , Presiding Council Member, Lëvizja VETËVENDOSJE!
Fr. 22.05.2015	Prizren, XK – Kukës, AL (hitchhiking)	
Sa. 23.05.2015	Kukës, AL	Lavdrim Shehu , Project Coordinator, Youth in Free Initiative (YFI) Veton Sylhasi , Education Program Officer, Kosovo Education Center (KEC)
So. 24.05.2015	Kukës, AL – Prishtina, XK (minibus/bus)	
Mo. 25.05.2015	Prishtina, XK	Visar Rushiti , Policy Analyst, GAP Institute for Advanced Studies Albana Merja , Group for Legal and Political Studies
Tu. 26.05.2015	Prishtina, XK – Skopje, MK (minibus)	
We. 27.05.2015	Skopje, MK	Jovan Bliznakovski , Researcher, & Misha Popovikj , Program Coordinator/Researcher, Institute for Democracy “Societas Civilis” - Skopje (IDSCS) Agim Selami , Project Manager/Researcher, ZIP Institute
Th. 28.05.2015	Skopje, MK – Tetovo, MK – Skopje, MK (bus)	Orhan Ceka , Co-Founder, Liberal Alternative Institute - LAI

Fr. 29.05.2015	Skopje, MK – Bitola, MK (train)	
Sa. 30.05.2015	Bitola, MK – Prilep, MK – Bitola, MK (bus)*	
So. 31.05.2015	Bitola, MK – Ohrid, MK (bus)	
Mo. 01.06.2015	Ohrid, MK*	
Tu. 02.06.2015	Ohrid, MK – Tirana, AL (bus)	
We. 03.06.2015 – So. 07.06.2015	Tirana, AL	Andi Skenderi , Recent graduate/Former head of student government, European University of Tirana Eliona Balilaj , Translator sq-en, Crown Agents Mariola Qesaraku , Program Coordinator, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Office Tirana
Mo. 08.06.2015	Tirana, AL – Berat, AL (bus)	
Tu. 09.06.2015	Berat, AL	Marius Qytyku , Youth worker, Municipality of Berat
We. 10.06.2015	Berat, AL – Vlora, AL (minibus)	
Th. 11.06.2015	Vlora, AL	
Fr. 12.06.2015	Vlora, AL – Saranda, AL (minibus)	
Sa. 13.06.2015 – Tu. 16.06.2015	Saranda, AL	Aris Mateli , Student
We. 17.06.2015 – Fr. 19.06.2015	Saranda, AL – Himara – Saranda, AL (minibus)*	
Sa. 20.06.2015	Saranda, AL – Corfu, EL – Berlin, DE (ferry/plane)	

4. Difficulties and Challenges

To make one thing abundantly clear at the outset, my overall travel experience was overwhelmingly positive – I am very pleased with how many of my initial ideas and aspirations I was actually able to realise during my trip. Inevitably, though, I did encounter a few obstacles along the way which, with the benefit of hindsight, lead me to re-evaluate some of my plans and preparations.

The reasons for these re-evaluations can be broadly classified into two categories. In the first category are factors related to the timing of the trip, both in terms of the time of travel itself (May-June) as well as the period of time spent at each of my destinations along the way. Indeed, the time of travel was generally very suitable to my intentions. With local elections in Albania held on 21 June 2015, i.e. one day after my flight back home, I was constantly surrounded by signs, banners, cars with loudspeakers advertising candidates, and political rallies – in short, I was travelling through Albania in a period of heightened political activity and, consequently, awareness, which perfectly suited my research. Also, the time of year was perfect from a tourism point of view – early enough to avoid the large influx of people particularly from the Albanian inland, Kosovo, and Macedonia to their holiday destinations during the high season, yet late enough that most facilities dependent on tourism had opened and to enjoy good weather. However, it turned out that this year's exam season for students in Albania commenced on 6 June, i.e. the morning before I left Tirana and began my tour of central and southern Albania. Consequently, many potentially very rewarding encounters did not transpire because young people were temporarily not available, especially in Tirana, Berat, and Vlora. This was compounded by the fact that, despite my efforts to keep my itinerary as flexible as possible, several contacts referred to me locally by other interviewees could not arrange to meet at such short notice, since I was spending only 2-3 nights in most places in order to accommodate all the destinations I had planned to visit.

