Along the path of identity transformation of different Albanian communities from their original Balkan environment to their destination in Italy as migrants

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CHAPTER I

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The Albanian Issues and Identities - Introduction

In 1912, noting the weakness of the Ottoman empire, the Albanian intellectual elite declared the founding of the Albanian state. Using the language and culture as bounds, they made the first step in erasing substantial cultural and religious differences and the creation of common identity between the Ghegs in Northern Albania and their Tosk cousins in the South. The newly founded state comprised, however, only a part of Albanian-inhabited lands while the rest was divided among the neighboring Slav states (Serbia and Montenegro) and Greece. A third of the Albanian population remained under the Serb and the Montenegrin administration, including the western coast of Lake Scutari, Kosovo and the western part of today's Macedonia. Although this division had serious economic and psychological implications it was not the only reason for the Albanian discontent. In fact the Yugoslav state was from the beginning bitterly hostile to the ethnic Albanians. At first, the official state policy toward the “anti-national” and subversive Albanian element was one of the state sponsored assimilation through the Serbian education system. This policy, however, did not give the expected results and it was abandoned after it became clear that instead of aiding assimilation it was encouraging the growth of the Albanian national consciousness and oppositional activity.

Considering that they were not able to assimilate them, the Serbian state authorities decided to adopt some more incisive policies of colonization and forced emigration. In the period between 1922 and 1938 many Albanian land ownerships were expropriated in favour of the Serbian and Montenegrin colonists and Albanians encouraged to emigrate to Albania and Turkey. Those who decided to stay in Yugoslavia were engaged in armed resistance and eventually sought to create their own national land.
In the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia the situation of the Albanian population improved. But, despite the efforts of the Yugoslav authorities to overcome nationalist sentiments and to bring together Serbs, Croats, Slovenians, Macedonians, Bosnians, Albanians and other people of the new Yugoslavia into a state based on the socialist rhetoric of “Brotherhood and Unity”, it seems that the Albanians have never felt themselves as a part of the Yugoslav Federation. Although the Albanians were granted some political, cultural and educational rights (for example they had a right to elementary and secondary school education in Macedonia and all the way to university education in Kosovo and there were some Albanian newspapers and magazines, as well as radio stations and television programs). These rights from the Albanian perspective, however, were not enough to grant the equality of the Albanian community and to foster integration into the Yugoslav society. Despite the fact that the Albanians made up almost ten percent of former Yugoslav population and outnumbered Slovenes, Macedonians and Montenegrins they had never been recognized as a nation but as a nationality (ethnic minority) without republican status. Such state policy was perceived as indicative of social exclusion and political oppression and had created a strong sense of community, woven around the idiom of suffering. In 1981, Kosovars rioted to protest their inferior status and demanded (for) the creation of the “Socialist republic of Kosovo”. The events in Kosovo were mirrored by similar, even if smaller scale nationalistic manifestations by Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia. The proposed “seventh republic”, which was to include the Albanian-inhabited areas of western Macedonia, was seen as a serious threat to the territorial integrity and as an answer to the Albanian nationalist claims, Macedonian and Serbian authorities introduced some special measures which circumscribed considerably the rights of the Albanian community and led to a gradual removal of Kosovo’s autonomy.

With the collapse of the communist ideology and consequent dissolution of the Yugoslav federation, the political and economic situation changed radically. The creation of the new Macedonian and Serbian nation states, characterized by a fierce nationalism, brought about further fragmentation of the Albanian community. However, the collapse of communism and the dissolution of Yugoslavia had its
positive political implications on numerous Albanian communities in the Balkans. After decades of neglect, demands for greater cultural rights and political aspirations of Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia gained prominence on the international scene. In 1999, the international military intervention put an end on the armed conflict between KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) and the Serbian regular and paramilitary troops. This was the first step on the long path toward the independence and international recognition that occurred in 2007. In 2001, the long lasting ethnic tensions between Albanians and Macedonians reached its peak and erupted in the armed conflict that lasted several months. In August of the same year, under international pressure, the Republic of Macedonia signed the Ohrid Framework Agreement that provided for a series of political and constitutional changes designed to accommodate the demands of Albanian minority for equal standing and representation. Although the Ohrid Agreement has not answered all of the Albanian expectations, it together with the success in Kosovo did change significantly self-perception of both communities. While in the former Yugoslav Federation they were an easily manageable minority facing a powerful state in the new political surroundings they form compact self-sustainable communities with a great potential for ethno-political mobilization.

The Albanian communities in the Balkans are heavily concentrated in the in the north-west and southwestern parts of Macedonia, in the south-east of Montenegro and in Kosovo and Southern Serbia live more then 1.5 million of Albanians. This “ethnic continuity”, close economic and family ties with Albanians from Albania, that lives just across the border, together with the fact that the Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia had never lost their sense of shared national consciousness according to many politicians but also ordinary people, foment their dreams about Albanian national reunification.

In 2005, I already carried out a research on identity formation, political aspirations and particular features of Albanian nationalism among Albanians in Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia. Using a technique of semi-structured interviews supported by a selection of photographs and images showing symbols, social practices and important events from different phases of the community
existence, I dug into people’s personal feelings, expectations, experiences and memories. This gave me the opportunity to learn about people’s perception about past and present and to gain a deep insight into the complex process of identity formation that includes a personal level as well. Five years later I decided to further my knowledge on the Albanian community and to include the most important component of the Albanian national identity, Albanians from Albania.

In 1989, after almost five decades of probably most the ruthless communist dictatorship in Europe, the “wind of change” reached the Albanian mountains as well. Europe’s most backward country slowly and painfully slipped out of its foreign political isolation and stepped on the road to democratic reforms, creating a market economy and building a new civil society in a multiparty system. The changes in all spheres of public, political and economic life were radical but, unfortunately, not always positive. After almost five decades of repression a long envisioned freedom had arrived. Albanians were free to vote, they had the right to passports and travel abroad, now all guaranteed by law. But after a short period of initial enthusiasm Albanian citizens had learned quickly that traveling abroad was not so simple because almost all European countries introduced a visa system. Foreign investments were not incisive as they hoped and didn’t prevent the closing down of the unprofitable and outdated enterprises. Inflation and unemployment increased and significantly lowered the already poor living standard. So much so, that in the first years of transition the Albanian citizens experienced the shortage of food and even the most ordinary medicines. Political life was characterized by instability, internal struggles and corruption, that led the country almost to the brink of civil war in 1997. Along with problems caused by the political and economic transition, the Albanian citizens had experienced a deep internal identity crisis as well.

In order to achieve full control over the whole population of Albania, which had proved throughout its history to be quite unruly and disobedient, Enver Hoxha during his government, tried to eliminate significant cultural, linguistic and religious differences between Ghegs and Tosks and to foster the sense of common belonging. This was achieved through erasing their collective memories and traditions, the final
standardization of language and introduction of new narratives and national myths\textsuperscript{1} that led to their complete isolation and subjugation to the communist ideological stereotypes and clichés. In order to describe the brutality of the Albanian Communist regime and the difficulties that Albanians went through in the period between 1945 and 1989, I'll mention just few measures introduced by the Communist regime. In 1967, the religion was banned by law, the chiefs of the clans who were supposed to keep the customs and collective memories for future generations were imprisoned or killed, the hundreds of thousands of pillboxes were constructed, people were put to prison for just watching foreign television, etc. The result of such policies was that with the end of communist regime and Enver Hoxha’s legacy many Albanian’s self-images were shattered while leaving no alternative unifying national vision or what it really mean to be Albanian.

In the period of economic hardship, political instability and general insecurity, nationalism, patriotic feelings and dreams of power that follow all forms of national assertion can in fact seduce a population that is coming out of a period of state and national disintegration. In such circumstances it could be reassuring to look outside the state borders, and this is exactly what happened in Albania.

“\textit{We are not a state of thee million people but a nation of seven million}” is an often quoted Enver Hoxha’s statement from the early 80s. But, even if the nationalism was an underlying prop for the communist regime and one of the reasons why a regime of such brutality and eccentricity had survived for so long, the so-called “national issue” remained a task of secondary importance in the period between 1945 and Enver Hoxha’s death in 1985. Although the Albanian leadership often used the situation in Kosovo in order to appease domestic discontent it had never been their intention to include Kosovo within Albania’s border Rather, it could be stated that the Kosovo and its inhabitants were considered as a possible destabilizing element and threat to Hoxhaim. In fact, whenever the members of illegal Kosovar groups sought shelter in Albania, they were regularly handed straight back to the Yugoslav authorities.

\textsuperscript{1} The myths had a very important role in the process of Albanian ethnogenesis. These myths initially introduced in order to eradicate internal differences and to ensure the stability of the communist regime were furthermore developed and exported in Kosovo and Macedonia. The nature of these myths will be discussed in the next chapters.
After Yugoslavia had fallen apart in was widely believed in Kosovo and Macedonia that a democratic government, led by the Democratic Party and Sali Berisha, would reverse previous negative trend regarding “national issue” and somehow encourage the international community to redefine the “unjust” borders\(^2\). However, once again Tirana’s official answer did not meet political expectations of numerous Albanian Diaspora communities in the Balkans. Despite the fact that some extreme political leaders had called for political reunification with the “brothers” in Kosovo and that the problem of Kosovars had started to be openly debated in media and political institutions, the only commitment demonstrated by the Albanian state was rhetorical and sometimes even theatrical.

As far as the ordinary people were concerned, when the Berlin Wall fell different Albanian communities eventually got an opportunity to meet and gain an intimate knowledge of each other. What they found out however was that their perception about their compatriots, who live just across the border, were romantic and unrealistic. It was recognized, although unwillingly, that there were enormous issues, apart from frontiers, still dividing the Albanian nation. After decades of separation and living in completely different social and political systems, they had become too different in terms of education, religion, culture and mentality. What binds them together are only language, kinship ties and ethnic memory. These symbolic resources are important but, I argue, insufficient elements to create a nation. However if the aspirations about political reunification are premature and unrealistic, as many of my informants pointed out the “process of spiritual reunification has already begun and it cannot be stopped”. The problem of the maturity and consolidation of the Albanian national identity is yet to happen in the Balkan region and the outcome of that process is quite uncertain. Moreover it shouldn’t be forgotten that at present we cannot speak of a single Albanian nationalism, but of at least two Albanian nationalisms with distinct centers and agendas, namely Prishtina and Tirana. While Tirana’s nationalism is rhetorical and limited and I would say more a dream of power than a real political engagement, Prishtina’s, on the contrary is very concrete and aggressive and exercises a great

\(^2\) Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia have never forgotten that after the First World War important parts of so-called “Natural Albania” such as the Diber region were given to Serbia by the victorious powers as reward for its loyalty.
influence on Albanian communities both in Macedonia and Montenegro. Notably there is a further problem to be considered i.e Kosovo only gained independence very recently and in the former state they were not sufficiently represented in the various public institutions. Consequently they lack competence in democratic tradition, diplomacy and the art of governance. Furthermore they will have to deal with the building of the state and the recognition of their state’s separate national identity.

The main goal of this research is to discover how the different Albanian communities from Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia relate to each other, how they construct their identities in relation or in opposition to each other and to official state policies in their home countries.

This time, however, I’ve decided to carry out the research here in Italy. Far away from their natural, highly politicized Balkan environment, where the sense of national belonging is considered not only as an indivisible part of the people’s identity but it also has a privileged status of being morally obligatory, I’ll be able to interview, observe and discover how the various Albanian communities relate to each other in a “neutral” foreign territory as well as their behavior regarding the delicate problem of their integration into the local community.

For the sample I choose families with two generations who have experienced several dramatic socio-political changes during the lifetime of their middle age citizens. The middle aged Kosovars, for example, have experienced life in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, the Rump Yugoslavia (Former Serbian – Montenegrin Federation), difficult years that preceded independence of Kosovo and now in Italy. More or less Albanians from Macedonia have experienced the same shifts and changes in their public allegiance while Albanians from Albania have experienced life in “only” two states and have a completely different socio-political background. On the other hand the members of the younger generation have usually experienced rather a short period of life in respective homelands. The most important years of their formation happened abroad and relatively free of the burden of the Balkan history they told me different stories about their own communities and how they perceive the others.
Such sample and their personal experiences give me the opportunity to gain a deep insight into three communities and to follow differences in their identity formation in the past and present but also to compare differences in the process of identity construction of people of different gender, age and education.

But before I move to the analysis of specific problems and characteristics of Albanian nationalism and national identity formation it would be useful to answer a few questions and define some terms that in literature result quite confusing. For example what is nationalism and why this phenomenon aroused from the ashes in the last three decades? Are the nation and ethnic group synonymous for the same concept or do they have different meanings? What’s the difference between a nation and a state? And, in the end, why the did study of collective identities became so important in the last few decades?

**Revival of Nationalism**

The process of globalization, improvement in mass communication, democratization and the creation of new supranational organizations (like European Union) led to the creation of new, open and multiple identities that hardly can be captured by any single state structure. Yet, these changes didn’t eradicate the sense of national belonging. On the contrary, recent events in the Eastern but also in Western Europe showed that the sense of national belonging didn’t lost its intensity and is still a major force and a cause of conflict in contemporary Europe. From the Atlantic coast to the Ural Mountains different national minorities ask for the political identity and, fortunately less often, for national self-determination. This clearly indicate that in contemporary Europe the “national questions” are far from being solved.

Various explanations were given in order to explain this phenomenon. The most acceptable one could be probably found in the very nature of the nation state which is characteristic for almost all European countries. Although culturally and ethnically heterogeneous, almost all European states have traditionally attempted to create cohesive societies on the principle of unique national culture. In this process, groups and individuals who differ from the dominant national culture are inevitably
left on the margins of society. At one level, these people will be assimilated, while at another they will be rejected and excluded.

Some national minorities may seek to escape the minority status and claim to be accepted as full participants in the life of the nation state. They do so, in order to combat social and economic inequality, to gain access to resources and improve their status vis-à-vis the majority. However, in doing so, they must forget their history and culture and therefore they will be gradually assimilated and incorporated into a dominant culture. In other words, in this way, the members of a minority choose to change their identity.

Such voluntary assimilations are rare and it is more likely that national minorities choose to resist assimilation attempts and to retain their identity. Some national minorities accept the minority status for their group and participate in the mainstream society, while others, that are politically organized and self-consciousness emphasize their distinct ethnic/national identity and seek to establish political movements on national ground. This new situation almost inevitably leads to reinforcement of the degree of struggle between the minority and the state. The ultimate outcome of such a struggle depends on various factors: the structural characteristics of the national minority like its size and compactness\(^3\); the quality of the leadership and financial resources of the national movements; the possible existence of an external “homeland” that seeks to protect the minority from assimilation because there is a sense of shared nationhood across political borders; as well as policies pursued by the state itself. Accommodation of cultural, economic and political rights, increases the possibility that the minority group should seek less extreme solution of political and cultural autonomy within the borders of a larger political unit. Otherwise, if the state creates an image (real or perceived)\(^4\) of an “oppressive” and “alien ruled” state that is attempting to homogenize the country and eradicate other cultural, ethnic and national identities, it is more likely that the majority group should advance more extreme claims of political independence.

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\(^3\) Some scholars argue that the larger minority group is relative to the state population, the greater is their capacity to alter the existing state framework. In addition, highly concentrated groups may constitute sufficient social and economic regions that under certain conditions may claim political independence. However, it has been widely accepted that these structural characteristics constitute necessary but insufficient condition to the advancement of particular types of group goals.

\(^4\) Brubaker argues that the question of perception is important. National states do not necessarily have to adopt politics of national homogenization, nevertheless the rhetoric emanating from the mobilized external homeland may be perceived as such by national minorities (Brubaker, 1994).
Many scholars argue that major cause of, what A. Smith calls “ethnic revival” can be found in the contradiction between the widespread theoretical acceptance of the right to national self-government and refusal of the states to tolerate their own dismemberment. Other contributing factors can be found in the fall of the communist ideology, the improvement of mass communications and in the fact that in the 19th century the right to self-government was applied only to the “great nations” like France, Germany, Italy, Hungary and others, while small national groups were usually denied to exercise the right to self-determination. Recent events, however, reveals that there is no limit to how small the new nations can be.

The Balkans have witnessed the struggle of diverse powers – in more distant epochs, the Ottomans and the nation states that came into being in the 19th and 20th century and in the last two decades between new nation states who declared their independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. This new political situation reshaped political geographies of the Western Balkans and the newly rearranged borders put under considerable stress once prevalent assumption of people’s stabile ethnic/national identities and cultures.

**Collective Identities: stabile or shifting?**

“I’m Albanian but I’m not sure who we exactly were in the 1920s and 1930s. I remember that that at home we used to speak the Albanian language but the language spoken by the majority of inhabitants here in Ohrid was Turkish. I do not remember well, but I believe that my father used to declare himself as Turk”

(from an interview with a ninety-five old Albanian informant from south-western Macedonia)

In order to explain the very nature of collective identities this statement can be a very light-hearted starting point. Regardless the assumption of supporters of the Primordialistic approach who tried to convince us that the nationality is a natural phenomenon, something that we posses in the same way as we posses weight, height or blood group, the evidence that emerged from my research shows that ethnic/national identities are open, multiple and context dependent.

W. Pfaff (1993) in his polemic book shows how identity and the political loyalty were changing the focus in different places and different historical times. "In
the past there were local loyalties to place and clan or tribe, obligations to lord or landlord, dynastic or territorial wars, but primary loyalties were to religion, God or god-king, possibly to emperor, to a civilization as such. There was no nation. To be Chinese was to belong to a civilization which was presumed to be universal, or if not universal, to have only barbarians beyond it. To be Mesopotamian or Roman was to belong to an inclusive empire of undetermined borders... Rome was not a nation; it was a city and empire both. To be European in the Middle Ages was, for the vast majority, to be a Christian, with obligations and rights with respect to a landholding hierarchy dependent, in theory at least, upon the Christian emperor, the Roman emperor's successor, and the pope God's vicar on earth....

In addition, the ethnic/national identity is only one of dimension in our identity field, which consists of a large variety of overlapping and sometimes competing identities. Which dimension of identity I'll choose to put forward depends on the context – political, social and historical. I can feel exclusively as a women, inhabitant of a certain region or a member of a certain nation. If my country is threatened I can feel a strong solidarity and allegiance to a nation even if before that national identity had not been important to my self understanding or in determining my actions. But in peaceful times each of us “moves in a determinate numbers of communities, some more inclusive than others, making different claims to our allegiance” (Sandel 1982). So, it depends on the context to which territory or to which community I’ll feel to be most attached to. These potentially competing claims for the attachment can under certain circumstances become the primary political attachment and the nationalist discourse feels very uncomfortable with this flexibility.

From the above discussion there seems to be enough arguments to assert that the collective identities are multiple and context dependent. However, for analytical purposes it may be useful to distinguish between different categories of collective identities. In his book “The Construction of Nationhood” A. Hastings distinguishes three categories of collective identities. He states that “an ethnicity is a group of people with shared cultural identity and spoken language. It constitutes the mayor distinguishing element in all pre-national societies, but may survive as a strong subdivision with loyalty of its own within established nations” (Hastings, 1997). For
Hastings, a nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity. It may be formed from one or more ethnicities, claiming the right to political identity with the control of specific territory. Furthermore, the nation state identifies itself in terms of a specific nation and there is thus an identity of character between the state and the people.

Guibernau, for instance, speaks about two basic identities and speaks of the nation as a cultural community and of the state as a political institution, arguing “that a clear distinction needs to be drawn between three main concepts: nation, state and nation state (Guibernau, 2004).

From the above analysis, we can deduce there are at least three basic types of identity: ethnic, national and state identity. The ethnic identity seems to be the basic one. The nation, consequently, can consist of one or more ethnicities, and the state can consist of one or more nation.

Ethnic Groups and Identities

In literature, the definition of the term “ethnic group” is quite confusing. Ethnic groups are usually understood to be social groups that share common origin, history, language and culture. A. Smith in his Ethnic Origins of Nations argues that the ethnic group is a “named human population with shared ancestry, myths, histories and cultures, having an association with a specific territory, and a sense of solidarity.” In Smith’s opinion, many nations have originated in pre-existing ethnic groups, which were pre-modern forms of cultural collective identity. “Collective cultural identity refers not to a uniformity of elements over generation but to a sense of continuity on the part of successive generation of a given cultural unit of the population…” (Smith, 1991). In Smith’s opinion, the most important criterion of ethnic identity is the sense of solidarity, but the common myth of descent also plays an important role. Eriksen, following Smith, points that “seeing oneself as culturally distinctive, collectively and individually, from other groups, and acting accordingly, is crucial for ethnic group to endure” (Eriksen, 2004).

Other scholars have different accounts. W. Kymlicka’s definition of ethnicity does not agree with other scholars and social sciences conventions. He argues that the term “ethnic group” should be reserved only for indigenous communities in their
homeland context. Fridrik Barth, for example offers an alternative approach in which ethnic groups are defined as “category of ascription and identification”, that people use to classify themselves and others (Barth, 1969). Barth’s approach allows us to understand how the ethnic boundaries are defined and maintained even in situations where there are no “objective” cultural criteria distinguishing between the groups.

In ethnic nationalism, the national identity is often perceived as “a reflection or awareness of possession of primordial or inherited characteristic, components of ethnicity such as language, customs, territorial affiliation and physical type”. (Greenfeld, 1992).

The Nation and the National Identity

The above discussion stresses that there are at least three types of collective identities and that ethnic group and nation are discrete concepts. However, there is no agreement among scholars about subjective and objective factors in the definition of a nation. Some scholars argue that ethnic categories are older than nations, while others state that nations are a more recent phenomenon, not more than two centuries old.

According to Anderson and Gellner, nations are socially and culturally constructed through complex historical and political process. It is well known Anderson’s definition of the nation as “an imagined community” and the Gellner’s statement that “nationalism invents nations where they do not exist.” These theories imply that the nations are created anew from absolutely nothing and do not take into consideration that many regional, ethnic, religious and class identities existed much before the rise of nationalism.

A. Smith argues that if nations were a totally new phenomenon, if national traditions were completely unrelated with the past, than they would not exert such power over people’s lives. Smith believes that many nations have originated in pre-existing ethnic groups and can be defined as “a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal right and duties for all members. Weber as
well affiliates nations to pre-existing ethnic communities, but in his opinion the 
nations are too various to be defined in terms any criterion, but he continues, “What 
distinguishes the nation is the commitment to political project” (Weber, 1994). Yet, 
the ethnic group with its symbolic resources like history, culture and the myth of 
common descent constitute a necessary but insufficient basis for the emergence of a 
complete nation. They can be defined as “raw material”, and they need to be 
 politicized in order to be transformed into nations. The nation, in Schoplin’s words, 
is above all political category. This does not mean that the nations do not have 
cultural, sociological, anthropological or other dimensions. On the contrary, he 
argues, “Without understanding the political dimension, too much is lost” (Schoplin, 
2003).

Once politicized, ethnic group comes to define itself as a nation, and it may 
embark on a quest for self-determination by seeking some degree of autonomy or 
even outright sovereignty over a national homeland. The territoriality - or the 
existence of a homeland - is one of the most important characteristics of the nation. 
Hechter argues that the real or presumed homeland is properly regarded as a 
defining feature of the nation. “Nations are territorially concentrated ethnic groups” 
(Hechter, 2000). Another important characteristic of a nation and a national identity 
is the process of differentiation. “Our” group is conceived in a particular way. The 
real or perceived characteristics of a national group provide a sense of internal 
affinity and external difference. “If and when these differences from “others” are 
expressed territorially, then the ethnic group becomes a nation” (Billig, 1995).

Other scholars list other important characteristics of nation like a belief in 
common heritage and destiny, existence of collective consciousness and cultural 
characteristics like key features that give substance to a nation and to a national 
identity. Speaking about nation, Hroh defines it “as a large social group integrated 
not by one but by a combination of several kind of objective relationships 
(economic, political, linguistic, cultural religious, geographical, historical), and their 
subjective reflection in collective consciousness” (Hroh, 1997). “I argue that 
national identity is a modern phenomenon of a fluid and dynamic nature, one by 
means of which a community sharing a particular set of characteristics is led to the 
subjective belief that its members are ancestrally related” (Guibernau, 2004). Some
authors claim that it is the belief in a common heritage and destiny which is decisive in the construction of a national identity. Other authors claim that cultural characteristics are the key features of a national identity. Still, there are a number of theories that treat the cultural characteristics of a nation as problematic. According to Kymlicka, we have no grounds for speaking of cultures as “synonymous” with nation or people. The cultural markers need to be politicized to serve as basis for claims of self-government.

The ideology of nationalism connects culture and politics. It establishes cultural distinctiveness as a basis for political action. Culture and nation are discrete concepts, even if they are strongly related. “Because culture is complex and multifaceted, what matters for the content of national identity are not peoples objective cultural characteristics, but their subjective perception of these traits and how they compare to the traits of other populations” (Shulman, 1999)

In spite of the similarities that exist between the concept of ethnic group and that of the nation, there are several important differences between the two that should be noted. These differences generally involve size, degree of politicization, and the relationship to a specific territory. Nations are large, politicized ethnic groups associated with specific territories over which they seek some degree of autonomy. Nations, as opposed to ethnic groups, are people who exercise, or hope one day to exercise, sovereignty over a given territory.

The Nation-state and the Nation building process

The distinction between a nation and a state is extremely important. While a nation claims to be a culturally homogeneous social group, a state is “a legal and political organization with a power to require obedience and loyalty from its citizens” (Seton-Watson); it is the mayor political subdivision of the globe. While states (like the former Yugoslavia) can contain more than one nation, there are nations (like in the Albanian case) who live in more than one state, and finally there are nations (like the Kurds, for example) who live in several states, none of which is their own.

Nationalism is the political principle according to which “the political and
national unit should be congruent” (Gellner, 1983). In other words, nations should have the right of self-determination and the right to exist as a sovereign and independent state. Nationalist ideologies are based on the assumption concerning “the existence of a geographically, historically, and culturally unique nation, which “is believed to be born of and indissolubly linked to a bounded territory and particular history” (Handler, 1988). The goal of nationalist movements is to “turn ethnic group into that more abstract and politicized category, the nation; and then to establish the later as a sole criterion of statehood” (Smith, 1981). In other words, their goal is to create a territorially bounded political unit, a state, out of a homogeneous cultural unit, a nation. A state that emerges from a successful nationalist movement is known as a nation-state - a state whose political boundaries are the same as those of the nation, a state whose population is homogeneous; whose inhabitants are all members of the same nation⁵.

Once established, the newly formed nation-state has to consolidate its national identity. One of the key elements of the national identity is the belief that all members of a given nation belong together, and in order to achieve this goal, the state has a variety of tools at its disposal. Anderson points out the decisive role played by the print-capitalism and the development of standardized national languages (both of which create a national community of people who read the same print language). Other scholars emphasize the importance of a new national culture, and the role that the intellectuals have in this process. They have a task to create “the symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1977) out of disciplines such as history, linguistics, literature and folklore, which than is disseminated to citizens through educational system.

As far as the role of intellectuals in the nation-building process is concerned, A. Smith writes, “The intellectual is the interpreter, par excellence, of historical memories and ethnic myths. By tracing a distinguished pedigree for his nation, he also enhances the position of his circle and activity; he is no longer an ambiguous “marginal” on the fringes of society, but a leader of the advanced column of the reawakened nation, the leaven in the movement of national regeneration”(Smith,

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⁵ Connor argues that only 12 of 132 states in the world “can justifiably be described as nation-states”.

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The intellectuals have to give decisive answers to decisive questions: what are the origins of the nation, who belongs to it and who does not. Among the intellectuals who propagate the national identity, historians have the particularly important function of constructing the nation’s past and present and presenting the nation as the inevitable outcome of a historical process. “The nations need a myth of descent, origin, ancestry, a golden age” (Smith, 1999). In other words, the nations need to believe in common ancestry, shared past and shared history that will unite people in a national community (Gellner), and the historians are invited to accommodate these claims. This is not an easy task considering that a new nation’s history must be written from complex and sometimes contradictory regional histories that had previously been told.

The nations are created out of different local cultures, pre-existing cultural forms, dialects, written history and collective memories. The main task of the national ideologies is to reshape these elements and to create new identities and communities from them. The citizens of the newly created nation-state are expected to learn their national language, their national history and to accept their new narratives and national culture. In doing so, they must forget their local dialects and local histories. As they are to remember the battles they fought together against the nation’s enemies, they must forget the battles they fought against each other. And finally, as they try to remember, what binds them together, they must forget what separated them in the past (Danforth, 2002). However, the self-conscious and deliberate act, which aims to impose collective forgetting and acceptance of the new national narratives, is not unproblematic as national ideologists want us to believe. Bell argues that the introduction of official national narrative is an attempt to impose a definitive meaning of the past, on the nation and its history (Bell, 2003). He adds that there will always be a dissent and the story will never be accepted consistently and universally. This is the first problematic aspect of the nation formation process, because, contrary to the nationalist discourse, it seems that the nation is not a unitary entity, in which all members think, feel and act as one. “Instead, each of us engage in many different ways in making sense of nations and national identities in the course of our interactions with others and in making the ideas of the nation and
national identity accountable to us” (Thompson, 2001).

From the discussion above, we may assume that, even if such thing as unitary culture and history do exist, it is very unlikely that all members of a nation (even of the same ethnic origin), within the state borders will share it. “Rather there will be a variety of cultural constructions from contestation between conflicting interests in the formation or development of the group” (Gilbert, 2000).

**Civic West and Ethnic East**

Adam Smith points out that “though most later day nations are, in fact polyethnich many have been formed in the first place around a dominant ethnie of core, which annexed or attracted other ethnies or ethnic fragments into a state to which it gave name and cultural character” (Smith). In other words, even in cases in which the state precedes the nation, the state seeks to develop the cultural solidarity and the national unity within its population. However, the process of state building and creation of national identities was different in Western and Eastern Europe. Hans Kohn (1961) was the first to develop a systematic difference between the “Western” and “Eastern” nationalisms. The Western type is the result of a long evolution where the state preceded the creation of the nation. The social, economic and political conditions were created mainly through the state expansion and consolidation, to transform the “people” into “nation”. This transformation was based mainly on the liberal middle class concept enmeshed with its democratic ideas and ideals. The result is a “civic” form of nationalism based on the citizenship, subjective choice and democratic ideas of the national sovereignty. The main political goal was to redefine people as citizens and to create inclusive societies where “anyone can integrate into the common culture, regardless of race and color (Kumlycka, 1996).

On the other hand, the Eastern form was created in a completely different environment. The nations were not created out of existing states but against the existing state pattern. The idea was to redraw the existing state boundaries in accordance to ethnographic differences in extremely heterogeneous societies. The eastern nationalism is based on cultural identity and nationality as an “objective fact”. The people were not primarily citizens, but “the Volk”. Where Western
nationalism started as a political development the Eastern started as a cultural movement (Romanticism) that later changed into a political force. The empirical fact of non-existence of national identity, of its variability in space and time is interpreted by nationalists as the result of oppression and subjugation. The fact that many people did not express their national identity everywhere and in all historical periods with the same enthusiasm is the consequence of the simple fact that the foreign conquerors had successfully suppressed it. The role of the intelligentsia and of the romantic nationalists of the XIX century was to awake and discover the forgotten national identity that was sleeping in the deeply hidden parts of the human soul. In the reality, it was not so much to discover the suppressed identity as to create and consolidate identities from the existing components. The Religion, the language, the historical memories and the political expedience were used to reshape the existing collective identities, to draw the boundaries towards the others and consequently and most importantly to establish the right of self-determination of the “people”.

The civic identity is based on a well-defined territory, a community of laws and institutions, equal rights for the members of the nation and common values, traditions or sentiment that bind people together. In other words, the social unity is defined by the political boundaries. On the other hand, in the Eastern type the affinity and the primordial ties are what hold people together. The ethnic identity is based on the idea of a common descent and people are perceived as one folk with a fixed identity, unchangeable and rooted in the natural distinctions between groups of people. The Primordial types of collective identity appear to be ‘objective' and unquestionable; the boundaries cannot be moved, and crossing the boundaries seems to be extremely difficult” (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995).

About this civic - ethnic dichotomy, other scholars said: “The myth of ethnic nation suggests that you have no choice at all in the making of your national identity: you are your cultural inheritance and nothing else. The myth of the civic nation, in contrast, suggests that your national identity is nothing but your choice..... (Yack, 1996). It seems that ethnicity is not chosen - not even a possible subject of

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6 The image of a dormant beauty awaken from sleep is common in nationalist ideologies (Anderson, 1996)
choice. “It is this, crucially, which distinguishes ethnic from civic nationalism; for on the later, national identity is presumed either to be chosen or at least to be what it would be rational to chose. Brown referred to these two bases of national identity as Cultural (or ethno-cultural) Nationalism and Civic Nationalism. “Ethno-cultural nationalism depicts the nation as a community of ethno-cultural sameness, while civic nationalism depicts the nation as community of equal citizens” (Brown, 2002).

Of course the East-West distinction can be subjected to criticism because some nationalisms in the west are clearly expressing the elements that Kohn attributes to the eastern version and the other way around some Eastern nationalisms are very “western” like in the Czech and the Hungarian case. Regardless of the dubious character of the Kohen’s distinction, his civic-ethnic dichotomy can be used as a useful distinction in comparing national identities. It is much more useful to treat it as ideal types and not as examples of concretely existing cases. In every example there is a mixture of civic and ethnic identities and this is valid for Eastern Europe as well. Greenfeld in his Nationalism in Western and eastern Europe argues: “what does play a part, and especially in determining whether a particular nationalism will be defined as civic or ethnic, is the perception of a nation’s status relative to other nations, whether it is perceived as a part of west of not (Greenfeld, 1995).

Theoretical Background for the Fieldwork

Many disciplines of social sciences, from linguistic to politics and sociology, have considered the way in which national and cultural identities are forged and reproduced in time and space. Actually, we may say that the national and cultural identity have become something very fashionable to study and literature on this topic abounds. One of the main reasons to focus on collective identities is that they are in transition. Due to the social and political changes of modernity, people’s sense of belonging have in many cases become open, ambivalent, and yet put into question. And as Bendle points out “though the identity is vital and problematic in

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7 For more details see Kurzio’s (2002) critical assessment on Kohn’s typology.
modernity “it is still under theorized and incapable of bearing the analytical load that the contemporary situation require” (Bendle, 2000).

Considering the different research approaches and the diversity in the area of identity studies, the question is where to start from. In the social sciences, the nature of collective identities has been considered by three different theoretical approaches: primordialistic, modernistic and ethno-symbolic (Ozkirimli, 2000).

The Primordialistic approach is marked by the vision of the nation as a natural part of human behavior, as natural as speech and smell. According to theorists of this approach, the identity is considered naturally fixed within a person without possibility to change. Linnekin and Poyer argue that “cultural affiliations reflect blood ties and have a predetermined quality of inevitability” (Linnekin and Poyer, 1990). The idea is that cultural forms from which nations are formed are in fact “primordial” or “naturally given”, which is one of the nationalism’s most powerful and dangerous constructions.

The Modernists are not homogeneous and there are many differences among them, but what unites them is their conviction that the nations are a phenomenon of modernity. The theorists of this approach assume that it was not the nations that created the states and nationalism, but it was the state structures and nationalism that formed the nations. Among the most renowned and quoted representatives of this approach are scholars like Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson.

For Gellner, nationalism is a marriage between culture and politics. In his view, “Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying man, as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth, nationalism, which sometimes takes preexisting cultures and turn them into nations and sometimes invents them, that is a reality” (Gellner, 1983)

For Benedict Anderson, ethnicity and nationalism are essentially artificial constructs, “capricious imagined communities that float out of the new formed of media that have spread with economic modernization. Anderson’s description of the nation as an “imagined community” has been widely quoted. It is imagined, he posits, “Because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in minds of each lives an image of their community”. It is community, he continues because “regardless of the
actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1996).

Finally, the third theoretical approach competing with the primordialism and the modernism is the ethno-symbolist approach. It is represented by scholars, like A. Smith and J. Hutchinson, who ignore the arguments of the modernists regarding the origins of the nations and in opposition to them focus their interest on the role of the old ethnic groups and ethnic bounds in building and forming modern nations. The Ethno-symbolist approach put emphasis on the subjective components of the national identity while simultaneously underlining the social bases of the collective cultural identities. For ethno-symbolists what gives nationalism its power are myths, symbols, traditions and memories. It is exactly studying these elements that we can learn much about division in social and cultural life of a community experiencing rapid social changes, and the difficulties it faces in trying to achieve social integration (Smith, 1999)

I do not share the position of the primordialist school and nationalist ideologies which consider nations and national identity as natural phenomena of great antiquity and natural outgrow of shared culture which is deeply rooted in history. Rather, nations are constructed from diversity of the ethnic groups, social classes and regional identities, which is often a self-consciousness and deliberate political action. Nations and national identity are to be understood as historically and socially constructed human products which use building material from history, from collective memory, from personal experiences and state institutions, and as such they are “continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized” (Nagel, 1994).

On the other hand, I do not share the positions of certain modernists, who argue that nations are invented and artificial constructions, created anew from absolutely nothing, since the choice made by nationalizing actors to found national culture and history is significantly restricted. As Brubaker points out “nationalist make their own history, but not entirely as they please; not with cultures of their own choosing, but with cultures directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”(Brubaker, 1994).

If we assume that nations are human constructs, this does not mean that they are artificial. If they were such they would not exert such a power over people’s
lives. They may be in a manner “imagined” or “invented”, but the sense of national belonging is real and it is a dominant form of political attachment in the modern world. For this reason, we must understand how the people perceive commonality, cohesion and continuity even if they do not know each other in person. This is quite a complex process, emanated from above in a form of ideological engineering and state propaganda, as well as from below in the form of popular enthusiasm and national sentiment. Some of the main strategies generally employed by the states are: “the construction and dissemination of a certain image of the “nation”; the creation and spread of a set of symbols and rituals charged with the mission of reinforcing a sense of community among citizens. However, “while it appears that it is the individual who has to fit in with nation, it is nevertheless evident that people make decisions about nations, on the basis of their knowledge of “national cultures”, and locate themselves and others accordingly” (Thompson, 2001).

“Nations are dual phenomena constructed from above, but in order to be understood must be also analyzed from below, from the ordinary people’s view, which is exceedingly difficult to discover” (Gellner, 1983).

When people think about “identity” they have in mind things like language, ethnicity, and culture. But these symbolic resources, like everything that is historical, undergo constant transformation and identities are “far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to continuous “play” of history and power” (Hall, 1990). For this reason, we may assert that national identity is a provisional, hybrid, and ongoing form of identification which has to be continually produced and reproduced over time and across space, if it is to retain its cohesive force. Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, which once established are fixed forever, we should think of them in continuous competition with other forms of identity. The unity of the nation seen from that perspective is constructed through the narrative of the nation, by which stories, images, symbols and rituals represent shared meanings of nationhood.

At times of major socio-political changes when the official narratives of the nation may undergo a radical re-writing or separating off, such discursive constructions of unity may come under considerable stress. The significance of this for Albanian communities that are target of my research should be obvious if we
consider the fundamental changes they had to undergo. For them the official narratives of the nation were written and re-written. Not just once but several times.

**Methodology for the fieldwork**

From the above discussion there seems to be enough evidence to assert that the national identities are not as sound and unitary as nationalist ideologies sustain and that they are, in addition, multiple, hybrid and ongoing forms of identification which involve the individual level as well.

But how to approach and comprehend this phenomenon? Different research methods have been used in order to gain deep insight into the people’s complex, fragmented and sometimes contradictory process of identity formation. If we assume that collective identity is a relatively unified concept, shared by all who adhere to it, makes it feasible to construct questionnaires. Thinking about identity as stable but not necessarily conscious or context dependent but stable under certain conditions, this still allows quantitative methods or, in case a mix of qualitative and quantitative research techniques.

According to Hall, there is no essence of identity to be discovered; rather cultural identity is continually developing within the vectors of similarity and difference, of inclusiveness and exclusiveness. The points of difference around which cultural identities could form are interactive with the socio-political context, they are multiple and subject to change. If we think about identity as an ongoing construction, potentially full of contradictions, which people confirm and reconfirm during their life-time, than in Somers and Gibson’s opinion this can be done through analysis of people’s narratives (Somers and Gibson, 1994) According to their theory, the narrative approach uses “relationality” as an important analytic variable and focuses on the various and fluctuating socio-cultural relations that an individual upholds during different life episodes. In Somers and Gibson’s opinion the meanings of identities are embedded in the stories and relations that people themselves consider as essential. Empirically this means that the analysis of people narratives is a convenient way to gain deeper knowledge of the fragmented process of the identity creation. However, such experiences cannot be elicited by questionnaires.
and opinion polls. They require a deeper understanding on how people construct and confirm their identities and experiences in a concrete cultural and social context. For this reason, I have decided that my research had to be strictly qualitative.

Regarding methodology, I used a technique of semi-structured interviews guided through open questions and answers. But, considering that people’s identities may be too complex, contradictory, context dependent and only partially open to self-inspection and self-description, the oral narratives of my interviewees were stimulated and partially structured by a selection of photographs and images showing symbols, social practices, and important events from different phases in the community existence.

The technique of interviewing people on the basis of historical and contemporary photographs is not new in sociological research. Photo-elicitation was conducted for the first time and classified as such in 1957 by John Collier (see Collier J and Collier M, 1986). Since then it has been widely used in anthropology and visual sociology.

The main reason why I choose this technique for my research is that, be they historical or contemporary, when used as a basis for interviewing people, photographs can act as a powerful medium for triggering peoples personal feelings, experiences, memories and associated events and contexts, and for connecting past and present through interviewees and researcher interpretation of both (Cronin, 1998)8. Photographs can be used to trigger interviewee’s reflections and personal narratives which locate their experience within historical, social and political context.