In the second category are two more general factors which contributed to my difficulty in finding interviewees at some destinations along my route. On one hand, I encountered unanticipated cultural obstacles in my approach to rely primarily on spontaneous encounters to meet young Albanians. Although Albanians are generally very helpful and hospitable towards visitors from abroad, I underestimated that particularly for young women around my age (early to mid-twenties), it is apparently

not common to meet a male stranger their age in a public place for a one-on-one conversation, even after I had made my purely political intentions quite clear. Of course, this conclusion is not readily generalisable – there are certainly significant regional differences in culture, and it is also possible, of course, that my experience was an exception. On the other hand – but more as a side note – I had initially hoped to meet locals by making use of the Couchsurfing Network, but it soon turned out that this type of accommodation is not yet very widespread in the Western Balkans. Consequently, I spent most nights in hostels.



UNESCO World Heritage Site of Berat, Albania, 09.06.2015

5. Findings and Impressions

By way of introduction to this chapter, a few general remarks. My ambition in the following is to present my personal, subjective travel impressions and research findings. Importantly, these are by no means imbued with a claim to general validity; this is, after all, a travel report and not a scientific paper. Much rather, the following is a brief snapshot gained over a limited time (not only) from conversations with a limited number of people, which nonetheless can be indicative of broader conditions and trends. Consequently (and partly at their express request), I will not personally cite any of my interlocutors or refer to them in conjunction with individual opinions; ultimately, this is about my own overall impressions. Regarding my approach, I will loosely structure my remarks according to the two groups of questions that I outlined as a result of my preliminary research,⁸ whereby the first two subsections of this chapter pertain to the first question group and the third and final of the following subsections corresponds to the second question group. I will pull these threads together in the concluding chapter.

5.1. “Greater Albania” vs. “Pan-Albanianism”

At the outset, it is necessary to refine two key terms. Several interlocutors made the distinction between “Greater Albania” and “pan-Albanianism” – the former denoting a crudely nationalistic and potentially violent struggle for territory with the aim to restore Albania’s borders to their pre-1912 expanse, while the more positive latter term refers to a process of peaceful integration among areas predominantly inhabited by ethnic Albanians, which is targeted at improving their inhabitants’ living conditions, thereby explicitly ruling out violent conflict over borders.

5.1.1. “Greater Albania”

There was general agreement that “Greater Albania” in its aggressive, territorially-focused iteration is neither on the agenda of Albanian political elites nor likely ever to be realised; in fact, it is presented not only by Albania’s concerned neighbours but also by the major Albanian parties in Tirana, Skopje, and, with some limitations, Prishtina as something to avoid. The reasons for this are twofold: First, the international community will not have it; redrawing borders around Albania would

⁸ See Chapter 1.2.

have knock-on effects on several other border disputes in the region, and too many diplomatic and economic resources have been invested – particularly in Kosovo – for the international community to allow their primary interest, namely the stability of the region as a whole to be put at risk. Second, politicians in the countries concerned do not want it. In fact, it was repeatedly pointed out to me that (Kosovo/Macedonian)-Albanian politicians are in fact among the greatest opponents of any noteworthy political integration between their constitutencies; a future larger Albania would require relinquishing personal power, particularly on the part of politicians in Prishtina and Skopje, whose influence would diminish as the centre of power shifts to Tirana. Much rather, as several interlocutors pointed out, it is the Albanian diaspora, particularly in Germany, Italy, and Greece, which – disconnected from the reality of their homeland and consequently prone to romanticising it – are often among the most radical in supporting an expansionist Albanian political agenda.

This is not to say, however, that the idea and, indeed, threat of “Greater Albania” is not being used as political currency by Albanian political elites. As people I talked to not only in Albania but also in Kosovo and Macedonia noted, there has been an increasing use of populist nationalistic rhetoric by national politicians in recent years. Interestingly, there was overwhelming agreement that this rhetoric is primarily employed with the intent to pressurise the international community and particularly the EU into advancing the respective country’s accession process; apparently, the idea of “Greater Albania” has been altered to the extent that it is now increasingly utilised in conjunction with the European integration of the Western Balkans. However, politicians also “[insert] the nationalist narrative into the EU imaginary”, as one of my interlocutors phrased it, in order to domestically legitimate painful reforms by the promise of pan-Albanian unification within the borders of the EU, which would help to explain the use of such rhetoric particularly in the run-up to elections. In short, while “Greater Albania” is nonexistent as a serious political program, politicians are increasingly playing the ethnic card for both domestic and foreign policy gains – including the promotion of EU integration – and will most likely continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

It is in this context that most of my interlocutors placed Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama’s controversial interview on 7 April 2015 in Kosovo, in which he threatened with unification “*the classical way*” in the absence of tangible improvements to

Kosovo's current international status.⁹ While some highlighted the discord between these words on one hand and Rama's intellectual background and usually conciliatory rhetoric on the other, there was broad agreement that this was a calculated move by Rama less than three months before important local elections, held throughout the country on 21 June 2015, and in full knowledge of the strong opposition which even the suggestion of unification between Albania and Kosovo would meet with internationally; Rama, perhaps frustrated with what he perceives as double standards applied to Kosovo by the international community and still harbouring resentment from when the EU refused to grant Albania candidate status for 4 consecutive years prior to 2014 all the while Serbia made significant progress, intended to display strength and increase pressure on the EU. Indeed, it was noted that Rama's statement is indicative of a wider trend in the region, namely the rise of a subtle form of euroscepticism among political elites that is characterised by the distinct combination of a very pro-EU stance on one hand and increasingly assertive, at times even openly critical rhetoric towards Brussels on the other. Ultimately, though, "Greater Albania" as a political idea remains precisely this – rhetoric.

5.1.2. "Pan-Albanianism"

What then about "pan-Albanianism", i.e. efforts to further peaceful cross-border integration of Albanian-majority areas in the region? After all, the EU financially and technically supports cross-border projects with its Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), including a whole range of so-called IPA CBC (Cross-Border Cooperation) Programmes that involve one or more of Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Thus, especially in light of the increasing use of pan-Albanian rhetoric in the EU integration debate in the three countries, it seems logical to expect not just words but also concrete evidence of increasing cross-border integration at least among these countries' Albanian-majority municipalities.

In fact, I encountered a diverse range of opinions on this issue. On one hand, several of my interlocutors felt that pan-Albanianism is already a matter of fact, remarking that culturally in particular, borders in the region have already become less significant. Thus, to name a few examples, Albanian television channels are broadcast in Macedonia and Kosovo, popular Albanian singers cater to a regional rather than national audience, and there are common "Miss Albania" beauty pageants.

⁹ Quoted at greater length in Chapter 1.1.

Since June 2014, when Albania and Kosovo unified their education systems, both countries have a joint curriculum, and there have been talks of introducing common textbooks. Furthermore, there is increasing physical interaction as Albanian tourists from Kosovo and Macedonia visit popular destinations in Albania such as the Valbona Valley in the north or the Albanian Riviera in the south, which I can confirm even from my relatively brief personal experiences while travelling in the off season. This exchange is greatly facilitated by two further developments: major infrastructure projects such as the newly constructed highway between Tirana and Prishtina, and international agreements allowing citizens of Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro to travel between these countries using just their identity cards, thus eliminating the need for passports and stamps.

With regard to political instances of pan-Albanianism, several interviewees remarked on the reception given to Albanian politicians during their regular visits to Macedonia and Kosovo. In Macedonia, I was told that Albanian politicians, even including opposition leaders, are virtually treated as the unofficial leaders of the Albanian minority, with the two major Albanian parties in Macedonia regularly competing to host their counterparts from the two largest Albanian parties PS and PD. Bilateral visits and talks at official level between politicians are frequent; for instance, I visited Macedonia just two weeks after a meeting in Skopje initiated by Edi Rama with Macedonian-Albanian political parties. Indeed, the Albanian Prime Minister is readily seen able to speak in the name of all Albanians when visiting Kosovo or Macedonia. On the other hand, however, I also encountered a number of more sceptical opinions, revealing that particularly in economic terms, pan-Albanianism is still far from becoming a reality. Thus, aside from general cultural and political trends that may indicate an increasingly closer Albanian cross-border community, to date there have been no noteworthy regional Albanian integration initiatives that transcend the level of rhetoric; in fact, while detailed discussion of the specific advantages and disadvantages of regional Albanian integration or, indeed, of unification between Albania and Kosovo may be taking place in scientific circles, this critical engagement is generally still lacking in politics, the general public, and the media.¹⁰ Crucially, this

¹⁰ Perhaps an exception to this assessment, the self-proclaimed “movement for self-determination” (*Lëvizja Vetëvendosje!*) in Kosovo is seeking to steer the debate on unification with Albania away from ethnical and towards economic considerations. Arguing that Kosovo can profit significantly from the bigger market accompanying such a union, for instance with regard to its energy supply, *Vetëvendosje!* currently enjoys widespread support also among young people, and is led by the

is despite numerous sensible starting points for further pan-Albanian integration – harmonisation of standards for agricultural products, removal of border tariffs, cooperation in the environmental sector. It is thus not surprising that in economic terms – despite an increase in Albania-Kosovo trade since Kosovo’s declaration of independence – Kosovo remains closer to the former Yugoslav republics of Serbia and Macedonia than Albania.