Another important advantage of this technique is that in talking about events that the photographs represent, interviewees do not have to answer direct questions, rather photographs provide context of interviewee’s own choosing. In this way the interview becomes more informal, and averts the strangeness of the interview situation (Schwartz, 1989). Using photographs provides the interviewee with a task similar to the viewing of the family album and enables them to talk, without hesitation about their way of life and their experiences of changing realities.

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8 For more details about significance of photography as a memory trigger see: Cronin and Gale (1996)
Moreover, the photographs ask their own questions. On the one hand, this enables interviewee to give alternative and sometimes oppositional meanings to photographs, on the other hand it reduces the role of the researcher to a minimum. In fact, only toward the end of the interview I was asking more direct questions to ensure further set of data.

Bearing in mind that my interviewees belong to three different communities and two generations, I made a selection of photographs and some video material that included: historical people, symbols, social practices and events from past and present, for example: the World War Two, the interwar period, Enver Hoxha’s funeral, upheavals in Albania in 1996, war in Kosovo, war in Macedonia, declaration of Kosovo independence etc.
CHAPTER II

Albanian identity – history and ethnogenesis

As mentioned in the introduction, the main object of this research is to investigate problems, reasons and possible further political and social consequences of the so-called “Albanian question” in the contemporary Balkan and foreign environment. If we are still trying to answer this delicate issue we can not forget or underestimate some historical aspects. In fact, the problem of the Albanian identity is not a recent one but it originated way back in their history, and is not only, I argue, a consequence of foreign oppression and expansionistic policies of today’s Albanian neighbors, rather, I would argue, that the process of differentiation among Albanians had started in the ancient times as a result of foreign conquests, great historical events as well as particular geographical characteristics of the territory and specific social organization.

Contemporary scholars have embraced as sufficiently convincing the thesis that the Albanians are most likely the descendants of ancient Illyrian tribes that settled in the Balkans before the arrival of Slavs in the 7th century. In the Roman times, the famous Greek astronomer and geographer, Ptolemy of Alexandria mentioned among different Illyrian tribes, the tribe of Albanoi (that probably means “people dressed in white”) and refer to them as a mass of free peasants and warlike people who in the more backward North succumbed to assimilation and gradually lost their Illyrian identity awareness, while in the Southern lowlands, the local population resisted the strong civilization pressure of the Roman Empire and, at least partially, preserved their identity. In the following centuries the territory of the present Albania went through some dramatic upheavals. The arrival of Avars and Slavs brought significant ethnic changes that were difficult to revise. Moreover the territory was for a long period an object of rivalry between Byzantium and the Bulgarian kingdom, but the event that had a major consequences on the Albanian historical and identity development was probably the official split between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. When their spheres of interest
were fixed, the dividing line ran across today’s Albanian lands, granting the Roman Catholic Church authority over the northern territories while the Orthodox church preserved their dominance over the southern lowland. Another serious obstacle for creation of a single Albanian identity was the geographical environment. In his book “The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II” F. Braudel points out that “the mountains are a world apart from civilization, which is an urban and lowland achievement. Their history is to have none, to remain almost on the fringe of the great waves of civilization, even the longest and most persistent. Civilizations may spread over great distances in the horizontal plane but are powerless to move vertically when faced with an obstacle of a few hundred meters”

The inhabitants of the Albanian inhospitable and inaccessible mountainous areas were in the majority free peasants, engaged in stock-breeding who lived almost in complete isolation and poverty and had very little contacts with feudal lords and church authorities. The rare travelers and observers from the past reported that these highlanders seemed to be anarchists by nature, thinly distributed and widely dispersed. These factors were probably the main reason why the attempts made by different empires and rulers, through out their history, to impose administration and to establish the state all ended in failure.

Society was organized in fises9 (clans) and vllaznijas10 (brotherhoods) and every fis and vllaznija had its own serious and rich ideological and value system that tolerated no influences or intrusions by alien elements. Typical of this system was collective liability that didn’t recognize the individual as a legal entity. In the case of a crime, for example in the case of a murder all members of the fis had equal responsibility for the wrong doing of one of its members. Considering the tribal system regarded the vendetta as morally obligatory tool of justice, all members of the accused fis or vllaznia became automatically potential targets of revenge, and in order to save their lives, sometimes entire brotherhoods or families were forced to leave. The blood feud was probably an important, but not the only reason of mass migrations. The Albanian highlands were infertile and inhospitable and the

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9 The fis was the highest, most significant and numerous form of social organisation. It was constituted on basis of the belief in a common descent, a real or imaginary ancestor and ensuing real or imagined blood relation in the mail line.
10 – Vllaznia was a kinship unit smaller than the fis, based on the same foundation but less numerous and with really blood related members
population lived in extreme poverty, this together with their refusal to pay taxes and to maintain any kind of contacts with feudal lords were probably the main reasons of mass migrations toward today’s Greece, southern Italy. Kosovo and Macedonia. In fact, the ethnic Albanians who settled in Kosovo and Macedonia during the 17th century, were according to many scholars, part of these North Albanian highlanders.

The social and economic situation in the Adriatic lowland was quite different. Society was organized in close-knit communities who hadn’t been involved in the blood feuds. They had their own nobility, the Orthodox church had a great influence and the efficient system of justice was introduced. As elsewhere in the Middle Ages, with development of crafts and guilds, the cities on the Adriatic coast became important trade centers and to a certain degree improved the life of its citizens. They hadn’t been just simple servants of the Byzantine Empire, but indeed enjoyed some political and civil rights, they were allowed to take part in the council of citizens and had considerable local autonomy.

Due to the flourishing economy, disintegration of the Serbian Kingdom and relative political stability, some Albanian princes and feudal lords sought to become independent masters of their feudal estates. This inevitably gave rise to animosities and rivalries between Albanian nobility and led the region in a series of wars between clans. The result of these clashes was anarchy and antagonism that paved the way to the Ottoman invasion.

**The Ottoman invasion. Colonization and islamisation**

The establishment of the Ottoman power over Albanian territories began at the end of the 14th century. Although slow and difficult, the Ottoman invasion was unstoppable. After the defeat at Kosovo Polje, the Ottomans in Southern Albania gradually deprived the local feudal lords and princes of their possessions and established their military feudal order in their place while in the unruly Central and Northern territories they preferred not to impose complete political and military control and opted for the policy of vassalage. Yet, the softer policy in the above mentioned territories this did not prevent the break out of insurrections against the new rulers. In 1443 George Kastrioti, the greatest Albanian national hero and the pillar of the Albanian national identity, proclaimed the uprising against Ottomans
and restored the independent principality of Kruje. His example gave impetus to the liberation movement in Central and Northern Albania. Almost all princes rejected Ottoman rule and under George Kastrioti’s leadership the free principalities were reestablished. In 1444, in the Albanian city of Lezhe he called an assembly of the Albanian princes and leaders of free tribes from the high mountains and despite the strong historical discord among them Kastrioti successfully found a union which went down in history by the name of the Albanian League of Lezhe. George Kastrioti was elected its leader and in the following decades he conducted a series of successful military operations that led to the establishment of the independent Albanian territories.

Yet, George Kastrioti, known also as Skanderbeg, is not remembered in history just for his military operations against Ottomans. For the Albanians, the League of Lezhe represented an attempt to form some sort of a unified Albanian state. In fact, the League was a federation of independent rulers who undertook the duty to follow a common foreign policy and to defend jointly their independence. Of course, this kind of commitment required a collective budget and each family was to contribute to the common funds of the League.

However, the League was short-lived. The Kastrioti’s efforts to reduce to a minimum the destructive forces of clan particularism and to found some kind of a single centralized Albanian state ended in failure. Family interests prevailed over the that of the “state” and the League unity began to vacillate when some of the princes and clan leaders abandoned “the common cause”. However, despite the difficulties George Kastrioti resisted the Ottoman military attacks and preserved independence of territories until his death in 1468. After his death many feudal lords as well as large numbers of peasants emigrated abroad and the “common Albanian cause” remained buried under historical ashes for more than four and a half centuries.

However, for the Ottomans George Kastrioti’s death did not resolve all their problems. Officially they reestablished military control over the Albanian territories but complete conquest implied also social transformation and religious conversion. As we will see in the following pages, unlike elsewhere in the Western Balkans this process in the Albanian case was very long and, it can be stated never really completed. The process of colonization had started in 1432 and it cannot be said it
was successful. It consisted only of a small number of people, whose task was to assume management of some smaller administrative units. But the situation in Albania was complicated and dangerous and the authorities soon abandoned this project. Rather, they made an attempt to gain some loyalty from the local population through the process of islamisation. Some people, in order to maintain (keep) their feudal estates or to be promoted in the Ottoman military hierarchy adopted the new religion, others maintained their Christian faith. According to some historical sources, in the 15th century the overall ethnic and religious configuration in the Southern Albania preserved its pre-Ottoman characteristics.

In the same period in Northern Albania the process of islamisation apparently seemed to be more successful. Many clans actually used to present themselves to the central authority as true Muslims. The closer analysis of historical sources indicates however that their conversion to Islam was, in most cases, fictitious. In order to make their life easier, to pay less taxes, avoid foreign elements and gain all possible advantages from the central authorities they officially and publically professed Islam while in private they continued to observe Catholic rites. As Muslims, the chiefs of the villages were officially registered as spahis (that means that they were subject to military service to the empire) and as such they were granted land called timar. As spahis they were members of military class and as such, on the paper alone, under direct command of the central authorities. In reality these local chiefs defended only the interests of their own communities which tolerated no foreign presence of interference and at the same time maintained minimum but necessary contacts with official power (payment of taxes and the recruitment of soldiers for the Ottoman army).

The central authority was quite aware that their Albanian “representatives” in the highlands were unreliable but it was the only way to establish, at least formally, Ottoman administration and to have minimum control over and contact with local population. For Albanians this system was acceptable allowing them to maintain their religion and customs, and to live relatively free, governed by their own

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11 Bishop Zmajevic pointed out that “there is a vicious and disdainful custom to give Holy Communion to those who, in order to evade taxation, publicly profess Islam, and secretly the Christian fait, infecting others by their example.
traditional laws. In this way the Albanian population in the highlands imposed their own model of seeming submission and actual self-government.

**The Process of Islamisation**

In Albania the process of islamisation was not forced, since all attempts to impose the new faith on Christian inhabitants ended in failure. It was also very gradual. It started in the 15th century with the incorporation of the local aristocracy into the Ottoman military-feudal class. Like elsewhere in the Balkans the majority of pre-Ottoman feudal lords adopted Islam in order to keep or extend their estates or to prevail over their rivals. Some native non aristocratic people also adopted Islam especially in the urban areas but until the 17th century the majority of population remained Christian. In the following centuries this process became rather dynamic due to the political aspirations of the Ottoman empire but also thanks to folk mentality and the peculiar religious identity of the native inhabitants.

As mentioned above some of these conversions were fictitious and proved to be an useful tool in maintaining a relative independence for some Albanian rural areas. Although only seemingly submitted to the central authority many families were obligated to provide soldiers for the Ottoman army. Although, according to some historical sources\(^\text{12}\), these Albanian soldiers never lost awareness of their ethnic or clan identity and their sense of affiliation to the Albanian North or South or to a particular village or local community was strong; they, recruited for some elite troops as well as for the sultan’s guards, unavoidably they became committed to the Ottoman elite and gradually entered as an integral part of the official authority.

Unlike the highlands where the Ottoman administration was only formally established, in the urban centers it was real. The cities were the first centers of the conquerors’ administration and the influence of Islam was strong. The numerous

\(^{12}\) In the first decades of the 18th century Lady Mary Montagu visited Albania and left quite accurate description of its inhabitants. “Of all regions I have seen, the Arnaut seem to me most particular. They are natives of the Macedonia and though they have lost name of Macedonia they still retain something of the courage and hardiness. They are foot soldiers and considered the best militia in the Turkish empire. They are all clothed and armed on their own expense, dressed in clean white coarse cloth… these people living between Christians and Mohametans declare that they are utterly unable to judge which religion is best, but to be certain, but, to be certain of not entirely rejecting the truth, they follow both and go to the mosques on Fridays and to the church on Sundays.
conversions to the new religion were due also to the fact that being Muslim was much more convenient than being Christian. The Muslim merchants and holders of money capital often colonists gained strong positions in the urban centers and the role of Christians began to decline. The only way to maintain their position was to embrace the new religion.

In the villages, the spread of Islam started much later. This was mainly due to the fact that the Ottomans did not have interest to impose Islam on a mass scale, considering such policy would have seriously affected the military and economic interests. The Christians were paying more taxes and were a source of recruitment for the Jannisary corps. Along with this it should be also mentioned that the population in the rural areas lived in a traditional, close-knit and quite isolated communities that made them almost impenetrable for any kind of foreign influence. In fact, as reported by the Vatican Catholic inspectors at the beginning of the 17th century, in Northern Albania and Kosovo only 10 percent of the Albanian speaking population embraced the new religion.

However, starting from the midle of the 17th century the process of islamisation became more dynamic and incisive and included the highlands as well. As already mentioned above, many Albanian clans formally embraced Islam in order to ensure their survival as relatively free and self-governing communities and to allow their admittance to the local Ottoman administration. Although officially Muslims, it wasn’t uncommon among these people to continue with old Christian practices that were strictly forbidden by the Sheriat Law. In fact, along with the prescriptions of the new religion many continued to baptize their children, took Holly Communion or to marry Christian women. This kind of dual religious identity was common among the Gegs in the North as well as among the Tosks in the South. Along with these explanations some scholars identified the reasons of a large scale conversion to Islam in the religious indifference that was already widely spread among Albanians in the pre-Ottoman period. This was mainly due to the strong rivalry between the Orthodox and the Catholic Church. The subordination of the

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13 The Janissaries (meaning in Turkish “new solder”) were infantry units that formed the Ottoman sultan’s household troops and bodyguards. The force was created by the Sultan Murad I from Christian boys levied through the devshirme system (in the Ottoman times feudal dues were paid by services to sultan) from conquered countries in the 14th century and was abolished by Sultan Mahmud II in 1826.
population now to the Vatican now to the Patriarchate of Constantinople and their struggle for domination over population caused, according to some scholars, the ideological doubts that prevent formation of an integral Christian outlook. In this ideological gap, some Muslim religious sects whose rituals and rites were closer to folk belief played an important role in the adoption of Islam. Sects like dervishes were religiously tolerant in celebrating some Christian saints and their missionaries were successful in melting together local traditions with Islamic and Muslim beliefs and practices, making in this way the conversion to the new religion easier.

What is more, in their long history, Albanians had learned that in difficult times they could not rely upon a concrete Church support. All these factors together contributed to the process of islamisation of the Albanian inhabited lands. Although some may argue that this was a very slow process, in many cases more a conscious strategic move than a sincere conversion and that the existence of a dual religious identity was quite a widespread phenomenon among Albanians the fact is that by the end of the 18th century, about 70 percent of the Albanian population was Muslim.

The Rise of National and Patriotic Ideas

Unlike its Balkan neighbors who during the 19th century all went through the process of national liberation and awakening, and established their own national states, the Albanians remained on the edges of these big social and political upheavals. This is quite surprising if we take into consideration that initially, the Albanians resisted the Ottoman invasion more vigorously than their neighbors and that in the first period of the Ottoman domination had rioted more often than anybody else in the region. In the second half of the 19th century the seed of the Albanian national identity sprouted but it was limited to some elite circles and completely missing among the folk. The absence of any politicized national consciousness was quite common among the Ottoman’s subjects in the Balkans and is the result of so-called millet system. In the Ottoman Empire the population was organized into communities or administrative units, known as millets, based on religion rather then on ethnicity or language. Muslims were recognized as equal first class citizens in the Muslim millet while the Christians and Jews were tolerated and
organized into separate millets. The different millets were treated as corporate bodies and had their own internal structure and hierarchy. Until the first half of the 19th century all Orthodox Christians in the Balkans were members of Rum millet. As such they were controlled by the Greek patriarchate in Istanbul and all experienced an objective threat of Hellenization. With regards to the members of the Muslim millet, they all, regardless of their ethnicity tended to consider themselves as Ottomans. This policy deeply influenced the identity formation of the peoples in the Balkans and the final outcome was that after four centuries of Ottoman domination the faith and not language or ethnicity became the prime focus of identity outside the family and locality.

The reasons of historical delay in affirming the existence of a separate national identity through the foundation of an independent national state could be explained with the fact that Albania was one of the most backward and isolated countries in the region. One of the rare travelers who visited Albania in the 19th and 20th century, the French journalist M. Delasy wrote that he had never visited a country so closed to civilization. “Even the Sahara is better known to us” wrote Delasy in his Les Aspirations autonomies en Europe (1913). The isolation, however was not only external but internal as well. In the first place the country was divided into four administrative units, vilayets that were de facto autonomous and there were no organic connection and no communication between them. To move from one vilayet to another the travelers required special safe conduct passes. There were no roads and from the narratives of rare European visitors those that existed seem to be dangerous. Another major obstacle was the traditional distinction between Gegs and Tosks, that dates back to the pre-Ottoman period. So the Albanians lacked the single administrative cultural center and to make things even more complicated they had to face up with strong religious differences as well.

Although they never lost their feeling for regional or clan affiliation, the Muslim majority also had a strong sense of affiliation to the Ottoman Empire. In

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14 The four Ottoman vilayets with substantial ethnic Albanian population were: Kosovo vilayet, Shkoder vilayet, Monastir and Ioannina vilayets.
15 This distinction was both cultural and linguistic. The language was divided into two major dialect, the southern Tosk with strong Greek influence and northern Gheg dialect that bordered predominantly on Slavic languages. The boundary of the two dialects was marked by the river of Shkumbin. The ethnographic, cultural and linguistic differences between the North and the South were such, that we can speak about two distinctive autonomous regions – Gegeria and Toskeria
five centuries of Ottoman domination, Albanian Muslims became a part of the Ottoman elite. They were the integral part of official authorities and held high positions in the army but also at the Ottoman court. In addition (what is more) they were educated in the Turkish language and felt strong affiliation with the Ottoman-Turkish culture as well.

Albanian Orthodox Christians made up about 20 percent of the population and if learned, they studied in Greek and were and were educated in the spirit of pan-Hellenism. In Catholic school the official language of education was Latin and Italian and pupils received generally the pro-Western cultural imprinting. In such social environment it comes as no surprise that the ideas of national unity and emancipation among Albanians were almost completely missing.

Regardless all these difficulties and obstacles, the process of the Albanian National Awakening, better known as Rilindja had started in the first half of the 19th century. As elsewhere in the Balkans, where the state preceded the nation, Albanian nationalism began as an elite phenomenon and was limited to a handful of intellectuals living abroad. Inspired with the ideas of European Enlightenment and influenced with the writings of some European travelers and ethnographers who visited Albania, the national ideologists made their first attempt to “awake the sleeping beauty” and create a seed of the Albanian national idea. The first programmed document of the Albanian national movement was written by Naum Vaqilharxhi, an Orthodox Albanian and was published in 1845. In it, Vaqilharxh emphasized the importance of the Albanian language and suggested that its development represents the first step in the evolution of the Albanian people. Of course, the Vaqilharxh example was not isolated and some other Albanian resistance movements also published their programs and called for national unification. Still, their policies did not have a great impact on Albanian society and its folk.

In the second half of the 19th century, due to great changes that occurred on European, as well as the regional, political and social scene, the Albanian national movement went through a period of great qualitative transformation. In 1878, after the peace treaty of Santo Stefano and a Turkish defeat in a Turkish–Russian war, the Great Powers called the Congress of Berlin. The goal of the congress was a partition of the Ottoman Empire between the newly created regional national-states.
Considering that, according to many politicians, Otto Von Bismarck included, Albania was nothing else but a geographical expression, a number of territories inhabited by Albanians were annexed by Serbia, Greece and Montenegro. It was in this atmosphere of general political, social as well as territorial and identity insecurity that the League of Prizren was founded. The League was a political — military organization that united different Albanian committees (put under a single flag), regardless of their religious or regional affiliation into a single body and transformed the Albanian romantic national movement into a real political national movement.

The priority and the immediate goal of the League was to prevent partition of the Albanian inhabited lands from the aspirations of their neighbors and defense of the Albanians’ national interests. For this reason they called upon the Port to unite four vilayets into a unique administrative unit with well defined borders. Although important the demands for autonomy and territorial unity were not the only goals of the League. Similarly to other national movements, the Albanian National Movement elaborated the political platform in which they aimed to transform passive, illiterate mountaineers from the North, historically bounded to clans, Islam and Empire and the pro-western Southern Albanians into a single “organic”, culturally and linguistically homogeneous nation, with a codified official language and well defined territory.