Thus, I gained a mixed picture when enquiring about the state of pan-Albanianism. While there are undoubtedly instances of regional integration particularly in the cultural sphere, there is still significant room for improvement particularly with regard to interconnectivity across borders. Indeed, it has very much been my personal experience that movement within and between Kosovo, Macedonia, and above all Albania is still obstructed by lacking infrastructure; travel within the region remains quite cumbersome. Towns I visited or passed such as Kukës and Bajram Curri in northeast Albania and Prizren and Djakova in southeast Kosovo could quite evidently greatly profit from further regional integration, as they are closer to each other than to the next major towns in their respective countries. In Macedonia, it is a regrettable fact that the connections between Albanian-majority towns are worse than between their counterparts in Macedonian-majority areas.¹¹ And particularly in Albania, regulated bus services are basically non-existent, rail transport is severely limited – it is not possible to enter or leave Albania via train – and roads are frequently still in deplorable condition, which in my experience regularly resulted in travelling times that are significantly longer than they ideally should be, for instance 6 hours for less than 200 kilometres between Struga, MK and Tirana, AL.

5.2. The State of Albanian Nationalism

However, if the political idea of “Greater Albania” generally does not go beyond rhetoric and concrete manifestations of pan-Albanianism are still fairly limited, how does this match with polls revealing strong support for the union of Albania, Kosovo and part of Macedonia among Albanians in the Western Balkans and with evident

incumbent mayor of Prishtina. However, it remains to be seen whether the party can or indeed wants to maintain its position on unification when in power.

¹¹ Indeed, I became acutely aware in Macedonia of significant differences in living standards between Macedonian-majority and Albanian-majority areas, both within the capital Skopje and between Macedonian towns such as Prilep, Bitola and Ohrid on one hand and Albanian towns such Tetovo on the other. Clearly, Macedonian society is not only highly unequal but also divided along ethnic lines, and the national government is, if anything, promoting this division.

outbreaks of nationalist passions such as those following the incident during the Serbia-Albania football match on 14 October 2014?

5.2.1. Albanian Brotherhood

In fact, it was my distinct impression that despite considerable differences regarding dialect, religion, and even culture particularly between southern and northern Albanians as well as between Albanians from Albania proper and those from former Yugoslavia, the sentiment of Albanian brotherhood and, by extension, the dream of pan-Albanian unification is firmly embedded in the public consciousness of Albanians; at some underlying level, the hope of a unified Albania is very much alive, and its final rejection would be hard to swallow indeed. Some younger Albanians I talked to viewed this nationalistic undercurrent rather critically; one interlocutor in particular criticised that among the first things young Albanians learn in history class at school are the injustices done to Albania by other nations, and remarked that the pervasiveness of nationalistic sentiment is a direct consequence of the ubiquity of this negative historical narrative.

However, while I did encounter the odd crudely nationalistic viewpoint, the great majority of people I talked to particularly in Kosovo and Macedonia rather stressed the notion of a common Albanian identity. Thus, in Kosovo, one of my interlocutors from Prishtina remarked that *“first of all, [he feels] like a human, but second as an Albanian”*; another from Prizren (born 1988) commented: *“I feel like an Albanian, not a Kosovar. How could it be otherwise when for most of my life, I have been perceived and discriminated against as an Albanian?!”* Indeed, I was told that people who identify as Kosovars and prefer independence to unification are in the minority, which is consistent with my – albeit fleeting – impressions. Perhaps, the trend is rather towards identification with Albanian as the nationality and an acceptance of Kosovo as the corresponding state; certainly, Kosovo’s independence has not lead to a decreased desire for unification with Albania. Similarly, most Macedonian-Albanians will refer to themselves as “Albanians” despite having Macedonian citizenship. An interlocutor in Skopje highlighted the official ceremony commemorating 100 years of Albanian independence in 2012, which was also attended by the Prime Ministers of Albania and Kosovo, as a particularly memorable moment: *“It felt like we saw ‘Big Albania’ taking place that day in Skopje; not a single Macedonian flag was visible.”* It

therefore appears that Albanians outside Albania predominantly equate their identity with ethnicity rather than with a connection to their country of citizenship.

Indeed, the most visible because omnipresent symbol of this underlying Albanian brotherhood is the Albanian flag; the red standard with the black double-headed eagle is undoubtedly the most pervasive pan-Albanian element in the region. As one of my interviewees in Skopje remarked, Macedonian-Albanians until quite recently viewed the Albanian flag as the flag of a neighbouring country, but have since come to accept it as their own. In Kosovo, by contrast, an interlocutor recalled that prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence, this was the flag of the Albanian population and consequently continues to be imbued with a much greater attachment than the newly adopted flag of Kosovo. Personally, I found the pervasiveness of Albanian symbols outside Albania quite remarkable; on several occasions while travelling through Kosovo and Macedonia, I caught myself thinking that, for all intents and purposes, I could just as well be travelling through Albania.