Initially, the Ottoman authorities were supportive of the Albanian national movement and the League members exported their ideas to the Albanians of the Kosovo and the Macedonian vilayet, including the use of Albanian as official language, autonomy for all Albanian populated provinces within the empire and the formation of an elected council of Albanians, that would represent the Ottoman state in Albanian territories.

However, with precedents like Serbia and Greece before it, both of which seceded from the Empire, the central Ottoman administration was unwilling to accord another autonomous region, which eventually would become an independent state. In the 1881, the League of Prizren was banned and its leaders forced to flee abroad. Although the League eventually failed it constituted a turning point in the history of Albanians. With its foundation the Albanian romantic national movement
was transformed into a national ideology and political force (which eventually led to the creation, a few decades later, of an Albanian independent state).

At the outset of the 20th century Haji Mula Zeka founded the first Albanian guerilla movement with a political motivation. The main aim of this so-called Albanian Revolutionary Committees was to organize a series of uprisings against the Ottoman authorities in different Albanian towns. In the first years of its activity, this Albanian national movement was allied with the Young Turk’s cause. But when it became obvious that the Young Turk’s revolution did not aim to contribute to the national causes of different national causes and that, on the contrary the real agenda of this organization was to promote Turkish nationalism their collaboration ended. In response to the pan-Ottoman programme that implied control over the religious communities and national schools of non-Turkish people the Albanians formed their constitutional clubs and demanded for the foundation of single administrative unit for all Albanian inhabited lands and opening of Albanian schools. Although some Albanian feudals, committed to the Ottoman Empire tried to impose a line of compromise with the Porte, their policy was overwhelmed by the nationalistic trend which called for autonomy and sometimes even independence. In the period around 1910-1911 the Albanian national movement reached its full maturity and a number of armed insurrections arose in different Albanian inhabited territories starting from Kosovo. At the same time Albanians tried to defend their cause by legal parliamentary means as well and started a parliamentary debate about Albanian cultural and political rights. This joined military and political action gave some positive results. In fact, immediately before the outbreak of the Balkan Wars the Port allowed some kind of autonomy for Albanians within the framework of the Empire. But, with the Ottoman defeat in 1912 its government administration actually ceased to function and the fear of partition of Albanian inhabited territories between the countries of the Balkan Alliance arose. This new political situation convinced even the most fervent supporters of the Port that for Albanians there was no other solution than to embark on the path to independence.

On 28 November 1912, when the armies of the Balkan Alliance had already occupied most of Albania and their governments officially stated that “Albania never existed and therefore it cannot be created”, 83 representatives form different
parts of Albania proclaimed in Vlora the secession from the Empire and the foundation of the independent state of Albania.

The final outcome of this decision, strongly supported by the Great European Powers as well, was a state of 28,000 square kilometers which, far from the dreams of the founding fathers of Albanian nationalism, comprised only a part of the Albanian inhabited lands. The boundaries of the Albanian state were defined in London in 1913 where the representatives of the Great European Powers decided to resolve Albanian problem by applying the principle of the winner of the war\textsuperscript{16}. On this principle, the Albanian state was not recognized in its ethnic borders and a third of the Albanian population remained under the Serb, Greek and the Montenegrin administration\textsuperscript{17}. This territorial partition was perceived as unjust by the Albanian part and in the years that followed became a constant source of tensions and confrontations between the states.

Although this division had serious political and economic implications it was not the only reason of the Albanian discontent. In fact, with the independence from a province of the Ottoman Empire, Albania turned into a protectorate of Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, Italy and Germany. In fact, German prince Wilhem de Wied was appointed prince of Albania and enthroned in 1914, while the army, police, finances and other important institutions were all controlled by foreigners. In the period that followed the foundation of the state, the traditional, as well as some new internal problems and contradictions emerged. The Ottoman legacy was hard to erase and it was clearly visible in the model of state organization, administrative division and in the electoral and juridical system. The country remained essentially unintegrated, dominated by a class of politicians who had an interest in the maintenance of a socio-political status quo, inherited from the Ottomans, and was essentially feudal. Along with this Albania was overwhelmingly illiterate and almost ninety percent of the population lived in extreme poverty. Inadequate infrastructure, lack of transport facilities and communications continued to exist together with the substantial cultural, social and linguistic differences between Ghegs and Tosks. Albanian remained a divided country even after the proclamation of independence and very

\textsuperscript{16} The Albanians were allies of defeated Ottomans in the Balkan Wars.
\textsuperscript{17} Kosovo and Metohija were annexed by the Serbian Kingdom, the western coast of lake Scutari by Montenegrins while the region of Cameria was given to Greece.
few people identified themselves primarily as national Albanians. In other words the problems and obstacles that became apparent in 1878 were still there. Although probably premature, and as some argue, more a result of external events than consciously aspired, the statehood was achieved. After the First World War Albanian leaders began a process of nation and state building. In the interwar period the most important issue for the majority of Albanian political leaders was to ensure Albania’s survival as an independent state and to find its place in the Balkan environment. This was not easy an task considering that the newly founded state was weak, without real allies and surrounded by powerful neighbors who all had territorial claims.

Considering the above described internal and international political situation it is not surprising that, in the period between 1918 and 1939, Albanian political leaders opted for policies aimed to consolidate state institutions, increase the internal social and cultural cohesion and to maintain the status quo on the international scene. On their political agenda there was simply no room for the so-called “National question”. Strong desire for national unification of all Albanians existed among Kosovars and inhabitants of Northern Albania but their aspirations had never met any serious state support.18

In the spring of 1939 Italy occupied Albania, annexed its territories under the Italian crown and Mussolini’s government assumed all functions of the Albanian state. Italians opened their enterprises, built the roads and administrative buildings but also gave Albanians something they had never been able to achieve for themselves, the Greater Albania. The “new state” under the Italian guidance annexed territories of Kosovo and a big part of Western Macedonia where the Albanians were the majority of the population. The Italian occupation authorities founded Albanian media and schools and the dream of Albanian nationalist, although for a short period of time, became true. In September 1943, when Rome surrendered to the Allies, Germany took over and ruled until the end of the war.

18 Fan Noli, main Ahmed Zogu’s political oppositionist and for a brief time Albanian prime minister (June –December 1924) attempted to re-open the question of Kosovo. Although he did not include the members of Kosovo Committee in his government he accompanied them to the League of Nations in the fall of 1924. In December of 1924, Noli was ousted by Ahmed Zogu and this event put an end on Tirana’s activism in Kosovo.
Quite surprisingly Albanians, who like to present themselves as one of the most freedom loving people in Europe, did not organize any armed resistance to the Axis until the beginning of 1942 when the Albanian Communist Party was formed. Almost exclusively a southern phenomenon (the majority of its leaders, Enver Hoxha included, were of Tosc origin) and deeply influenced and supported by the Yugoslav Communist Party, this organization was almost completely focused on the armed resistance against occupational forces and on the Albanian internal problems.

On the other hand, the Albanians who did not trust the communists and called themselves “nationalist” founded another resistance organization called Balli Kombetar, led by Midhad Frasheri, ex minister in the first Albanian government.

The dividing line between these two organizations was not only ideological and cultural, but it concerned the problem of national unification as well. While the foundation of the Greater Albania was decidedly on the political agenda of the nationalist movement, the communists, imbued with the ideas of Moscow dictated internationalism did not consider the Albanian national problem as one of its priorities. On the contrary, some party leaders even supported the idea of a new Yugoslav federation which would include Albania and Kosovo, ensuring in this way unity and prosperity of the Albanian nation as a whole. Other, less radical members of the party opted for a more cautious policy of preserving Albanian sovereignty and independence, but they as well, were much more concerned about preserving collaboration and solidarity between the YCP and the ACP then to protect their compatriots in Kosovo and Western Macedonia. Not only the ACP leaders left their compatriots in Yugoslavia but they also actively participated in repression of Albanian nationalists in Kosovo. In fact, in 1944, at Tito’s request, the Albanian Communists sent troops to disarm the population in Kosovo and to “prepare the way for the resumption of Yugoslav control. (Nicolas Pano, The People’s Socialist Republic of Albania – Baltimore, 1968)

In the period between 1942 and 1949 the influence of the YCP on their Albanian like-minders was so strong that many argue that only the split between Tito and Stalin safeguarded Albanian independence of the state in its 1913 borders.
Albanians in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes

The Albanians who found themselves in the newly created first Yugoslavia, quickly learned that theirs was an inferior status. In fact the Yugoslav state was from the beginning bitterly hostile to the ethnic Albanians. Yugoslavia literally means “land of south Slavs” and the Albanians of course knew that they were not. I have already argued that neither Slavs nor Albanians had any national consciousness until 20th century, but each of them knew that they were not a member of the opposite group. A Slav was not a “Turk” (the name to describe a Muslim majority that included the Albanians as well), and a Turk was not a Gavur, a non-Muslim subject, an infidel. However the Slavs of Macedonia were in better position than their Albanian fellow-citizens. Even if they were not recognized as people and were considered by the Serb authorities as bumpkins with Serbian roots (Perry, 2000), they at least were the south Slavs while the numerous Albanians from Macedonia and Kosovo were usually portrayed as vile and alien “Turks”(Perry, 2000).

In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (latter Kingdom of Yugoslavia) the process of Serbianization in newly acquired territories of Macedonia and Kosovo was restless and affected all spheres of public life, education included. After 1918 all Albanian schools in Kosovo and Macedonia were shut down. Still, the policies of assimilation through the education system did not give the expected results. In response to the state repressive measures Albanians withdrew their children from the state sponsored schools and it comes with no surprise that in the first half of the 20th century the illiteracy rate among Albanians was almost ninety percent. When it became clear that the assimilation attempts only encouraged the growth of Albanian nationalism and oppositional activity, the authorities from Belgrade adopted some more incisive measures of colonization and forced immigration. The 1914 law-decree on Agrarian Reforms and Colonization encouraged settlement of Serbian and Montenegrin colonists in Kosovo and Macedonia and supported expropriation of the Albanian ownership and emigration. Along with these repressive measures the Albanian community reported in a 1921 petition to the League of Nations that since 1918 about 12,371 people had been killed and 22,000 imprisoned.
Consequently, the 1930s saw a worsening in the interethnic relations between the Slavs and the Albanians, which was seen as proof that policies had to be strengthened with more drastic measures. Such measures were most notably suggested by Cubrilovic in his 1939 project titled “The expulsion of Albanians”, in which he recommended the state authorities to force all Albanians to emigrate to Albania or Turkey. In fact, because of a Serbian repressive policy many Albanians decided to emigrate to Turkey and those who decided to stay in Yugoslavia were engaged in armed resistance and founded the Albanian religious schools, that became the center of nationalist activity. Of course some minority rights were recognized, although on the paper alone. In the early 1920s Albanians were allowed a political party, the “Islamic Association for the Defense of Justice” also known as Bashkim and two deputies from “Southern Serbia (Macedonia) and three from the Old Serbia (Kosovo) were elected to parliament in Belgrade. This Albanian political experience, however, was short lived and when the deputies came to oppose the Serbian government the party was abolished and its leader assassinated in 1929.

There are no doubts that Albanians found themselves in a hostile state and in response, eventually sought to create their own homogeneous national land. In 1918 the Kosovo Committee was formed, fundamentally a clandestine resistance movement, which drew its membership from both sides of the border. Its minimum goals was the Yugoslav recognition and accommodation of Albanian minority rights while its long term ambition was the annexation to Albania of the territories primarily inhabited by Albanians. The Committee had supporters in Albania, especially among Albanians form the northeast, who had family and trade links with Kosovo, but it had enemies as well. Namely the government in Belgrade who considered them a possible threat for the state sovereignty but also the politicians in Tirana, who considered any aspiration of incorporating Kosovo as a possible disaster for Albania. Concerned more with domestic issues and the very survival of the state, Ahmed Zogu one of the Albania’s principal politicians in the interwar period, had no stomach for the Kosovo cause. In the exchange for Yugoslavia’s support in the

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Ahmed Zogu (1985-1961) was born of Muslim parents in the Mati area and acquired military experience during the World War I as a commander of the new Albanian army formed in 1916 by occupying Austrian forces. He played a leading role in departure of all foreign forces and consolidate his power as a interior minister until 1924. In 1924 he became president and in 1928 he proclaimed himself king. He ruled until 1939 when he was expelled by the Italians.
struggle for power, (in order to eliminate his opposers) he agreed to eliminate the Kosovo Committee and its leaders. The only concession Zogu gave to the Kosovo cause was in 1928 when he proclaimed himself not the King of Albania but the King of all Albanians. His commitment to a national cause was, however, only rhetorical.

During World War II, the Albanian community in Yugoslavia had mixed feelings about placing their allegiance. Some of them joined the partisan movement led by the Albanian Communist Party while the others joined the Balli Kombetar, the National Front, which was an anti-Communist and anti-royalist nationalistic group. Under Italian sponsorship, the Balli Kombetar aimed to create a “Greater Albania” which would include Albania, Kosovo, western Macedonia and other territories that were “stolen” or “occupied” by the neighboring Slav states. This policy was very attractive to Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia who had never lost their sense of shared national consciousness but also given the treatment of Kosovars and Macedonian Albanians during the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. For this reason many Albanians joined the National Front and fought against the partisans making them enemies of the local Serbian and Macedonian population as well. Consequently, the image of an Albanian ambition to create a “Greater Albania” was firmly imprinted in the consciousness of Serbs and Macedonians.

How to create a nation? The main elements of the Albanian national identity.

The process of Albanian nation building and self-confirmation as a distinct ethnic, linguistic and cultural community cannot be understood unless we put it in the context of the 19th century Balkans. Although similar to other Balkan national movements, the Albanian one had to overcome serious obstacles, that most of their neighbours had either surmounted or had never faced along their path toward affirmation of their distinct national identities.

If we consider the fact that Albanians had been isolated from the external world for centuries, administratively divided and had suffered from a numerous dangerously centrifugal forces, the fathers of Albanian nationalism, in order to stop what they considered the “already advanced process of erosion of the national
sentiment” singled out the language as the most reliable unifying element. Yet, the codification and the introduction of the Albanian language in the educational system and public life proved to be quite problematic. First, the Albanian culture was principally a popular and folkloristic one, without any relevant written tradition. Another serious obstacle in the affirmation of a separate Albanian identity and introduction of the Albanian language as a medium of education were the central Ottoman authorities. For the Supreme Port, Albanian territories represented not only a borderland defensive belt but also a cheap source of cannon fodder for its military campaigns. For this reason they did not have any interest in recognising Albanians as a separate ethnic group and to encourage use and development of the Albanian language. Considered simply as Turks or as Orthodox, Albanians were forced to receive their education in Turkish or Greek and were not allowed to use their language not even after the Tanzimat reforms when the usage of mother tongues became possible for almost all Ottoman subjects. The result of such policies and the objective lack of a written literate tradition was that in the second half of the 19th century very few Albanians believed that their language could or should be written. In fact, it was only in 1908 at the Congress of Monastir that the Albanians codified their first alphabet and adopted the Latin script. The choice of Latin script was a strategic move. Although innocent in appearance it was a powerful factor in unification but also signified a breaking away from Turkish-Islamic culture and orientation toward the West. In 1916, at a meeting in Shkoder the first attempt was made to create a common literary Albanian language. The participants chose the Gheg idiom from the town of Elbasan as a basis of a future Albanian literate language. However, the language issue remained open for a long time and it was only in 1972 that a Unified Albanian Language was adopted.

In the process of nation building of almost all Balkan nations the re-creation of history played a very important role and Albania was not an exception. In order to develop and foster a sense of common belonging, Albanians as well needed a shared

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20 The Tanzimat, meaning reorganization of the Ottoman empire, was a period of reformation that began in 1839 and ended in 1876. The ambitious project was launched to combat the slow decline of the Empire that had seen its borders shrink, and was going weaker in comparison to the European powers. By getting rid of the millet system, the Ottoman authorities hoped to integrate non-Muslims and non-Turks more thoroughly into Ottoman society by enhancing their civil liberties and granting them liberty throughout the Empire.
common history, and if they were to survive and ensure their existence in the Balkan environment they as well, had to produce evidence of their historical continuity. To justify their claims to the land they inhabit, Albanians had to prove not only that they are an autochthonous population in the Western Balkans but also that they had been living there longer than their neighbours. Since in the historical sources Albanians are rarely mentioned as distinctive ethnic group the first generation of Albanian writers traced the emergence of the nation back to the mythical Pellasgians. Soon this theory was replaced by more convincing Illyrian descent theory and became one of the pillars of Albanian nationalism. The existence of an Illyrian population in ancient times was quite well documented in historical sources and was a proof, at least on paper, of Albanian ethnic and historical continuity in Kosovo and other areas contested by Serbs, Montenegrins and Greeks. The fathers of the nation however, were not only concerned with the nation’s external borders but they also had an important task to consolidate the sense of common belonging. In this process the use of history has to be selective. Like many other nations, Albanians as well had to learn what binds them together and to forget what separated them in the past. For this reason some historical events were simply omitted or reshaped while others were excessively emphasized. For example, the seven centuries of Byzantine domination was almost never mentioned in the official national narratives because it could have been associated with Orthodoxy in a country where the majority of the population had become Muslim while the role of Skanderbeg and his rebellion against Ottomans was reinvented and transformed into a myth. George Kastrioti was a rather well documented historical figure whose memory was still alive in oral tradition, and although his action had never really involved all Albanians, his heroic tragedy had all necessary ingredients for building up a myth of “continuous resistance” against numerous enemies over the centuries. Of course, in order to transform Kastrioti into a symbol of national cohesion and resistance some adjustments had to be done. In particular, his Christian orientation was minimized or avoided. His figure was useful also in the creation of a myth of Albanian centuries long pro-western orientation. This argument was very useful in convincing Albanians to turn their backs to their Ottoman past but also in convincing the European Great Powers that the Albanians had sacrificed themselves
in defending Europe from the Turks and to earn their support for the foundation of an independent Albanian state.

Although we can draw numerous parallels between the Albanian and other nationalisms, the Albanian case had some particular aspects that distinguished them from their immediate surroundings. While in other countries of the region, religion played a fundamental role in the process of nation building in Albania it was seen as a serious obstacle. In order to overcome substantial religious differences within the country Albanian national ideologists tried to find solution for the problem by making nationalism an alternative to the existing religions and in assuming from the very beginning quite anti-clerical attitude. At the end of the 19th century Vaso Pasha coined a concept of “Albanism” (“the real religion of Albanians is Albanism”) which was widely accepted and almost deified by the Albanian population. In fact, Albanians not only have a long tradition of peaceful religious coexistence, but are also the only Muslim people in Europe who fought together with their Christian compatriots against the central Ottoman authorities, and who proclaimed as their national hero a man who for decades fought against Turkish domination. Yet, concern for religion as a potential seed of discord is constant in Albanian recent history and there were different proposals which, although different from each other, all aimed to neutralize possible negative effects of religious factor. With the creation of the Albanian state, King Zogu adopted the strategy of the “nationalisation of religion” which imposed state control over all religious institutions and reduced to a minimum any external influence.

In 1912 Albania became an independent state and for the first time in history the Albanians had sovereign control over a particular territory. The state was established but the nation had still to be created. In the last decades of the 19th century a handful of intellectuals began to forge the Albanian national identity. With independence the nation building process became more dynamic because the foundation of the state made it imperative to create a sense of common belonging. In order to disseminate and develop national cohesion and integration, national ideologists used all means at their disposal. Similar to many other nation building processes they developed a unified code of national values and symbols, creating in

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21 The proposals ranged from introduction of Bektashism as pan-Albanian religion to mass conversions to Protestantism.
this way the necessary normative framework which made possible the imposition of state control on society. But if they were to overcome significant social, cultural and religious differences inherited from the past they had to integrate the Albanians into one homogeneous ideology of a shared cultural and historical heritage. The doctrine or rather myth of national unity became central to national ideology and articulated at several levels. At a social level, the emphasis was put on domestic national unity while in a broader sense emphasis was put on the unity of the Albanian nation as a whole, regardless of the fact that the demarcation of borders had left about forty percent of all Albanians outside of the Albanian state. The fact that national ideologists gave such a great importance to this doctrine is the best evidence of the problems encountered in the process of building national cohesion and integration.

Disastrous consequences of hatred, alienation, religious division and disunion among Albanians were described by N. Frasheri in his article “We Are Dying Out”. “A nation, claiming to be alive, should be united, should have its own language and history, should be civilized, because as it is, wild with no civilization and knowledge, it would not last long. These recommendations were taken seriously by the Albanian political leaders and ideologists and it is not surprising that social and cultural homogenization was considered a priority not only during the reign of King Zog but also during the communist period. This was done through the centralization of power, the spreading of public administration, the destruction of existing local autonomies, introduction of the new national narratives, education in the native language etc.