Albanian flags in
the centre of
Prishtina,
Kosovo,
25.05.2015

5.2.2. Increasing Nationalism?

With regard to my research interest, however, the key question is whether Albanian nationalism is markedly *increasing*. After all, this “*patchwork of imagined communities*”, to cite one of my interlocutors, is by no means an exclusively Albanian phenomenon; Serbs, Macedonians, and Bulgarians all have their own (mutually incompatible) dreams of a “big state”, all of which are expressions of the still

widespread notion in the Balkans that the superiority (or inferiority) of a nation is somehow directly linked to the size of its territory and population. Indeed, the majority of my interviewees agreed that recent years have seen not just a resurgence of the use populist nationalistic rhetoric by politicians but also a heating up of nationalist, i.e. pan-Albanian sentiments more broadly. Besides the aforementioned national romanticism and dreams of “greatness”, security concerns were also mentioned as a possible reason for this development – in light of events such as those in Kumanovo on 9-10 May 2015, as a result of which nine Kosovars were killed, and the perception of external security threats, a union with the NATO member state Albania might seem very attractive to Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia.

However, although one of my interlocutors explicitly pointed to the Albania-Serbia European qualifier as a trigger for more heated nationalism in the region, most interviewees cautioned against interpreting too much into what ultimately was as an isolated incident; despite their undeniable political consequences, the events surrounding the football match must be seen in context. Firstly, national temperaments at sport events are always higher in countries as passionate about football as Albania, not just in the Western Balkans. Secondly, emotions were running particularly high in this case because for the first time, the Albanian team – which incidentally is made up of players from both Albania and Kosovo – has a realistic chance to progress past the qualifying stage and participate in the European Championship final tournament, held in 2016 in France. When, following the abandonment, the UEFA controversially awarded Serbia a 3-0 walkover win – albeit in conjunction with a three-point deduction – this consequently created a public sense of outrage among Albanians, particularly since the tense run-up to as well as insults and violence by Serbian fans during the match had been extensively covered in the Albanian media.¹² Thus, while there was undoubtedly a significant regional component to the reactions, they are more accurately viewed in conjunction with outrage specifically at the treatment both of Albanian players by Serbian fans and of

¹² After the Albanian and Serbian football associations both appealed at the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) against UEFA's decision, the CAS in July 2015 reversed the ruling, holding that the Serbian rather than the Albanian football association must be considered responsible for the abandonment of the match, which was caused by security lapses of the organisers and violence exerted against Albanian players by Serbian fans and security personnel. The Albania side, however, was held responsible for the drone operated during the match. Consequently, Albania was awarded a 0-3 walkover win and fined EUR 100,000, while Serbia was deducted three points, fined EUR 100,000, and ordered to play its next two official matches as host team behind closed doors.

the Albanian Football Association by the European Football Association rather than in the broader context of “Greater Albanian” nationalism.

Based on my personal experience, I have to qualify the perception of increasing nationalism as well. I only rarely encountered nationalism of the crude, aggressive, territorially focused kind during my trip – indeed, several of my interlocutors pointed out that at the level of ordinary citizens, relations between Albanians and Serbs in particular are unproblematic; there is generally no more hatred between people on the grounds of ethnicity. Much rather, my overwhelming impression was one of a strong common Albanian identity uniting the people across their countries’ borders.

5.2.3. Identity vs. Reality

But the essential question remains: Why does this obvious sentiment of shared identity not translate into action, i.e. into concrete political demands? How can it be that polls indicate a wide majority in favour of unification, yet this topic is hardly publicly discussed, also not by the general public and particularly not by the youth?

“The youth”, of course, is hardly a monolithic entity, especially not when referring to this age group across three countries, but I nonetheless became or was made aware of several generalisable conditions and developments that can go a long way in explaining this apparent mismatch between identity and (political) reality. First and foremost, virtually all the young people I talked to in the three countries said their primary concern is much rather the dire economic situation – in Albania, for instance, youth unemployment is currently at around 58%, with nearly 40% of the population below the age of 25. In Tirana, I met people my age working in call centres for Italian companies for the equivalent of 2 Euros an hour at the age of 25, despite having a university degree. Repeatedly throughout my trip and especially in northern Albania, I was approached by people my age and asked about the prospects of receiving economic asylum and finding a job in Germany – interestingly, not just in the hope of (better) pay but also on the grounds of persistent rumours, even long before the developments surrounding the European migrant crisis as of August 2015, that Germany is not only accepting immigrants, but even paying for new workers to come from abroad. Indeed, many people only half jokingly asked me why I even bother coming to Albania when so many Albanians are already going to Germany. Ultimately, in light of this generally depressive state of the Albanian youth, the question inevitably arises (in the poignant words of one of my younger interviewees):

“How can ‘Greater Albania’ ever happen if all the young people just want to leave?!”

Quite simply, young (Kosovo/Macedonian)-Albanians seem too concerned with finding a well-paid job and too frustrated with the lack of future prospects for economic prosperity in their respective country to devote significant time and effort campaigning for pan-Albanian unification.

However, the expression of various more urgent concerns and frustrations should better not be interpreted as meaning that the great majority of the Albanian youth simply does not care about the idea of pan-Albanian unification – after all, polls show great support for this concept. Important to the understanding of these polls, however, is the persistence of what one of my interviewees described as a “lack of idealism” among the Albanian youth. Asked how they would vote if a referendum on unification would be held tomorrow, most people answer “Yes” – thus the aforementioned poll results. However, if the question were to be rephrased to the extent of *“Would you personally struggle to achieve unification?”*, the response would be much less affirmative, if not outright negative. Crucially, as this particular interviewee pointed out, even among the low percentage of young Albanians who claim they are strongly interested in politics, many get involved primarily because of employment issues, i.e. they join political parties to find a job. Finally, there is the widespread acceptance that such a referendum will certainly not be held any time soon; as a student in Kosovo noted, he is in favour of unification but does not express his support vocally because he realises that, at least currently, this is a red line that is not to be crossed if further support by the international community is desired.

Indeed, this latter statement is representative of a general attitude I noticed while talking to Albanians, young and old alike. While there is a realisation that unification is not on the cards for the near or even medium-term future, there generally exists at the same time a quiet, relaxed conviction that Albanian unity is an inevitability and, in one form or another, will eventually become reality. In this vein, several references were made in particular to the demographic development in the region, which is clearly in favour of the Albanians; while Serbia’s population is declining, Albania and Kosovo both have positive population growth rates. Macedonia is a particularly interesting case: While Macedonia has a positive rate overall, this is predominantly due to its ethnic Albanian community – the rate among ethnic Macedonians is negative. As one of my interviewees in Skopje pointed out, a law passed towards the

end of the last century by Macedonian Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski with the intention to stimulate natality has to date benefited mainly Albanians and Roma in the country. Ultimately, therefore, explaining the state of Albanian nationalism in the general public and among young people and, in particular, the noticeable mismatch between sentiment and reality is more about priorities than about definitive acceptance or rejection of the idea of “Greater Albania”.

5.3. Opinions on the EU

Besides the striking number of Albanian flags by the roadside not only in Albania but also in Kosovo and Macedonia, I was also astonished by the pervasiveness of the EU flag; indeed, both the red/black and blue/gold standards usually appeared in tandem, in Kosovo frequently additionally accompanied by their German and/or Swiss counterparts. Consistent with this impression, surveys in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia regularly reveal an enthusiasm for EU membership among the respective populations that current Member States can only dream of – numbers commonly around 80%, in some cases even up to 90%. While a few interlocutors did mention that EU membership is indeed also seen in connection with the Albanian National Question, in particular with the hope that borders between Albanian-majority areas will become less significant with increasing European integration, factors in line with the aforementioned (above all, economic) priorities of the people are of greater significance; for most, the EU is predominantly a promise of prosperity and better living conditions – a panacea for all the hardships people currently face in their daily lives.

In fact, it was precisely this idealisation of European integration (not only) among (Kosovo/Macedonian-)Albanians that many of my interviewees critically commented on, emphasising the need to qualify euphoric survey results that are frequently referenced by national politicians towards the EU as proof of their populations’ readiness to become full members of the European community. Thus, a criticism that I heard many times from Albanians themselves is that while most of their compatriots will say “Yes” to EU membership if questioned on the street, the great majority of Albanians are not sufficiently aware of what membership actually entails, particularly in terms of its costs and obligations. One of my Albanian interlocutors drew a parallel between the current enthusiasm surrounding Albania’s candidacy for EU membership and the accession of Albania to NATO in 2009; amidst the big public

celebrations and festivities 6 years ago, only few were aware that NATO membership is in fact costly, and, in light of these costs, reflected on whether it is really necessary considering Albania's relatively secure geopolitical position. A younger interviewee criticised that politicians capitalise on this widespread benevolent ignorance and use European integration as a "sedative" for the general public, instead of explaining to their voters not only the benefits but also the costs of joining the EU.