As elsewhere the building of social and national cohesion was sought through the centralization of power, the spreading of public administration, the destruction of existing local autonomies, education in native language but also through some more incisive measures adopted by the communist regime. As in to many other nation building processes, the Albanian one also sought to achieve the necessary level of social and cultural cohesion through the centralization of power, the spreading of public administration, the destruction of existing local autonomies, education in the native language as well as through some more incisive measures adopted by the communist regime. After Second World War the selective use of history continued, aimed mainly at legitimizing Albanian leaders.
and their policies rather than increasing the level of social cohesion. Although, as elsewhere in Europe, Communism in Albania began as a complete rejection of the past, Enver Hoxha realized very soon how a selective use of history and tradition could increase his power. In order to establish legitimacy for his regime he created the myth of constant resistance where the armed partisan resistance was represented as a continuation and glorious epilogue of Skanderbeg’s insurrection against the Ottomans. Eventually, the reinterpretation of history reached the level of paranoia and made Albania one of the world’s most isolated countries.  

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22 In the myth of constant resistance Enver Hoxha was represented as a heir of Skanderbeg.
CHAPTER III

The Albanian community in the Yugoslavia.

The specific feature of the Balkans is the concentration of diversities (geographical, historical, ethnic, civilizational and cultural) in a comparatively small space. The Yugoslav Federation (established in November 1943) inherited cultural, ethnic and religious differences that had coexisted in the Balkans for centuries, and approached them in a new way. In an effort to integrate the various populations into a new state, with a new system of social justice and faster economic and social development, the ruling elite decided, on the one hand to recognize the existence of differences and on the other hand to treat them as “specificities”, marginalized as much as possible, in order to create one state out of many ethnicities and nations. The final goal of Yugoslav leaders was to create a new man and a new socialist culture. In the first years of existence of the state, the integrative efforts were based on the idea of creating a Yugoslav nation based on similarities between the Slavic people. In its democratic version (Democratic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia) the common state was perceived as an instrument of gradual amalgamation of these commonness without the hegemony of any of its constituent parts.

Considering the ethnic potpourri within the country, and the fact that most of the people who joined the Yugoslav Federation had different political, social, cultural and religious backgrounds, the existence of the state was not justified on the basis of its naturalness (as the inevitable outgrowth of shared culture and history), but rather on its constructiveness expressed through the free will of different nations to join together in the new state. There was no rhetoric of an ancient past and no suggestions that the Yugoslav nation had existed in the past. It was acknowledged that the South Slavs had been in the Balkans since the 6th century, but it was also acknowledged that their histories and fates had been separated until 1918, when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was established. Nevertheless, the experience of a common state,
which existed in the period between 1918 and 1941, played no role in the new State’s self-image. The Kingdom was labeled as a “dungeon of nations” and the communist party was careful not to repeat the mistake of the Serbian elite that antagonized all other national groups through the policy of domination. Rather, the new state made a virtue out of novelty and non-conformity, and was constructed along very different lines. “The Yugoslav political leaders understood that the policy of a unified nation state, based on an “imperialistic” attempt to deny the nationhood of many people making up Yugoslavia would fail” (Cohen and Warwick, 1983). Even if the ruling elite, in the first decades, was probably nostalgic towards some form of Yugoslavism, they were very careful not to impose it on the nations of Yugoslavia (Sekulic, 2001). In its socialist version (Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia) the state was constructed as a federal state based on the equality of its six constituent nations and divided according to national lines. The national identity became one of the principal criteria for constituting the political system and the idea of Yugoslavism was labeled as “artificial” and finally abandoned. However, even if the state with the 1974 constitution became less centralized, communist leadership was hoping that through the policy of “brotherhood and unity”, without the enforcement of Yugoslavism and the expression of national aspirations through the federal system, the nationalist aspirations could be satisfied and the integrity of the state would be consolidated and preserved (Sekulic, 2001). Federalism and the decision of Yugoslav leaders not to link citizens together directly into a state identity, but to operate through the ethnic medium, was one of the peculiar characteristics of Yugoslav nationalism. Instead of being simply Yugoslav citizens, and have a single mode of belonging to the state, the peoples of Yugoslavia were above all members of the Croatian, Slovenian, Serbian, Macedonian, Bosnian and Montenegrin nation, associated with the particular territory of one of the countries republics. One may argue, as some do, that the definition of nations in primordial terms was more or less taken for granted in the former Yugoslavia, and that the national and not state identity represented the primary political attachment. Yet, with being Croats, Macedonians, Slovenes, members of different nations
were also members, loyal citizens of the multinational and multiethnic Yugoslav state. This secondary, and in some cases even primary, focus of loyalty gained prominence, and the people of some constituent parts of Yugoslavia (Macedonia for example) felt a strong affiliation to the Yugoslav state. The Yugoslav identity (both national and state) in the period from the 60s to the late 80s represented the way of escaping ethnic essentialism, and overcoming traditional nationalism, and most importantly this kind of identification had some elements of civil identity of the western type. In the 1991 the Yugoslav Federation broke up, and together with the state the civil way of identification was lost.

The Yugoslav federation was a multinational and multicultural state, whose legitimacy was based on a specific variant of socialism and its leading role in the non-aligned movement. Considering that the legitimacy of the state was strongly linked with the communist ideology, there was no chance for the state to survive the dissolution of communism (Sekulic, 1997). In fact, after the fall of the communist ideology, the Yugoslav Federation and its particular state building pattern broke-up, but as Appadurai points out “by instituting a system of an intermediate stage of belonging, Federal Yugoslavia could be said to have represented an attempt by its leaders to think beyond the nation” (Appadurai, 1993).

The Growth of the Albanian Nationalism

Albanians in Kosovo

The 1960s represented the turning point for the Yugoslav Albanians. In 1966, Aleksandar Rankovic head of the Yugoslav security forces, famous for its pro-Serbian and anti-Albanian policy was discharged and the role of the Serb-dominated UDBAa and its anti-Albanian policies were significantly limited in the province. At the same time the Yugoslav state moved toward greater decentralization, by which the federal units received more power. Encouraged by this new political situation, the Yugoslav Albanians increased their national consciousness, and some of them began to gather up forces demanding more group rights.
In 1968 there were large-scale demonstrations in Prishtina, where the Kosovar Albanians expressed their dissatisfaction with their minority status, demanding that the republican status be granted to provinces of Kosovo and Metohija as well as the establishment of an Albanian language university\textsuperscript{23}. These demonstrations were followed by similar demonstrations in Tetovo where the Albanian nationalists demanded to join Kosovo in a seventh republic. Of course, the Albanian demands were labeled as irredentist and firmly denied by the authorities in Skopje and Belgrade.

However, the Albanian demonstrators achieved a part of their objectives. In 1970, Prishtina University was established and in 1974, the new federal Constitution provided for virtual self-rule to the Autonomous Region of Kosovo. What Kosovo gained with this constitution was a republic without republican status. As Albanian political leader Azem Vlasi observed, “Kosovo functioned as a republic in the federal state of Yugoslavia and we were not a republic only by name”. The status of an autonomous province of Serbia made it possible for the provincial political elite to create direct links with the federation authorities and to bypass the republican ones. By this constitution, the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo obtained a constitution for the first time in its history, according to which it had the right to regulate independently its social and economic affairs and its political bodies. The Kosovo Assembly was defined as the highest institution of self-management and had the power to change the constitution of SAP Kosovo, had a vote in the event of change to the federal Constitution, and the power to decide on other crucial questions regarding the political, social and cultural development of the region. It also had the power to issue laws and budgets and to appoint or recall members of the Assembly, the judges of the Constitutional Court and judges of the Supreme Court. In other words, from 1974 onwards, Kosovo had almost all the prerogatives of other federal units (republics) while the federation controlled the country’s monetary, military and foreign affairs. The changes brought by the 1974 Constitution significantly increased participation of Albanians in political institutions not only at the regional but also on the federal level and in diplomacy.

\textsuperscript{23} Regardless the fact that in former Yugoslavia lived more than 2 million Albanians and that they outnumbered Macedonians and Slovenes they had never been recognized as people but only as nationality,
From the Albanian perspective, the broader range of political and cultural rights in Kosovo and high rates of Albanian participation in the political institutions of the federation were not enough and they still felt they were being unequally treated. In effect, as statistical data from the 60s and 70s show, the Albanians were underrepresented in state-run enterprises and in the League of Communists, their economic status was low and cultural institutions inadequate. But the major cause of Albanian discontent was refusal of the Federation to grant the Albanian population symbolic equality with other Slav nationalities and to recognize the republican status of Kosovo.

Regarding ethnic relations, in the period between 1968 and 1981 those between Albanians and Serbs and Montenegrins in Kosovo were improving, at least in official discourses, supported by communist ideology and its slogans of “brotherhood and unity” but also due to the improved socio-economic and cultural conditions of the Albanian population. However, leaving a side some examples of cooperation, above all in the economic sphere, there was no will to create a multiethnic society with stable and lasting institutions. Substantial social, economic, religious and cultural differences between the two major ethnic communities generated in history were not erased and Serbs and Kosovars continued to coexisted peacefully although as communities apart.

Along with its complicated history and difficult ethnic relations it should be noted that Kosovo was the poorest and less developed region in the former Yugoslavia. In order to overcome economic hardships in the region the federal authorities in the 1970s established the so-called “Federation fund for inducing a faster development of undeveloped regions” in which Kosovo had a significant share of 37-45%\(^2\). However, despite significant federal state incentives the development gap between Kosovo and other republics increased. Official statistics indicate that in 1952, Kosovo’s per capita social product was 44% of the Yugoslav average and in 1988 it drooped to 27%. Such poor economic performance was translated into high unemployment rates, two and a half times higher than official rates in the rest of the Federation. In such a strained economic situation, poorly

\(^{24}\) In the period between 1971 and 1988 the more developed republic of Yugoslavia gave 3% of their income for the development of underdeveloped republics.
educated Albanians were at a disadvantage. In fact, in 1981, 77% percent of unemployed people were Albanians.

Despite the socialist rhetoric of “Brotherhood and Unity”, undoubted improvement of social and cultural conditions of Kosovo Albanians provided by the 1974 Constitution and higher rates of Albanian participation in the political institutions of the federation, in March 1981 Kosovo Albanians rioted again. There are many disagreements and controversies about the intentions and real motivation of the demonstrators. The initial riot began in a cafeteria at the University of Prishtina where students expressed their concern and frustration over a number of issues: unemployment, unwillingness of the federal state to recognize inadequacy of higher education and inferior status of Albanians in the province. These dissatisfactions were symbolized by the scarce quality of the food, bad living conditions, overcrowding and underfunding of the University of Prishtina. Soon the student demonstrations grew into a mass protest all across Kosovo but, instead of the improvement of living conditions for students the protesters asked for the creation of a “Socialist Republic of Kosovo”.

The response of federal authorities on Albanian demands was sharp and exaggerated and showed the federal state’s inability to understand the real nature of the Kosovo problem. Instead of accommodation of Albanian claims for symbolic equality with the Slav nationalities, i.e republic status, the federal authorities declared a state of emergency, deployed tanks and the federal army, closed schools and described demonstrations as “aggressive, ruthless, brutal and devastating actions with scope of forming the Republic of Kosovo, which would secede from Serbia and Yugoslavia”. As some external observers suggested, the events of 1981 in Kosovo were to be understood as a part of a larger historical example of ethnicity and nationalism in the Balkans. In the words of a well known Serbian journalist Aleksandar Tijanic “the Yugoslav authorities grossly underestimate to what extent the idea of a Kosovo republic seems natural to most Albanians”.

In a period that followed the demonstrations many protesters were arrested and Albanian political leaders recalled. Yet, these were not the major

25 According to all Yugoslav constitutions only nations and respective republic had right to secession.
26 From 1981 forward, Kosovo Albanians made up highest percentage of political prisoners in SFRY.
consequences of the 1981 events. Serbian authorities, who had never been satisfied with the autonomous status of its provinces proposed to revise the constitution and find an alternative to the 1974 de facto status of Kosovo. They argued that the autonomous status of Kosovo had already brought disunity to the Republic of Serbia, that regardless of all the concessions Kosovo Albanians were never satisfied with their status and that were not striving for some significant improvement of the status, but rather for secession form Serbia and Yugoslavia. Between 1981 and 1991 Kosovo officially preserved its autonomy but Serbs de facto reinforced its power over the province. With the excuse of fighting Albanian irredentism introduced some restrictive measures and impose almost complete police control over the region. During the 1980s, the majority of Yugoslav citizens who were arrested under article 136 of the federal criminal code for “association for purposes of hostile activity” were Kosovars. Along with being labeled as a serious threat to a territorial integrity of the state Kosovars were also accused of implementing a deliberate strategy of “Albanization”. It has been argued, that the Albanian high birthrates are due to a conscious decision of Albanians to reproduce rapidly in order to change the demographic picture of Kosovo. In order to give some support to these assumptions they used the statistical data that actually showed that the Albanian population in Kosovo significantly increased in a period between 1948 and 1981, while the proportion of Serbs and Montenegrins fell. The decrease of the Slav population was explained not only with Albanian demographic expansion but also with the mass migrations of Serbs from Kosovo. Although the Serb migration from the province had been constant since the early 1940s, it was only after 1981 that the problem became an object of public debate. From a different studies, almost all commissioned by the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences Since, it emerged that the “mass” emigration of Serbs from Kosovo originated from non-economic factors but as a result of fear, constant pressure and the failure of the state to protect the people and their proprieties. In the meantime the newspapers began to report about violence against private and state property, attacks on police and provincial

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27 In 1979 the birth rate in Kosovo was 26.1, which was the highest in Europe.
28 According to the official statistics in 1948 there were 498,000 Albanians, 171,000 Serbs and 28,000 Montenegrins. In 1971 Albanians were 917,000, Serbs 228,000 and Montenegrins 31,000. In 1981, the number of Albanians increased to 1,226,000 while the number of Serbs fell to 209,000.
authorities, about sexual violence and general mistreatment of Kosovo’s Serbs and Montenegrins. In addition, the Serbs from Kosovo considered themselves to be discriminated against in the labor market, in provincial courts and in police forces. All these “facts” contributed a mass, grass root, ethnic mobilization of Kosovo Serbs. In the early 1980s Kosovo Serbs started to organize a small scale local meetings and protests against discrimination and asked for the protection of their rights and establishment of law and order. Soon these “spontaneous” meeting were transformed into a mass movement capable of involving thousands of people and the local Serbs shifted their agenda from the local security problem to the issues of broader political significance including the constitutional issues as well. The protesters argued that if the provincial authorities were unable to guarantee protection for the Serbs and to stop their “mass” migration form Kosovo then the province should be brought back under direct control of Serbia’s authority. Serbian activists sought the support of influential people and established contacts with dissident intellectuals like Dobrica Cosic (a well known writer who had been purged from the Communist League because of his nationalist writings and policies) but also with a young generation of Serbian politicians, like Slobodan Milosevic, who soon became their protector and used their support to secure the leadership of the League of Communists of Serbia in 1987. The final outcome of this collaboration was further aggravation of already seriously compromised ethnic relations between Kosovo’s Serbs and Albanians.

Until 1991 and the formal dissolution of the Yugoslav federation all Kosovo’s issues and crises were treated on a federal level. But with the declaration of independence of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia Kosovars found themselves ones more in a Serbian state characterized by fierce nationalism. After 15 years, Serbian authorities finally got an opportunity to revise the constitution and re-establish a complete political and social control over the region.

In March 1989 militant Albanian miners from the Trepca mine went on strike and occupied the mine management office. They demanded the resignation of provincial leaders imposed on them by Serbian authorities and suggested that any
constitutional limitation of Kosovo’s autonomy should be subject to democratic debate. In response to Kosovar’s demands, Serbia’s National Assembly passed the controversial amendment that would eventually return Kosovo to Serbian control. A few days later there were mass protests all across Kosovo. Serbian authorities once more declared the state of emergency, deployed special security forces and suppressed demonstrations in a bloodbath. It had been reported that many Albanians were killed shot by the Serbian police and army.

In June of the same year, in Gazimestan (central Kosovo) Slobodan Milosevic delivered his famous nationalistic speech in occasion of six hundred years of Serbian defeat in the Battle of Kosovo. This event was described by many commentators and observers as presaging the collapse of the Yugoslav Federation and the bloody wars that followed. In that occasion, in front of a crowd of half a million people, he spoke about the possibility of “armed battles” in future of the Serbian national development and made a clear parallel between the Battle of Kosovo and present times trying to illude to the fact that the Serbs who fought against the Turks in the past were somehow the same Serbs who today, were fighting for Serbian national survival. In his speech, Kosovo had a central role “Nobody should be surprised that Serbia raised its head because of Kosovo this summer. Kosovo is the pure center of our history, culture and memory. Every nation has one love that worms its heart. For Serbia it is Kosovo. The message for Albanians was clear.

One year later, the Serbian government implemented constitutional changes and remove the legal basis for Kosovo’s autonomy. The Kosovo parliament was suspended and Belgrade imposed its direct rule over the province. Kosovars responded with the establishment of a parallel institution the “Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo” with headquarters in Zagreb and decided to organize a referendum on Kosovo’s sovereignty. The referendum was backed by the majority of Albanians and Ibrahim Rugova emerged as a leader of the Kosovar liberation movement.

In the period that followed foreign observers, journalist and international NGOs reported about severe violations of Albanian civil and human rights, Serbian
repression, strained economic situation and poverty. Ethnic tensions increased to a point of no return and finally escalated into an armed conflict in 1999.
Albanians in Macedonia

With regards to the Albanian community in Macedonia, the changes brought about by the 1974 Constitution did not mean much since they continued to be considered as a minority in the Republic of Macedonia and as such had been granted only cultural rights.

The events in Kosovo in 1968 and 1981 were mirrored by similar even if on a smaller scale nationalist manifestations by the Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia. The proposed “seventh republic”, which was to include the Albanian-inhabited areas of western Macedonia, was seen as a serious threat to the territorial integrity but even to the very existence of the Macedonian nation (Perry, 2000). As an answer to the Albanian nationalist claims, the Macedonian authorities introduced some special measures which circumscribed considerably the rights of the Albanian community. The Albanian names “which stimulated nationalist sentiment and adherence to the People’s Republic of Albania” were banned from the registrar of the Tetovo municipality, the Albanian folksongs were also banned and some Albanian officials were dismissed from the state administration for attending Albanian weddings at which “nationalist” songs were sung (Poulton, 1998).

For the Albanian population in SR Macedonia it was perhaps events concerning education and language which caused the most opposition. At the beginning of the 1987 school year, the authorities canceled the Albanian-language in secondary schools. The Macedonian and the Albanian students were integrated and school lessons were in the Macedonian language. The next year, the authorities decided to introduce bilingual education in the Albanian schools. The Albanian parents protested, and many children were withdrawn from the bilingual schools.

The same year, as reported by ATA, the official news agency of Albania, Tetovo municipality introduced a “package of administrative measures” aimed at restraining the birth rate among Albanians. According to these new measures, the families with more than two children were required to pay for the health care of additional children (Poulton, 1998).

In this political surrounding the relations between the Albanians and the Macedonians deteriorated and mutual resentment grew.
As I have already stated in the first chapter, the Albanians were never satisfied with their legal and political position in Former Yugoslavia. At the time of Socialist Yugoslavia, the then Socialist Republic of Macedonia proclaimed the equality of all citizens and the principle of non-discrimination on national grounds. By law, the existence of the minorities was recognized and was defined by special laws. According to the 1974 Constitution, Macedonia had been a “state of the Macedonian people and the Albanian and Turkish minorities“. The theoretical legal framework provided by this Constitution at first sight enabled a vast area of rights and freedoms for the minority communities. But this was just theory since the great formal rights just enabled partial covering of the factual discrimination. National minorities such as the Turks, the Roma, the Vlachs, the Albanians and others were neglected and did not enjoy the same support for development by the state institutions like the members of mainstream Slavic culture. This kind of treatment of the national minorities created and emphasized the differences at the socio-economic, cultural and educational level.

Fear of the ther, poor mutual understanding and nationalist thinking kept the Macedonians and the Albanians from cooperation. The new 1989 Macedonian constitution even worsened this situation. While according to the 1974 Constitution, Macedonia had been a “state of the Macedonian people and the Albanian and Turkish minorities,” the 1989 constitution said that Macedonia is the “national state of the Macedonian nation” meaning the Orthodox, ethnic Macedonians who are the native speakers of Macedonian. Albanians saw this as a reduction of the status and rights, while ethnic Macedonian officials viewed the change as a way to strengthen the national integrity of the Macedonian people. Unwilling to accept this situation the Albanians formed political parties based on ethnic lines in order to improve their status and bring changes by all means at their disposal, democratic or other. The main goal of the Albanian politicians was to gain status of equal partners in the state and to escape minority status.

29 On the legal ground, anyone who is a citizen of the Republic of Macedonia is Macedonian. But Albanians and members of other ethnic groups prefer to identify themselves not as Macedonians in any sense, but as part of their own ethnos, living in the Republic of Macedonia. An Albanian is an Albanian and does not wish to be called anything else.
They demanded to make the Albanian an official state language and to gain the right to fly the Albanian flag alongside that of the state flag.

With the proclamation of independence in November 1991 ethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians increased significantly. Following the independence the newly created Macedonia state, whose state but also national identity, had been contested by almost all its neighbors, has passed through the period of strong national reawakening. In order to support national group consolidation, which was politically very important in a short period that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the Macedonians made a significant effort to assert separateness and uniqueness of the Macedonian nation. In this new political and social environment there was simply no room for national minorities and their claims. It can not be stated that the Macedonians did not recognize some minorities collective rights like the right to primary and secondary education in their native language and representation in media and state institutions. Still, this was not enough to create a homeland for its numerous minorities, especially Albanians, who made up 27% of the overall population of the state. The Albanian community Macedonia is not only numerous but it is also highly concentrated in the western part of the country, bordering on a predominantly Albanian province of Kosovo and the Republic of Albania. This ethnic continuum, as well as relative economic independence and close family and economic ties with other Albanian communities provides the Albanians with a sense of being a part of a great Albanian, economically self-sustainable community able to face up with a small and weak Macedonian state.

The Albanian claims ranged from the right to use their language in public administration and education, to the right to use the Albanian flag and the

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30 The Macedonians as a separate national identity were recognized only in the 1945. Until then they were considered Bulgarians or Serbs. When Macedonia declared its independence in 1991, the state, but also the national identity of the Macedonian people was contested by almost all its neighbours. Bulgaria, Macedonia’s neighbour to the east, recognized the state but it does not recognize the existence of a separate Macedonian national identity and language. Greece did not contest the existence of a separate national identity but still fails to recognize the state. They claimed that the name Macedonia and use of the flag (Alexander’s Star of Vergina) imposed territorial claims on the Greek region with the same name. The Serbs were and still are sceptical about historian existence of any fixed ethnic identity among Slavs in the contemporary Macedonia before the second half of the 20th century. The state and national identity are also contested within the country because Albanian minority likes to portray Macedonian nation as an artificial product of Titoist brainwashing.
demand to become the second constitutive people of the republic\textsuperscript{31}. These requests, labeled as exaggerated and a serious threat for the state integrity were all rejected by the Macedonian state authorities.

Since Macedonia became independent at the end of 1991, there were several armed conflicts between the official state administration and the local Albanians. In February 1995, in a village called Mala Recica, the police prevented by force the opening of the unrecognized university in Albanian. On this occasion one demonstrator was killed, several were wounded and the heads of the controversy went to prison for a long time. Two years later, during the demonstrations in Gostivar three Albanian who claimed more cultural rights were killed and the Mayor of the town who hoisted the Albanian flag on the Town Hall was sentenced to reclusion in prison. However, the most outstanding event was the armed conflict of National Liberation Army (UCK) with governmental forces in the spring 2001, which brought the country to the brink of civil war. The armed conflict lasted seven months and ended with the Ohrid Agreement, which awwarned the Albanians but also other communities considerably broader collective rights than the Constitution had granted them until then.

\textsuperscript{31} The reference to language is typical of Albanian nationalism and a main marker of their national identity. Throughout the entire political separation between Albania and Yugoslavia, the Yugoslav Albanians adopted the linguistic reforms decided on the conference on spelling held in Tirana in 1972. From the Albanian point of view an Albanian remains Albanian as long as he speaks the Albanian language. If he loses his language due to the exclusive use of Macedonia or Serbian, he becomes “assimilated”. Thus, the Albanians demanded the government to endorse the widest possible use of their language. The position of Albanian parties was that the Albanian should become the country’s second language, equal in status to Macedonian. Language claims were also maid in area of education, especially in university education.
Republic of Albania

Unlike their Yugoslav “compatriots” who in a period between 1945 and 1999 had to fight for their basic political, social, cultural and group rights, Albanians in Republic of Albania found themselves in a “new” communist guided country and lived mostly a different story. In 1946, Enver Hoxha a leader of the Albanian Communist party proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of Albania and introduced in a short time a totalitarian regime of a Stalinist type. The newly created state inherited almost all the problems and internal and external controversies that characterized the previous system and since the very beginning had to face up with a number of internal and international issues. After the Tito-Stalin split, the Albanian communists who since the foundation of the party had been closely related to their Yugoslav colleagues, interrupted all relations with the Yugoslav state and became an obedient and close ally of the Soviet Union. In 1949 Albania closed its borders and interrupted all economic, cultural and family ties that Northern Albanians held with Kosovars and Macedonian Albanians.

In the same year Albania became a member of the Council of Mutual Economic Aid, and in 1955 it joined the Warsaw Pact. In the first years of the existence of the “New Albania”, as Enver Hoxha liked to portray the country, did not differ from other Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe. But soon the things changed. Although the official relationships with Moscow had never been interrupted, the Moscow attempt to improve its relations with Yugoslavia were seen as a sort of betrayal and official Tirana reduce its contacts with the Soviet Union to a minimum. In the early 1960s Albania found its partner in the Communist China, but this partnership as well did not last long. Starting from the early 1970s, Albania who in Hoxha’s words, remained loyal to the principals successively betrayed by China and Soviet Union, began to develop “its own socialism”. Surrounded by rapacious neighbors (it should be noted that in the post war period none of its neighbors actually had territorial claims toward Albania) and threatened by the imperialist United States, Western Europe and betrayers of the Communist ideology like Soviet Union and China,
the Working Party of Albania (ex Communist Party) decided that the almost complete isolation of the country was the only way to ensure its survival and development. This paranoia reached its climax in a period between the 1960s and 1980s when the communist party forbid its people listening to foreign radio stations and to watch foreign TV programs. Any attempt to break the rules and obtain external information was severely punished and many Albanians were imprisoned. Traveling abroad required special permissions which were issued only for state representatives.

Even the family ties were interrupted. Albanians were not allowed to visit their relatives in Kosovo or Macedonia and the foreigners in mixed marriages were offered to choose between leaving the country or staying but cutting any contacts with their homeland. Such isolation resulted in almost full deficit of information about the external world.

For decades the economic life was dominated by the centrally planned economy and a number of state controlled enterprises were built. However, these enterprises soon proved to be outdated and unprofitable. Economic hardship became even more evident when Albania left CMEA and the Warsaw Pact in 1968. The situation in agriculture was more or less the same. The inexistence of any private-owned land destroyed any labor stimuli of the population and resulted in low productivity and subsequent constant shortage of even basic foodstuffs.

Along with the economy and agriculture Hoxha’s totalitarian regime almost destroyed the collective memory and traditions of its people. During his rule, that lasted until his death in April 1985, Enver Hoxha exercised an outright totalitarian dictatorship based on the cult of the “leader” that has no precedents or analogies in the modern history of Europe. In order to achieve full control over the population and to unify the people from the North and the South into a single state and national identity Hoxha focused his attention on eliminating internal differences and political opposites.

Already during the war Hoxha decided to limit the social and political power of the unruly and unsubmissive Ghegs in the North. As in Ottoman times, the northern highlanders continued to live in their compact communities
According to their traditions and customary laws and were quite unwilling to accept the new system and legislative rules. Such traditional society represented a serious obstacle in a process of “modernization” and the creation of the “New Albania” and the communist leaders decided to approach this delicate issue in a drastic way. Instead of a gradual transformation of the existing social model they opted for the elimination of the local leaders, so-called bajraktars, acquainted with the customary laws and guardians of traditions and morals. What is more, the northern highlanders were accused of being anti-communist elements who collaborated with Germans and Italians and active supporters of the nationalist Balli Kombetar movement. It has been reported that in 1944, Albanian partisans were sent to annihilate the tribal leaders in the north and that a third of the adult male population was killed on that occasion. The bajraktars who survived were killed or imprisoned afterwards. Considering these facts it comes as no surprise that in today’s Albania local people often have no memories of their own predecessors, of the clan or tribe to which they belonged fifty years ago, and that some traditions and customs are lost forever.

Another thorny issue and a possible threat for national unity was represented by religious differences. Although the Albanians through their history had showed little attachment to religious issues and are an example of peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians, these differences had always been considered as a possible element of discord that lay in wait. During the period of national awakening “the fathers of the nation” tried to overcome, or rather to reduce to a minimum this threat with the introduction of the doctrine of Albanism. This doctrine which implies that the only religion of Albanians is their ethnic belonging was widely accepted by the majority of Albanians and examples of religious intolerance are very rare. Yet, these facts were not convincing enough for Enver Hoxha and in 1967 he approached the issue by banning religion by law. The decree on the atheist state passed and three traditional religions were prohibited while the churches and mosques were all demolished or transformed into shops or sport halls. There is no doubt that this political campaign erased from the collective memories a great part of
religious traditions and rites but it should be noted that Albania would not easily declared itself the “first atheist state in the world” if the popular sense of religious indifference did not have its historical roots.

Inherited social, cultural and linguistic differences between Tosks and Ghegs were alleviated as we have seen through erasing collective memories and traditions but also through complete subjugation of people to the Communist ideological stereotypes and clichés. The latest was achieved through the final standardization of language and the rapid spread of popular literacy which opened wide possibilities for state sponsored communist propaganda and the introduction of new national narratives and myths all constructed around the figure of Enver Hoxha (the central character was Hoxha). According to these myths E.Hoxha was a political genius, brilliant military strategist, the infallible founder of the Albanian Communist party, the liberator of Tirana, but also the key figure in what is to be understand as a modern creation myth – the construction of New Albania. The creation myth is a common feature of many cultures. They usually generate in oral tradition and are then codified in a written literally tradition. But in the Albanian case there was no single, common creation myth. Hoxha identified this absence and created a new framework of national consciousness constructed entirely around his figure. Like a hero of classical antiquity he liked to present himself as a military genius with the gift of a semi-divine foresight and wisdom and a great founder and leader of the nation. In the history of the Party of Albania, published in 1982 it was stated that: “Outstanding among all leaders is Comrade Enver Hoxha. He is the founder of the Party of Labor of Albania and had led it through all historical stages of the revolution. With his wisdom, determination, foresight and revolutionary courage, Comrade Enver Hoxha has ensured the consistent, revolutionary implementation of the Marxist-Lenin line and norms of the Party, has never allowed it to be diverted into blind alleys and has brought it triumphant through all difficult and complicated situations... He is the most beloved teacher and leader of the whole Albanian people, united in steel like unity around the party and its Central Committee.”
The “new” nation needed a history as well, but this time its purpose was not only the creation of social cohesion. History served, above all, to legitimize the Albanian leader and his policies, and the selective use of history that characterized the early period of Albanian national awakening continued. In order to give legitimacy to the Albanian version of communism, Hoxha presented himself as the heir of Skanderbeg and presented the partisan resistance of the Second World War as a natural continuation of the Skanderbeg rebellion against the Turks. This manipulation of history gradually reached Orwellian dimensions of paranoia. Contradictory and difficult historical fate together with forty years of probably the most ruthless dictatorship in Europe had indelible consequences on Albanian society and it comes as no surprise that the transitional period and the establishment of new democratic institutions was quite problematic. Unlike many other countries from the former Soviet block, which after 1989 returned to their own heritage and restore the democratic institutions, Albania, unfortunately did not have much to restore. As noted in previous pages Albania in its history did not have democratic institutions and traditions, and if any positive heritage of self-governance had existed, it had been erased from the collective memories during the communist regime. What is more, in the transitional period Albanians had to face up with a serious identity crisis as well. During communism, collective memories, traditions, rites and other important elements of Albanian cultural identity were seriously compromised and transformed into new values and self-images to which many Albanians, willingly or not, adhered. But with the end of Hoxha’s legacy these values and self-images were shattered while leaving no alternative unifying national vision or what it really mean to be Albanian.
The problem of the Albanian national unification

In 1949 Enver Hoxha left Kosovars to their own fate and during his regime the so-called “national question” remained a secondary issue. Every now and then the question of Kosovo was pulled out from oblivion and some political and academic works asserted the injustice of the 1913 arrangement but it was done only for propaganda purposes when the regime faced difficulties of political or economic nature. Contrarily to Serbian convictions that Tirana constantly alimented Kosovar discontent and dreams of a Greater Albania it was not in Hoxha’s interest to include Kosovo within Albanian borders. Both Serbs and Kosovars were not aware of the true nature of the regime in Tirana. Those Kosovars who, in a period between 1949 and 1985 sought shelter in Albania, convinced that the “mother country” would protect them, were all handed back to the Yugoslav authorities.

After Enver Hoxha’s death in 1985, the ideological differences between Yugoslavia and Albania were smoothed out and relations between the states improved despite tense ethnic relations in Kosovo. The borders were opened, although traveling was not easy due to the introduction of a visa system, and the economic and cultural co-operation re-established. The Kosovars and Macedonian Albanians who thought that the co-operation between the two states would improve their position were wrong, again. In fact, official Tirana had much better relations with Belgrade than with Prishtina. Political pragmatism and economic interest prevailed and Tirana continued to treat the problems of Kosovars as an Yugoslav internal issue. Every now and then state officials talked about “equality of rights” for minorities but their commitment to Kosovo was only rhetorical.

In 1991, “the wind of change” finally reached Albania. The first democratic elections were held and the Albanian Labor Party, who had the whole power in its hands and full control of the secret services and the army won. But, soon the situation in the country became explosive, accompanied with a wave of strikes and popular protests and the first government was forced to resign. The second elections were held in 1992 and won by Sali
Berisha’s Democratic Party. The new government seemed to be more comprehensive toward the Kosovo issue. In fact, a few months before the elections Berisha stated that once in power he would bring down the “Balkan Wall” and the Kosovars but also Macedonian Albanians began to daydream about the tanks which would come rolling over the mountains from Albania to defend their brothers as soon as Berisha’s Democratic Party gained power. However, the facts that followed proved that Albanians from the former Yugoslavia were wrong, once more. Initially, Berisha was seriously convinced that Kosovo’s independence proclaimed in Zagreb in 1991, would be recognized by the international community, following the examples of Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As a Gheg with many family ties with Kosovo he also hoped that the new international situation will finally offer the Albanians the chance to unite. He and the Kosovars believed that the second elections will be followed by important foreign investments and that the Albanian economic situation would improve quickly. This, however, did not happen and economically strained Albania could not afford war with the Serbs. Considering this situation the Tirana’s official policy on the “national issue” became more pragmatic and moderate. Instead of calls for territorial unification, which would seriously damage the political and economic recovery of the country, official Tirana offered a more realistic solution of the spiritual unification, but also because in the words of DP’s vice president Shkelzen Maliqi “a hasty unification now would produce more damage than good, because of the large differences in the level of economic development, as well as life style, way of thinking and some basic values. The predominant view is that the best solution for both Albania and Kosovo is to join the EU”.

Strained economic situation and unwillingness of the international community to endorse and finance the Albanian dreams of territorial unification were not, however, the only obstacle that Berisha’s government and Kosovars had to face to. The major opponents were the Albanian citizens who soon became indifferent toward Kosovars and their claims and unwilling to sacrifice themselves for the “common cause”. Considering this situation the Albanian government turned their attention from Kosovo and concentrated on
internal issues. In the years that followed Berisha’s policy toward Kosovo often alternate between hardline and moderate positions depending on internal situation and Western pressures. Occasionally he used the Kosovo issue and played the nationalistic card in order to gain political support of radical nationalist and diaspora communities in the US and Western Europe in his political struggle with the opposition Socialist Party but in concrete terms did little to promote the idea of a pan-Albanian national state. In 1994, under western pressure, Albania recognized the inviolability of Albanian borders with Serbia and Montenegro and since then the Berisa’s government has pushed for the idea of an autonomous status for Kosovo within a reconstructed Serbia or Rump Yugoslavia. Despite the strong opposition of the radical line, which in the meantime gained power within the LDK (Kosovo Democratic League) Berisa’s policy continued on this trend until 1997 when the Albanian state collapsed due to the failed pyramid schemes.

Berisa’s government was succeeded by the Albanian Socialist Party led by Fatos Nano who since the very beginning made it clear that the idea of a Greater Albania was not on their agenda. Their official position was that the Albanian communities should be integrated into different counties where they are based and that these liberal and democratic countries would one day join the EU and resolve in this way the problem of different Balkan minorities. In the 1999 Albanian government gave shelter to 500,000 Kosovar refugees and the question of a unitary state was briefly on the table. But after an initial “enthusiasm” and a wave of patriotism among the Albanian population from the North, alimented by the right wing parties things calmed down. Instead of knocking down the existing barriers, the war in Kosovo underlined the existing and the new ones arose. In fact, after 1999 the prejudices and negative images that the two communities had toward each other increased. With regard to the official policy it can be stated that the war did little to change the cold official relationships between Tirana and Prishtina.

NATO intervention in Kosovo led to an escalation of Albanian nationalism in the region. In fact, in 2001 there was an armed conflict in Macedonia between the governmental forces and the Albanian paramilitary
organization and this arose the fear among Albanian neighbors that the Albanian national unification may be the next destabilizing factor in the region. The response of official Tirana to the events in Macedonia did not differ from those issued by the international community. Rather, the state officials did their best to reassure Albanian neighbors as well as the international community, that the Albanian state does not seek the border changes but rather that they hoped the latest would in a future become irrelevant and stressed the commitment of Albania to continue the process of European and North Atlantic integrations.

These statements did not, however, convinced the people in neighboring countries and many still believe that official Tirana still has the hidden agenda and is only declaring what the international community wants to hear. However, I believe that the preceding pages and historical facts have shown that the official state’s commitment, from King Zogu onwards, to the so-called national question was only rhetorical. More a dream of power than a real political engagement.
The Albanian-Albanian dialogue

In 2005 I carried out the research on identity formation comprising the Macedonian and Albanian communities in Kosovo and Macedonia. The main goal of that research was to follow the process of the identity formation of the “contested” Macedonian identity and to identify how the members of different communities, mainly Slavs and Albanians, construct their identities in relation and in contrast to each other, to their host states and to the great socio-political changes that occurred in the last twenty years. During my fieldwork in Macedonia and Kosovo I chose a representative sample of five families with three generations and made about fifty interviews with people of different social backgrounds. The sample included interviewees from rural villages and urban centers, with elementary, high school and university education.

During the research, quite surprisingly, I discovered that the recent and contested Macedonian identity is even less “imaginary” than the Albanian one and therefore an interesting subject for further research. The Albanians from the former Yugoslavia seriously convinced that there is a static and deeply rooted identity, based upon the common language, some ethnic memories and a handful of myths would make them one People. However, as a consequence of the interviews gathered it appeared that almost a century of living in completely different political and social surroundings have created some substantial differences among them. When the events made it possible to different Albanian communities to finally get closer to each other, the myth that “Albania is not the state of four but the nation of seven million people” came under considerable stress. Common language, ethnic memories and myths are an important but, I argue, an insufficient elements to create a nation and a sense of common belonging.

In 2007, building on the work of other researchers as well as on personal experiences and convictions that collective identities are far from being perennial and fixed in some essentialist past but rather subject to continuous mutation, I decided to deepen my knowledge on Albanians and their identity formation, and I included the Albanians from the Republic of Albania as well.
The main goal of this research is to identify how the different Albanian communities from Macedonia\textsuperscript{32}, Kosovo and the Republic of Albania relate to each other and how they construct their identities in relation or opposition to the official state narratives and policies in their home countries. It is my intention to show the fluid and ongoing nature of national identities though the narratives of my interviewees. I did not focus on the construction of national identities on a large scale and as a long term historical process but rather my research was focused on the short-term biographical process that takes place over the time of specific individuals.

The fieldwork on which this research is based was carried out in different towns and villages in Western Macedonia and Kosovo as well as in Trieste, where the numerous Albanian and Kosovar communities live. The decision to carry out a part of this research in Italy was not unintentional. Knowing well the highly politicized Balkan environment, where the sense of national belonging seems to be an indivisible part of people’s self-understanding and is considered as something morally obligatory, I decided to interview people in a neutral foreign territory where, once freed from the domestic pressure they would be able report their feelings, opinions and personal experiences about so-called “Albania issue” but also about their new Italian environment. In order to gain deeper insight into the three communities and the complex process of identity formation I partially used the results obtained in 2005 combined with fifty new interviews, made in the last two years. This time I chose sample that comprised families with two generations and used the technique of semi-structured interviews guided through open questions and answers. Considering people’s identities too complex and only partially open to self-inspection and self-description the narratives of my interviewees were solicited by a selection of photographs of historical events and personalities as well as symbols that I considered as relevant for stimulating life-stories and these are my findings.