However, the opinion which I encountered most frequently in Albania with regard to the country's accession to the EU, particularly among younger people, is that Albania is still far from ready to join and needs to tackle various fundamental problems first – especially issues related to basic mentality and to habits which date from or have developed in direct reaction to the country's communist past (1946-1992). The pervasive littering, for instance, which is noticeable even in the country's remotest and most picturesque areas, was explained to me as a reaction to "forced volunteering" under the communist regime of Prime Minister Enver Hoxha; ordinary citizens had to participate not only in the construction of railways and other major infrastructure projects such as dams but also had to spend every Sunday on the streets collectively cleaning up their neighbourhoods. With the fall of Communism, this tradition, and with it, inevitably, the sense of collective responsibility for maintaining a clean environment, was done away with as a remnant of the former communist regime – hence the current situation, which poses a major obstacle to the further development of the country's potentially very lucrative tourism sector.¹³ The driving habits of Albanians – personally, a reliable source of adrenalin – was another frequently mentioned example. These, in turn, were traced by my interlocutors to the general prohibition of car ownership under Communism, as a reaction to which people developed their distinctive anarchical driving habits when they were finally able to own cars. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was thus especially my younger interviewees which frequently criticised that, so to speak, the baby had been thrown out with the bath water after Communism, resulting in major and deeply ingrained obstacles to the readiness of the Albanian population to take on the responsibilities of EU membership.

It is therefore only logical that I did not once encounter outright disappointment with the EU in Albania, neither as an idea nor as an institution, but rather strong dissatisfaction with the perceived inability of national politicians to implement reforms

¹³ As another interlocutor remarked, even the concept of voluntary work itself was abolished after Communism and is only slowly gaining acceptance again.

capable of addressing the country's shortcomings, preferring instead to blame eurosceptics in the Member States for their country's lack of progress on the path towards EU accession. In fact, the overwhelming majority of people I talked to not only in Albania but also in Macedonia indicated that they would be disappointed if the EU were not to judge these two candidates on their own – currently lacking – merits. Instead, they emphasised that Brussels should much rather take a tougher stance not only towards the governments in Tirana and Skopje but also towards politicians in the Western Balkans more generally. Specifically, the EU should understand that the usual “carrot and stick” approach in its enlargement policy is not suited to the nature of Balkan politics; rather than the overly diplomatic language in its Country Progress Reports, with frequent use of words such as “sufficient” and “progress” which are, in turn, used by both sides to their respective advantage, the EU should be more direct, apply more pressure, and even punish governments in candidate countries if necessary.

The overall opinion I encountered in Kosovo, however, was rather different. While EU membership as such enjoys strong support and is the clear objective of Kosovar politics, the predominant sentiment among my interlocutors in Prizren and Prishtina was one of frustration, if not disillusionment over the country's current status, particularly over the lack of visa liberalisation with the EU. The EU is seen by many as guilty of applying double standards, allegedly repeatedly tightening the conditionality for Kosovo while the citizens of all the other countries in the region have already been granted visa free access to the Schengen area; one young interlocutor in Prizren bitterly remarked that Kosovo is essentially being run, if not ghettoised by the international community and is clearly disadvantaged by the EU compared to its neighbours – Serbia in particular. In light of the practical implications which the lack of visa liberalisation has for Kosovo's overwhelmingly young population, subjecting Kosovars that wish to travel, as one interviewee emphasised, to copious amounts of paperwork, substantial costs, and seemingly arbitrary behaviour on the part of foreign officials, the significant attention currently given to this particular issue within the domestic debate on European integration is quite understandable. Indeed, in light of the fact that an agreement on visa liberalisation for Kosovo, in the estimation of one of my interlocutors, will probably only be reached in about 2 years time, this actually untenable situation will be further prolonged.

6. Conclusion

Writing this chapter almost exactly one year after the fateful European qualifier between Serbia and Albania in Belgrade, my answer to the question I posed myself before embarking on a two-month journey across Albania and through the ethnic Albanian-majority parts of Kosovo and Macedonia can be summarised as following: Although “Greater Albania” is currently not a fact and is, indeed, unlikely to become one any time soon, it is nonetheless a strong enough fiction to be and indeed remain a significant political factor in the region.