\textbf{The Albanians from Macedonia about themselves and the others living just across the border.}

\textsuperscript{32} It should be noted that, unlike Kosovo, the region in Macedonia inhabited by ethnic Albanians does not have a particular ethnonym and in order to distinguish them from other Albanian communities in this research they will be always referred as Macedonian Albanians.
When, in 2005, I interviewed the members of the Albanian community in Macedonia and asked them to give me their personal assessment about their position in Macedonian society and in the region as a whole they seemed to be quite optimistic with regard to their future and almost filled with enthusiasm and convinced of their abilities, tested and confirmed in the crucial moments of community existence. It was the period that followed the NATO intervention in Kosovo and the armed conflict in Macedonia that drew the attention of the international community on the Albanian problem in the former Yugoslavia. Although the results of these conflicts were not exactly the expected ones (in 2005 Kosovo was still under international protection and not an independent state and Albanians in Macedonia were not recognized as a constituent people of the Republic) in the course of my interactions with a wide range of people of Albanian origin I often heard that, in the words of one of my interviewees, “‘We (Albanians) are strong and capable. Considering that in our bitter history we could never rely on state support, we learned to cope with every situation and we became self-sustainable. Even if the Slavs still consider us to be illiterate peasants, in the last fifteen years we showed them who we are. Despite strong Macedonian opposition we opened an Albanian university in Tetovo, in 1999 we defeated the Serbs in Kosovo and finally in 2001 we took to guns to get what belongs to us. ‘It is really sad what occurred in 2001 but’ he continues ‘we simply had no other choice. For many years we have looked for our rights but the Slavs did not consider our requests. After 1999 and 2001 they learned that they should listen to us’”. Such positive group self assessment is only partially due to a relatively positive outcome of events in 1999 and 2001. It should be noted that the decades of state-sponsored repressive measures, lack of trust in formal institutions as well as historic memories of discrimination and alienation held by Macedonian Albanians and Kosovars in their compact and economically self-sustainable community.

33 In their narratives ethnic Albanians in Macedonia usually do not make distinctions between Serbs and Macedonians and refer to them as “Slavs”, a homogeneous mass that share the same characteristics (brutal, aggressive and generally bad people who do not treat others as equals but instead look down on others and expect Albanians to work in their service) and pursue the same goals and that is to overwhelm Albanians and to spread their Orthodox Christian religion at the expense of Islam. In fact, the current conflict between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians is often perceived, in Samuel Huntington words, also as a “clash of civilizations”. 
When I asked them to tell me about their personal experiences from the recent, socialist past Albanians from Macedonia and Kosovars all reported about state repressive measures and their inferior status. The Kosovar told me bitter stories about their relatives, who in the 1950s experienced political pressure to declare themselves as Turks and were encouraged to emigrate to Turkey. They also told me about numerous Kosovars (speaking of about 130,000 people) who were dismissed from their jobs after the 1989 riots or about people imprisoned just for being Albanians.” During my military service I was accused for irredentism and put in jail just because they heard me speaking in Albanian with another Kosovar soldier. We were talking about our families but my commander was not convinced. I was released after one week”.

“I worked for 20 years in the same, so-called parallel school in Skopje” said a sixty years old woman “and we Albanian teachers, out of respect for our Macedonian colleagues, spoke Macedonian in their presence. But the Macedonians never learned a single word of Albanian, not even good afternoon. They did not consider that necessary, although it would mean a lot to me. We were treated as guests in their school although the number of Albanian students was greater than the number of Macedonian students. This was really symptomatic and tells a lot about our relationships.

This testimony recalls similar stories I heard in the course of my field work. For most Albanians the construction and experience of such events as indicative of social exclusion and political repression had created a strong sense of community, woven around the idiom of suffering.

To make things even more complicated the Albanian community is numerous and heavily concentrated in Kosovo and in the north-west and south-western part of Macedonia and that both regions border Albania. This ethnic continuity, historical memories and family ties with Albanians who live just across the border, provide the Albanians with a sense of being a part of a great Albanian nation and according to many, foment their dreams about Albanian national unification. As one of my interviewees, a well known Macedonian political scientist said: “the Albanians can be labeled as the teenagers of Europe. If the Macedonians have no other option except Europe, Albanians do have, and that is their reunification and than integrating
with Europe. They have an intermediate phase, which they would probably like to achieve”. This opinion is widely shared by many people in the Balkans. Convinced that the Albanians in Macedonia but also Albanians as a whole have a hidden agenda they argue that the Albanian ethnic mobilization does not have anything to do with claims for greater cultural and collective rights and that their real goal is secession form their host states and the creation of Greater Albania. These assumptions proved to be mostly true in case of Kosovars but do the Albanians from Macedonia have the same aspirations?

Considering the already tense ethnic relations with the Macedonian Slav majority and the lack of support from the international community Albanian politicians and intellectuals in Macedonia prefer not to discuss publically the “Albanian national issue”. Rather in official discourses they advocate a moderate option of Albanian spiritual and non political unification. Concerning this issue, an Albanian professor from Tetovo University told me: “It is doubtless that the process of the Albanian reunification has already begun and that it can not be stopped. However, this reunification has above all, a spiritual and not a political character. In 1912, the Albanians were divided by an international border and since then we Albanians have lived in different political and social systems. Alongside this in the last fifty years we have had almost no contacts and today we can not deny that the differences between us are substantial. We Albanians from Macedonia are less educated, women are not emancipated and we are far more conservative and traditional in comparison with Albanians from Albania and Kosovo. So the plans for unification advocated by some right wing politicians are premature and unrealistic”.

Leaving aside the official and elite discourses, I was interested above all in the feelings and opinions of ordinary people concerning the issue of Albanian national unification. As I have already noted in previous chapters, in the second half of the 19th century a handful of Albanian intellectuals, mostly living outside the country, did their best to “awake and discover the forgotten national identity that was sleeping in the deeply hidden parts of the human soul” (Anderson, 1996) and to create a sense of common belonging among the conservative, illiterate mountaineers of the north and the less fractious Muslims and Christians from the south. Theirs
was a difficult task and in order to overcome substantial cultural and religious differences the “founding fathers” employed all the means at their disposal. The first step in the long process of the Albanian national affirmation was the introduction of the Albanian language as a medium of education. Even if important, the linguistic element proved to be insufficient in erasing substantial internal differences and ensuring the survival of the nation in a difficult Balkan surrounding.

In order to support national group consolidation, to protect themselves from their rapacious neighbors and to justify the claims to the land they inhabit, the Albanian intellectuals introduced a series of myths which according to N. Malcom can be divided into four major categories: myth of origin and priority, myth of ethnic homogeneity and purity, myth of permanent national struggle and myth of indifference to religion. These myths which were initially introduced in order to eradicate internal differences and to turn the “scattered array of clans into nation” were afterwards developed, reinforced and successfully exported abroad, mainly in Kosovo and Macedonia. The result of this national building process is that today, the Albanians in the Balkans and worldwide are seriously convinced to be the most ancient race in southeastern Europe whose origins can be traced back to the ancient pre-Hellenic times. Moreover, during my research, I often heard my Albanian interviewees quoting the Enver Hoxha’s statement that “Albania is not the state of three but the nation of seven million” which in their words originated from culturally and genetically pure Illyrian stock. When referring to Albania many Macedonian Albanians but also Kosovars often used the metaphor of “the mother” who has three children (Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro) which seems to suggest that regardless the current situation, Albania (the mother) will never break ties with Albanians with its numerous communities abroad. As one of my interviewees puts it “We Albanians from Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania speak the same language and have the same blood, flag and customs. We are one and the same people, are we not?”

References to the language and flag are typical of Albanian nationalism. As already noted in previous chapters the language is the main marker of the Albanian national identity and the most important tie that bands different Albanian communities in the Balkans but also the worldwide. Reference to the flag is also very important and gives some substance to the nation. All the Albanian families I visited in Kosovo and Macedonia have at least one flag in the house and in many towns and villages Albanian flags are displayed everywhere. The reference to common customs is also often
All these arguments are put forward in order to justify their political and cultural claims in the territories they inhabit but also to give some substance to the nation of “seven millions” whose sense of unity came under considerable stress after the fall of communism. After almost fifty years of separation and dreams of their mother country and compatriots who live just across the border, when the different Albanian communities finally met they discovered that there were some substantial differences between them and to their big surprise, that they did not like each other contrary to their initial expectations.

Almost all Albanians interviewed in Macedonia have visited Albania at least once since the fall of communism and, although grudgingly, most admit that their perception about “the mother country” was maybe mythological and imaginary. Instead of the cradle of the nation, which they had envisioned for a long time, what they found was a backward, poor and dangerous state. A middle aged man from Gostivar said: “Believe me when I got there for the first time in the early 1990s I cried. For years I listened to my father stories about a fairy tale homeland. But what I found was a nightmare. I couldn’t imagine that such poverty could exist in the contemporary Europe”. This story echoes other similar stories I heard in the course of my interactions with Albanians from former Yugoslavia. An eighty five year old man form Struga along with being disappointed with poor economic and general conditions of the “homeland” was even rubbed when he went there to visit his family that he had not seen since the end of the Second World War. “It was my first” and he added “last visit to the homeland”.

Concerning the people from Albania, often referred as “those from Albania”, they also have a poor reputation with Macedonian Albanians and are often referred to as smugglers, thieves idlers and, which was quite surprising for me, “non believers”. In spite of the fact that in their narratives my interviewees often stated that for the Albanians as a whole, religion is not an important issue because “the only religion of Albanians is Albanism” and that they tend to portray the weak religious sentiment of “those from Albania” as an advantage and indicator of emancipation the fact that they criticize the unconventional behavior of other
Muslims who drink alcohol and eat pork meat suggests that their adherence to the Albanian myth of a weak religious sentiment is only rhetorical.

However, regardless of all these facts, Macedonian Albanians are seriously convinced that “those from Albania” are advantaged. They had schools and universities and, in their opinion an opportunity to develop their national culture and emancipate them. On the contrary ethnic Albanians in Macedonia were deprived of all this and today they are culturally the most undeveloped Albanian community in the Balkans. This cultural backwardness and the widespread phenomenon of illiteracy among women were, according to the Albanian political and cultural elite, the main reason why the Albanians pushed for the opening of the Albanian University in Tetovo. Regardless the strong opposition of the Macedonian government and ethnic Macedonians, the University was established in 1994. The very fabric of this university has a very symbolic at meaning, and according to all Albanians I interviewed represents the brightest moment in the history of the Albanian community in Macedonia. In that building, in 1944, many Albanian civilians unjustly accused of collaboration with Italian and German occupational forces, were killed, and today, according to the Dean of the University, many young people, especially women, are being educated and emancipated there. In the Dean’s words “The symbol of Albanian suffering has turned into the symbol of emancipation of the entire Albanian community”.

I do not denies the importance of the Tetovo University in the process of education and emancipation of Albanians, nor do I argue that Albanians in Macedonia should be denied the right to higher (university) education in their native language, but, I have serious doubts about the purely educational character of that institution. Through the establishment of the University of Tetovo (built and mostly financed by the Kosovars although ethnic Albanians in Macedonia deny this) the foundation for Albanian spiritual unity was set. That is the place where, for the first time in history, Albanians from different areas have an opportunity to meet and possibly, get closer together. At present, as I realized from the accounts of my young Albanian interviewees, this project hasn’t still produced the expected results. When I asked him to tell me about his personal experiences with other Albanian communities a 21 years old student from Tetovo said: I’ve been listening since I
was a little kid to my father’s stories about Albanian national unity and he was so proud that I enrolled at the same university as Albanians and Kosovars. But I share neither his opinions nor his enthusiasm. He never had the opportunity to mix with Albanians like I did and I can tell you that we’re different. We are less educated and more conservative and Albanians treat us with superiority. We have more contact with Kosovars but generally Kosovars hang around with other Kosovars, Albanians with Albanians and we rarely mix”.

Another issue that I find scarcely believable concerns the real reasons of the Albanian commitment to education and emancipation, especially among women. The Albanian society is very traditional and conservative and the women are far from being equal to the men. There is also significant discrimination toward female children who, especially in rural areas, according to many Macedonians but also educated Albanians from urban centers, were and still are, forced to get married at a very young age and often denied the right even to elementary school education.

These negative trends were explained by my male interviewees as the result of state’s repression and neglect to provide its Albanian citizens with elementary and high school education in their native language. Still, my female interviewees told me quite different stories and from their narratives it emerges that the Macedonian state is only partially accountable for poor level of education among Albanian women. When I asked the wife of an middle aged employee at Tetovo University how come she doesn’t speak Croatian despite the fact that she spent almost fifteen years in that country, a 35 year old woman replied “I understand but I don’t speak Croatian because I rarely had an opportunity to speak with Croats. I and my elder sister grew up there, but we never went to school and we were rarely allowed to go out, unlike my brother who speaks your language very well. You know he even graduated at the University of Zagreb”.

The general situation of women in the Albanian traditional society is really poor and I often had serious difficulties talking with them and listening to their personal opinion about themselves and their community. All my interviews in the 2005 were made in the Croatian and the Macedonian, languages that my male interviewees proved to speak and understand very well, unlike their mothers, wives and sometimes even daughters. Unfortunately my problem was not only linguistic
but also the conceptual one. When I asked my male interviewees to meet their wives and mothers they often answered that talking with them would be a waist of my time because in words of my 40 year old and university educated male interviewee “my mother and my wife not only do not speak your language but they also have little to say about politics and what’s going on out in our society or in the region. You know they are housewives and live in their little world”. Unfortunately, from my field experience I learned that, in a big number of cases, he was right. Numerous, but fortunately not all, male interviewees have almost illiterate mothers, partially illiterate wives and until the early 1990s almost all were inclined to withdraw their female from schools as soon as they finished their compulsory education (in some cases the more conservative and traditional Albanians preferred to pay a heavy fine to the state than to send their female children to school).

Then, starting from the early 1990s the things changed significantly and I could not escape a general impression that today young Albanian women in Macedonia are more than encouraged I would say almost obliged to continue with their higher education. As reported by a 19 years old Albanian girl from Tetovo “It was not my intention to continue to study after high school but my father really insisted. He’s an activist of the Albanian Democratic Party (right wing) and he thinks that we Albanian girls should go to the university and learn foreign languages and become like women in Albania. So I enrolled at the faculty of economic. You know, he keeps talking about importance of education and emancipation but in the evening I’m not allowed to go out, to wear short skirts like Albanian girls or to have a boyfriend. We are supposed to study, to find good jobs and earn money but also to maintain our traditionally subordinate position in the family.

From the above discussion there seems to be enough evidence to state that the poor level of education among Albanian women in Macedonia is only partially due to the state’s policies and I argue that this negative trend can be also ascribed to the internal restriction that Albanian traditional and conservative community imposed on its members. I also argue that the desire to change and emancipate their community is not exclusively the outcome of a long process that matured within the community. Rather, I would say that it was imposed from the outside and was a part
of political platform which aimed to remove the existing, cultural, political and social, obstacles on the path towards an Albanian, first spiritual and than political unification.

Albanians in Macedonia rioted in the past as well and rightly claimed for more cultural and group rights, but it was only at the beginning of the 1990s that their demands became more aggressive. In the 1990, they organized demonstrations in which participants demanded the foundation of a Greater Albanian state. The next year, an overwhelming majority of Albanians boycotted the Macedonian referendum on independence and organized their own referendum which resulted in the proclamation of the Republic of Ilirida, an autonomous Albanian political entity. In the same period Albanian politicians began to claim for more rights and these claims ranged from guarantees of cultural rights to the elevation of the Albanian community to a status of constituent nation of the Republic of Macedonia. In 1994 they opened the University of Tetovo and began to use the Albanian flag in public life (Albanians in official discourses argue that the red flag with the black eagle is not the symbol of the Albanian state but the symbol of the Albanian people worldwide). In other words they began to challenge the Macedonian’s exclusive right to the state. In the meantime Tetovo, since the early 1990s a small provincial town developed into probably the biggest Albanian cultural centre in the Balkans, with its two Albanian universities as well as numerous bars, restaurants and night clubs. In these, until yesterday exclusive male domains, alcohol is regularly served and it is not uncommon to see young women. Although all these great political, social and cultural changes were welcomed by the majority of my interviewees, I could not escape the impression that rather then welcomed these changes are only tolerated, because, as many pointed out “we are culturally, socially and politically the most backward Albanian community and if we are to become like others (referred to other Albanians) we have to accept these changes. If those from Albania drink alcohol we will serve it in the bars. If their women go to schools and universities and study foreign languages our girls should follow their example. Another big problem of our community is the attachment to religion. We are much more religious if compared to Albanians and Kosovars and it is something we have to overcome”. 
In these, I argue, not exactly, spontaneous and “genuine”, processes of political awakening and affirmation as well as in the cultural emancipation of Albanians in Macedonia, Kosovars had a decisive role. Unlike “those from Albania” who in the narratives of Macedonian Albanians are portrayed as parasites, communists and betrayers of the “common cause”, when asked about Kosovo and its inhabitants, the perceptions and feelings of my interviewees were quite different. Many Albanians from Macedonia whom I met, have close relations with Kosovo and almost all tend to identify themselves more with Kosovo and Prishtina than with Albania and Tirana. Such attitudes are understandable considering that the two communities were not separate by the state border and that many Albanians from Macedonia studied and even married in Kosovo. Kosovo is also an important political ally and almost all my interviewees reported that they can rely more on Prishtina than on Tirana to solve their problems with the Macedonian state.

In their interactions with foreigners, ethnic Albanians in Macedonia when referring to Albanian community from the former Yugoslavia usually use the term of “us” which implies that there are no differences between them and that they and Kosovars are, as many of my interviewees reported, “like one body and soul”. In their narratives the sense of unity and solidarity with Kosovars was constantly asserted and after a while they almost convinced me.

It should be noted that in the Balkans the people of not Albanian extraction tend to portray the Albanians as a “compact”, “conservative” and “impenetrable” homogeneous mass where all members think, feel and act as one. They are also considered to unwilling to admit any external influence and it is widely assumed that they can not be studied, because even if the Albanians accept to be interviewed they will not be truthful or forthcoming and only provide information imposed from above. I must admit that at first sight they seemed to be as Macedonians and Serbs describe them, but after some time, as I socialized and I talked with them, that I realized that there are many differences among them and their opinions and feeling about their own community’s past and present, about Kosovo and possible national unification are not that unitary as they would like to present it. Rather there are very real and actual divisions among them. So I discovered that not all Albanians feel a strong attachment to the Albanian flag and Albanian nation, not all think that they
and Kosovars are one body and a soul or that they should sacrifice themselves for Kosovo, and that regardless their sometimes very categorical statements they are not particularly anxious about changing borders.

When I showed him the image of the Albanian flag, a middle aged Albanian man said: “Please turn off the recorder and promise you won’t cite my name in your dissertation. If my Albanians hear what I have to say about the flag I would end up in trouble. I would be a target. I never comment on political issues in the company of other Albanians. It has been a long time since I have felt so free to speak my mind about the whole situation. Well, I’ll tell you. I do not give a damn about the flag. To me, it is important that my country (referred to Macedonia) provides me with normal life and living standards. If they provide me with that I don’t give a damn about the flag and national unification.”

With regards to his community and their relations with Kosovo an Albanian employee from the Tetovo University said: “You probably had hard times with my Albanians here in Macedonia. They all told you the same story, didn’t they? That’s because in our community an individual and his personal opinions and feelings are not important. The community is important. With regards to Kosovo I’ll tell you what the people in Tetovo think but never say it out loud. We do have the same blood and we speak the same language but there had always been a border between us, ever since the Turkish era. During the Socialist Yugoslavia as well we lived in two different political realities. Regardless their claims and discourses between 1971 and 1989 they were an autonomous province and had a wide range of cultural and political rights. Of course it was not enough because being considered only a national minority was really humiliating. But they had a university, schools, newspapers and the television. All things we could only dream about. What’s more they all lived on state support while we were forced to immigrate. They consider us illiterate peasants and use us every now and then for their political goals, but you’ll see that once they become independent they will mind only their own business and leave us to our own fate”.

This statement surprised me, but five years later it seems that my interviewee was right.
Kosovars about themselves and the others, living just across the border

In 2005, when I met and interviewed the members of the Kosovar community, they seemed, just like their Macedonian neighbors, filled with enthusiasm and convinced in their abilities. Once they defeated the Serbian army (it is the widespread opinion among Kosovars that was them and not the NATO forces who defeated the Serbian army) and finally resolved the problem of Serbian oppression they were quite optimistic about their future. Of course their political status, at that time, was still uncertain and this caused some anxieties among local population but, from their narratives I understood that the option of returning under the direct Serbian jurisdiction was scarcely believed possible. In the prospect of the creation of the independent Kosovar state I was interested in investigating people’s opinions and perceptions about their future status but also about their immediate Balkan surrounding. Like Albanians in Macedonia, Kosovars as well were shown photographs representing important events from the community’s past and present as well as powerful symbols like flags and monuments and these are my findings.

Unlike their Albanian neighbors from Macedonia, Kosovars were less hospitable and quite unwilling to discuss about their community. I was rarely allowed to enter the houses and I must admit, that the quite short interviews were almost always made in the bars or on the door-steps. While in Macedonia I felt free to go wherever I wanted and I spoke with people freely it was not so in Kosovo.

Regardless of the recommendations and suggestions of my ethnic Macedonian friend that it is really dangerous to walk around alone in the areas where the majority of the population was Albanian I never had bad experiences. On the contrary, I remember that I used to go alone in bars and restaurants (quite an uncommon habit for a woman in that part of the Balkans) and to order coffee or a meal in my really poor Albanian. Although it was clear that I’m Slavic they’ve never been rude to me. On excusing myself for my poor Albanian, they usually answered with a smile and remarked (in Macedonian) “never mind we know that Albanian is difficult but we really appreciate your attempt to say at least good
afternoon in our language. Now you can speak your language we can understand you”.