It is important to distinguish between “Greater Albania” as an aggressive because territorially-focused concept, which has a negative connotation even for most Albanians (at least those currently living in the region)¹⁴ and “pan-Albanianism” as denoting peaceful integration efforts among ethnic Albanians across borders. While the former is, if present at all, confined to the level of rhetoric on the part of national politicians for both domestic and foreign policy purposes – predominantly related to European integration – there is concrete evidence for the latter in both the cultural and political, though much less in the economic sphere. Nonetheless, there is a strong underlying sense of common identity among Albanians in the region, the most prevalent expression of which is the pervasiveness of the Albanian flag not only in Albania itself but also in Albanian-majority areas in neighbouring countries. This widespread sense of brotherhood, however, generally does not manifest itself in an increasing display of nationalism – in particular, the incidents surrounding the Serbia-Albania football match should be interpreted in context rather than as indicative of broader “Greater Albanian” tendencies. Above all, this is because most Albanians, in particular among the younger generations, have other – above all, economic – priorities, i.e. are preoccupied with securing a future for themselves (preferably abroad) rather than with politically campaigning for Albanian unification – or, indeed, getting politically involved for reasons other than finding a job. However, the sense of Albanian unity across borders remains alive and, for many, a dream which they are convinced will eventually become reality.

¹⁴ Indeed, an examination of the research topic with a focus on the generally more radical-minded Albanian diaspora is an interesting angle for further research, both with regard to comparisons between the diaspora as a whole and ethnic Albanians at home and to comparisons within the diaspora, i.e. between ethnic Albanians from different countries living and working together abroad.

With regard to opinions on the EU, these are overwhelmingly positive throughout the region, though characterised by a general lack of understanding about the costs and obligations of EU membership. Indeed, young Albanians in particular are very self-critical about their respective country's readiness for accession, the perceived lack of which – in the case of Albania – is traced to the inability of incumbent politicians as well as to fundamental obstacles posed by habits related to the country's communist past. Consequently, a common theme among ordinary citizens throughout the region is the wish for the EU to take a tougher stance towards the governments of the Western Balkans in its enlargement policy. Kosovo is somewhat of an exception in this respect, however, since the generally very pro-EU stance among Kosovar politicians and general public alike seems to be currently outweighed by frustration particularly at the lack of visa free access to the Schengen area.

Ultimately, therefore, the key question is much rather whether and to what extent the widespread sense of common Albanian identity in the region will manifest itself politically when the currently predominant concerns of (young) ethnic Albanians in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia have been addressed. In this case, will the widespread dream of Albanian unity surface and seek to become reality, or will the desire for unification become less prominent? Despite encountering arguments on either side of this debate, based on my overall impressions I am positive that desire for unification with Albania in Kosovo and Macedonia will in fact decrease in line with increasing prosperity, improved cross-border – above all, economic – integration, and further progress on the path towards EU membership; the EU's enlargement policy can indeed provide a peaceful solution to the Albanian National Question. Crucially, however, each of these positive developments is by no means inevitable – both incumbent national politicians and the EU have a duty to ensure steady and credible progress towards these ends. If they do not, and untenable situations such as currently in Kosovo are indefinitely prolonged, then what currently is still an issue that deserves to be approached in a relaxed way by all parties can quickly spiral out of control.

6.1. Acknowledgments

Finally, on a more personal note, I would like to thank the Schwarzkopf-Stiftung Junges Europa and Ilka Keuper in particular for giving me this unique opportunity. Not only was this the first time that I visited South Eastern Europe but also my first

long backpacking trip and indeed my first extended period of solo travel. Besides all the fascinating insights I gained into my research topic, there are two more general realisations that stand out above all others: First, the generally negative reputation of the region and Albania in particular is wholly undeserved. When telling people about my destination in the weeks and months before my departure, common reactions by those who had not already visited the country themselves ranged from „Albania?! Why would anyone want to go there?!“ to „Just be careful you don't get killed!“; (not only) in Western Europe, Albania is more often than not still associated primarily with organised crime. In fact, I felt safer in Albania than in many a city in Western Europe, and the locals were exceptionally friendly, helpful, and hospitable – indeed, I did not have a single significant negative interpersonal experience during the entire 7 weeks. Clearly, Albanian tourism has a long way to go – littering in particular is a great and very visible problem, and travel in the country still has a distinct element of adventure – but I hope that with this report, I can contribute to the reduction of false prejudice. Second and most importantly, I realised how lucky I am to be born when and above all where I was, and by extension, the value of the opportunities available to me. In the countries I visited, I met many highly educated, multilingual, cosmopolitan young people – indeed, people very much like myself – but who have significantly less opportunities in life than I do simply by virtue of being born in a different place, and consequently want nothing more than to leave their home country and start a better life somewhere else. Ultimately, therefore, I experienced what EU enlargement, at least on an individual level, should be all about – in the interest of both sides: providing above all the many young people in the enlargement countries with the same opportunities in life that we currently enjoy.

The End