When I told to my Albanian friends in Macedonia that was my intention to visit Kosovo some of them were really worried. “You must be crazy” remarked a middle aged ethnic Albanian politician when I told him about my intentions, “I’m a man and Albanian but I never go to Kosovo alone. Prishtina is a dangerous place imagine what can happen in the villages and small towns”. On my remark that I’m not afraid and that as a Croat (Kosovars doesn’t perceive as enemies) I probably will not have problems he answered “you do not speak Albanian and I’m afraid that as you open your mouth in five seconds they won’t understand the slight linguistic differences between Serbian and Croatian and that they can shoot you”.

Regardless these recommendations I decided to visit Kosovo and to make few interviews with local people. I was always in the company of other Albanians (mostly my friends from Macedonia) who previously arranged all interviews and explained who I was and what kind of research I was caring out. Although unwillingly Kosovars answered the major part of my questions. I asked my questions in Croatian and the majority of my interviewees answered in Albanian (their answers were kindly translated by my Albanian friends from Macedonia) because as one of my middle aged interviewees pointed out “I can understand you perfectly, I can even speak Serbian but I do not want to answer in that language. Now Kosovo is free and I hope we won’t hear that language never again.

All my Kosovar interviewees were asked to report their feelings about their life in the former state and if they ever felt to be a part of the Yugoslav federation. The majority told me more or less the same stories about that period. They all told me, I must say, quite confused stories about the unequal status of Albanians in the former state and I was not able to understand what the real reason of their discontent was. On my remark that their was a de facto republican status which granted them all cultural and group rights they all replied that it was not enough. I also asked them if the real goal of the 1981 demonstrations was the secession from the Yugoslav state and their answers tended to be vague and repetitive. The majority reported that the former state was a “dungeon of the Albanian nation” dominated by the Slav majority but they also reported, when shown the images of the Olympic Games held
in Sarajevo in 1984, sometimes with a smile on their face that they were really proud that such an important international event was held in “their” country. I could report pages and pages of such, for me confusing testimonies but I decided to cite only one, which in my opinion summarizes in a few sentences the real reasons of Albanian discontent. Regarding this issue, a middle aged university educated man from Prishtina said: You ask me to tell you about my feelings and perceptions regarding the Yugoslav period. On your question I’ll answer with another question. If in the former state there was such a thing as “brotherhood and unity” how come you do not speak my language but I speak yours? I had to learn the Serbian language and to be honest that did not disturb me when I was a young man. I was born in a family of intellectuals, communists and we did not consider ourselves as nationalists. Of course at home we spoke only Albanian and I knew that we were different but it was only at the university that I learned who I was. Considering that the University of Prishtina had a really bad reputation of being the worst university in the former Yugoslavia my father sent me to Belgrade to take a “real” degree in political sciences. My family was not rich and I had to work to earn my living during my studies, but as an Albanian the only work I was offered was the wood logging. Regardless all my efforts I and also other Albanians were not able to reverse our low social status. It was a Slav centered state and in your eyes an Albanian remains Albanian regardless everything. That’s why we rioted in 1968, 1981 and in 1989. I participated in the 1981 demonstrations and I was arrested for irredentist activities. I spent 16 months in jail and it was in that period that I began to dream about my “real homeland”.

The stories about the “homeland” I heard in Kosovo echoed the similar stories I’ve already heard in Macedonia. But, while the majority of my Macedonian interviewees made only short trips to Albania, the Kosovars, I would say unfortunately, had the opportunity to deepen their knowledge about that country. In fact, in 1999 when the war in Kosovo broke out many Kosovars found shelter in the neighboring Albania. It was on that occasion that many of my interviewees learned that the homeland of their dreams, hopes and aspirations doesn’t exist and that the Albanians living across the border are more “cousins” than “brothers”, with whom they had little in common.
In 2005 these perceptions had never been openly declared by my Kosovar interviewees. In their narratives it was always categorically asserted that the Albanians in Albania and Kosovo are one and the same people. They all pointed out that the Albanians on both sides of the border share the same blood, customs and traditions, common historical memories and language and that all these attributes are sufficient to allow them to consider themselves as the members of the same nation. If there were some differences between them they all tended to minimize them (this was particularly referred to the language) and portray them as simple regional particularities or as the result of a long period of separation. All these differences and possible obstacles were, according to their narratives easily surmountable.

These perceptions are understandable if we consider that until very recent times Kosovars did not have an alternative to their self-definition and identification. As already noted in the previous chapters the foundation of the Albanian independent state preceded the creation of the Albanian nation and the “founding fathers” had worked hard to overcome significant internal differences and to create and divulge the sense of common belonging among its citizens. Regardless of all the difficulties the Albanians from the motherland managed to develop perhaps a primitive but solid national culture. In the same period Kosovars became unwanted guests and subjects of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and were not included in the process of the Albanian nation building. Discriminated even in their basic human and civil rights they were not able to advance politically or culturally. During the Second World War different Albanian communities had experienced a period of national unification under the auspices of the fascist Italy. After the Second World War there was also a short period of collaboration between official Tirana and Belgrade that enabled contacts among Albanians from Kosovo, Albania and Western Macedonia. Still this short period of time was not sufficient to allow different Albanian communities to deepen their knowledge about each other. The great split between Tito and Stalin and Enver Hoxha’s decision to ally his country with Moscow against Belgrade radically changed this political situation. In fact, from 1948 to the late 1990s, the border between Kosovo and Albania remained hermetically sealed. The obvious result of this division was the creation of two different Albanian cultures and I argue of two different nations. The four decades of
the isolationist regime of Enver Hoxha destroyed many aspects of traditional Albanian culture while the population, according to the groups’ own assessment, lived in ignorance, fear and misery. In material terms they were deprived of all but the bare essential needs to stay alive. On the other side Kosovars had quite a different story. Unlike their Albanian cousins, they made some economic progress and achieved a certain degree of prosperity. During the period of Socialist Yugoslavia they were citizens of a powerful state and enjoyed relative freedom and privileges which their Albanian “cousins” could only have dreamed of. Still, according to the narratives of my Kosovar interviewees, the former federation failed to create a common state for all its citizens and they had never considered themselves as Yugoslavs. On the contrary, they all reported about social exclusion and political repression which resulted into complete withdrawal of the Kosovar community. Hermetically closed and traditional they found the exit solution in a constant assertion of their Albanian identity, based on memories, undoubted ethnic and linguistic similarities but also myths, and their dreams about a fairy tale homeland.

Unfortunately, when the two communities finally met in 1998, Kosovars learned that the reality was completely different. Not only were they strongly disappointed with poor economic conditions of the state but above all with its inhabitants. However, while the state was portrayed as poor and without effective state organization and political stalemate the disillusion with its inhabitants has never been openly declared, at least not in Kosovo. On my demand to tell me about their feelings and perceptions about Albanians from the homeland Kosovars tended to give me vague and in my opinion not entirely genuine answers. Some of my interviewees reported that they perceived “some” cultural differences and that meting with Albanians from the homeland did not entirely fulfill their expectations but they were quite unwilling to give me further explanations. Some of them said a few words about “Fatos Nano’s treacherous government” and about Southern Albanians who are “selling the state to Greeks and Italians” but the unity of the Albanian nation has never been questioned in their narratives. Unlike Albanians from Macedonia my Kosovar interviewees did not portray their Albanian cousins as idlers, thieves and “non-believers” but rather as a “little bit lazy” and “completely
destroyed by communism”. “They do not have working habits” said a 35 year old man from the village near the Albanian border. “I spent six months in Albania as a refugee. We lived in a village which did not offer much entertainment and we had a lot of free time, so me and my cousins decided to fix the road near to the house where we lived. While we were working the locals were sitting on the edge of the road and making jokes about us saying that we were crazy to work for free. That’s not our business they used to say. It is the state who should take care about ruined roads and building. Which state I was wondering? There is no state in Albania and as long as they do not learn to rely on their own forces they won’t change their poor situation. We Kosovars are different; we are much more determined and have more initiative.

The cultural differences between Albanians and Kosovars, according to my Kosovar interviewees, are mostly based on different perceptions of the state and its governance (which is quite understandable if we consider that the two communities lived in completely different political systems) but are, in their opinion, easily surmountable. Any further attempts to deepen my knowledge about possible perceived cultural differences between Kosovars and Albanians resulted in their refusal to give me answers or in efforts to change the subject. “Listen, do not ask me about cultural differences between us and Albanians” said a middle aged man from a village near the Macedonia border, “they are not important and even if there are some differences now we feel that we are getting closer and closer to the Albanian people in Albania”.

In this process of cultural rapprochement the language issue has a very important role. Whenever I asked my Kosovar interviewees to explain the linguistic differences between Kosovars and Albanians they all recounted that the language they learned in school is the same as the language spoken in Albania and that “slight” dialectal differences do not prevent them to understand each other. This supposition was not entirely true. Kosovars and Albanians do understand each other but the language used in Kosovo is based on the Gheg dialect and differs from the language that is taught in school and used in Albania. The Albanian official language, used in formal interactions and public life, so-called Letrare is predominantly based on the Tosk dialect of Southern Albania.
Although the overwhelming majority of Kosovars do not speak that language the *Letrare* was recently introduced as a first language in all TV stations and newspapers and employees from Albania proof read and corrected the language that the Kosovars produced. Some of my interviewees also admitted that for them it is really difficult to speak in that way but it seems that the desire to get closer to the Albanians and their culture at any price is stronger than their desire to preserve their own characteristics. The language issue was something very delicate to discuss with Kosovars and any observation about their “regional peculiarities” was taken as an attack on the “National Issue” because as they put it “We are Albanians and we have to learn our language properly and correctly”.

Another delicate issue I wanted to tackle with my Kosovar interlocutors was the possible existence of a separate Kosovar ethnic and national identity. My questions about the Kosovar identity were not to be understood as provocative nor was it my intention to deny or question the existence of the Albanian unified national sentiment, as because I also share Miller’s point of view that “national identities are constructed by belief and nationality exists when its members believe it does”. I simply asked, in a prospective of a future foundation of the Kosovar independent state, if this event could possibly promote the creation of the new Kosovar identity. I also argued that the new state will have to choose new state symbols and will have to create a state identity. In reply to my questions, Kosovars were quite categorical in asserting that a separate Kosovar ethnic or national identity doesn’t exist. “It’s a myth invented by Serbs in order to undermine our national sentiment. There is no Kosovar identity nor will such a thing ever exist”. Regarding the flag an overwhelming majority of Kosovars replied that the only flag they could recognize as their national symbol is the already existing red and black Albanian flag with its two-headed eagle. To my remark that that flag is the symbol of the Albanian state, they replied that is not true, for that flag is the symbol of the entire nation and that the international community will have to accommodate their claims to use it as a state symbol as well.

In 2005 I did not spend much time in Kosovo and I did not have an opportunity to deepen my knowledge about its inhabitants. It was in Italy, especially through my job as a consultant on immigration issues that I got in close contact with
this community and its various problems. This time, free of the burden and bulk of their history and from their Balkan environment they showed more willingness to tell me about their community but also about their personal feelings and experiences. While in Kosovo I perceived them as a conservative and hermetically closed community where it was almost impossible to hear an individuals’ point of view, in Italy different views emerged through their narratives.

When I asked him to tell me his perceptions about Albanians a 45 year old Kosovar said “When the war started I left my burning house and I and my family found shelter in Northern Albania. We did not have relatives there so I had to find the accommodation for my wife and children. I was quite surprised with their living conditions but what really shocked me were the people and their behavior. They were convinced that we Kosovars are rich. Well in the past that was perhaps true but in 1999 we were fleeing from war and misery and Albanians used that situation. In 1999 they did not treat us like their compatriots but rather, we became objects for their self-enrichment. The man who rented me a room in his house asked for an exorbitant price for the roof and food. Fortunately I had a brother in Germany who sent me the money. Otherwise, I’m convinced that he would have showed us the door. When the war ended we immediately returned home and we never went back there. Oh, if you do not trust me I can bring you other Kosovars who will tell you the same story”.

Fortunately not all Kosovars had such dramatic experiences. Still those who visited Albania finally admitted that in 1999 the forced reunion was a cultural shock for the Kosovar community. They recounted about the horrible living conditions, the misery and lawlessness of the Albanian state but they also reported, in the words of my 35 year old interviewee from Prishtina “At the beginning when I meeting them (Albanians) for the first time I found out that we were similar, but as time passed I noticed differences. I do not know how to explain this to you. Yes, we have the same identity because we speak the same language (although he admitted that there are some differences) and the same traditions but after a while I had the impression, that they belong to another nation”.

For others it was not only the impression. “I was raised to think that I’m Albanian and that we and they are one and the same people. In our family we used
to watch Albanian TV and to listen to their radio stations (although this was a very
dangerous activity after the 1981 riots) and consequently we were seriously
convinced that Albania was the country of our dreams. We thought that was a happy
and independent country where free people raised their own flag. When I arrived
there for the first time in 1993 (he arrived in Albania from Italy by ship because the
border between Serbia and Kosovo was de facto closed) the first thing I did was to
kiss the holy Albanian ground. However the great disappointment arrived soon. The
problem was not the poverty or misery of the country, but the people. They did not
show any comprehension for the problems of Kosovar Albanians or any interest for
the “Common cause”. In 1993 I was told that I was not an Albanian but a Kosovar.
This stunned me; I did not expect such betrayal from my compatriots”.

In the course of my research I heard also other testimonies in which the
Albanians from the homeland were referred to as “ill-mannered”, “primitive”,
“crime-ridden”, “egoistic”, “presumptuous” people “who looked down on us as we
were just illiterate peasants”. Such stereotypes and prejudices without doubt
seriously affected relationships between Kosovars and Albanians, but from their
narratives it clearly emerged that the major cause of Kosovar disappointment is the
scarce commitment or rather indifference of Albanians to the so-called “National
Issue”.

In 2008 Kosovo finally declared its independence and today it is a state with
its own symbols, recognized by the US and 22 out of 27 members of the European
Union. At this point I was curious to find out if the feelings of my Kosovar
interviewees about a possible emergence of the new Kosovar ethnic/national identity
had changed since 2005.

Despite the fact that Kosovars sometimes embark on virulent stories and
describe the “others” in the light of negative stereotypes, the majority is still
convinced of being a part of a “great” and “unitary” Albanian nation. With some
rare exceptions the overwhelming majority of my interviewees reported that they
consider themselves as Albanians with Kosovar passports.

“The stories about separate Kosovar identity makes me laugh” stated a 29
year old woman from Mitrovica, “You are asking me what this new Kosovar flag
means to me? Well I can not say absolutely anything because it is the result of our
long fight against the foreign oppressor but I do not perceive it as our national symbol. This symbol does not disturb me but I do not recognize myself in it. I was born an Albanian and I can not become something else just because the international community decided so.

Feelings and perceptions of other Kosovars do not differ much regarding this delicate issue. They are all convinced that they are one of the most ancient races in Europe that had never lost its national self awareness. A population who had fought for centuries against different foreign oppressors and had been unjustly divided in 1912. After almost hundred a years they are convinced that this great injustice will be somehow readjusted. Kosovo today is an independent state and they are very proud about this. Still, many consider this new political reality only as an intermediate phase and that the natural outcome of a century old struggle will be the final reunification with other Albanians. Differences, cultural and their own opinions of the world, between them and Albanians do exist but many consider them just skin deep, based on prejudice and anyway surmountable.

Such strong nationalistic feelings are understandable and can be explained as a form of self-defense against oppressive rule. What is more it is not something that sprouted in the last twenty years but has been going on for almost a century and I do not think it can be easily erased. Still. Hope is often last to die. In the last few years the issue of a separate Kosovar identity became an object of public debate and some intellectuals started to promote this more civil form of identification. They argue that different histories have created two distinct identities and even if the Kosovar identity is still in an embryonic phase and perhaps unstable, they argue that this identity exists but has to be supported. The first efforts in this sense were made in the early 1990s when Ibrahim Rugova, the Kosovar Gandhi, tried to promote the idea of the Kosovar national cuisine or the introduction of a new flag with a symbol of the ancient Dardania (the ancient word for Kosovo and ancient kingdom of uncertain origins). The opposition to these ideas very strong. The same thing happened in 2008 when the first Kosovar Prime Minister Agim Ceku argued that Kosovo has to find its own place on the Balkan geopolitical map and make its own secular nation. In response, the nationalists accused him of betrayal.
Although the idea of a separate Kosovar identity is still a taboo and strongly opposed among its citizens, I truly believe that this will change. The new state has been established, with its new symbols and borders (which can not be changed according to the agreement on inviolability of the Kosovar borders signed in 2007, one of the main conditions for international recognition) and like all other states worldwide the Kosovar as well, will have to the achieve the necessary level of social, national and cultural cohesion. This will be done through state institutions and the education system. Of course this will not be enough, so they will need some history and new national myths. Through the inevitable process of state building in a few decades I believe that they will learn who they are. Like we all did in the 19th and 20th century. Moreover I argue that the necessity to stress ethnic ties with the "homeland" will significantly diminish now that the external threat (Serbian oppression) has disappeared.

The last, but not least important, thing is that to create a union between two territories there must be a consensus on both sides of the border. According to the data I gathered through the interviews with my Albanian interviewees this consensus is missing, as far as they are concerned.

The issue of national identity always has the capacity of provoking debates and inflaming spirits. Especially among Kosovars and Macedonian Albanians who are, I would say, obsessed with the issues relating to their national and ethnic identity. Here in Italy, however, these issues seem to be less important. The national identity issue is discussed in bars, with compatriots and people like me. But what really worries my Kosovar informants is not the “National Issue” but the hard economic crisis that the region has undergone in the last decades and they all referred to a deterioration of the economic conditions, high unemployment rates and almost a complete isolation of the country. For this situation they blame the Serbs and their oppression, bloody wars in the Balkans but also their own politicians, who incompetent and corrupt haven’t a clue how they should lead their country. At present they do not see the way out of this situation and many Kosovars have decided to emigrate. When I asked them to tell me about their experiences as migrants and if they feel integrated in this community their general assessment tended to be positive but as a young Kosovar women pointed out “I do not have
problems here but I do knot now if I really like it here or if I’m integrated in this community. I simply do not have time to think about those things and who cares if I like to stay here or not. I have to stay here and work. At home I have parents and 6 brothers and sisters who survive only thanks to me and the money I send there every month”.

Albanians about themselves and the “others

When I told to a 35 year old man from Durres that I was writing my PhD dissertation about Albanians he immediately accepted to be interviewed and showed his disposability to tell me about his feeling and personal experiences regarding his community. But, when he found out that my research includes also other Albanians
and that I wanted to hear his opinion about the “Albanian national issue” he replied
“I thought we will talk about us (shqipetar) not about them (Kosovars). You know, we Albanians from the South already have enough problems with our” domestic northerners” and we really do not need further complications. We Albanians from the south, speak different dialect in our every day speech and we are better educated and highly cultured. We are also much more open to the world. Those from the north are different. You know, they are backward and conservative people who still live in the clans and according to the principles of the common law and practice vendetta, like in the Turkish times. The Kosovars are similar to our northerners but maybe even more violent, arrogant and crime-ridden. As far as I know they were fine in Yugoslavia. They had plenty of food, could own property, their houses are three times as big as ours and they had possibility to emigrate to the West, if they wish. If you ask me they fought for flag! To my remark that many Kosovars, as well as international organizations, have reported about severe violations of even basic human rights in that region during the regime of Slobodan Milosevic and that in 1999 there was a war and that many Kosovars were expelled he replied: ”Yes I know that. Many Kosovars arrived in Albania in that period and they caused only troubles. They argued that they were oppressed. Well, I have my own, personal theory about that issue. Maybe I’m wrong but I’ll tell you what I think. Like other northerners, Kosovars as well, have been living, since time immemorial in their backward parallel societies and admit no foreign influence. They like nobody but themselves and simply cannot live with others. As expected when I asked him about the “Albanian national issue” he replied: “We southerners do not consider it as an “issue”. The Greater Albania doesn’t exist. It’s just a myth invented by “those” from the north.

This statement recalls similar, although less virulent statements I often heard in the course of my interactions with Tosks. In their narratives Kosovars were portrayed as liars, Mafiosi, inhospitable and only interested in money making, but also fascists collaborators. “They (Kosovars) are talking about patriotism but I can tell you that they were the only Albanians who welcomed Germans in the Second World War and are responsible, together with their Ministers for the worst
atrocities against Albanian population in Albanian proper. We did not forget that!” said an older man from a village near Vlore.

All these opinions are clearly indicative of the feeble sense of community with Kosovars but they also revealed a deep divide that characterizes the contemporary Albanian society. In their narratives they often make distinction between shqiptar (Albanians from Albania) and Kosovars and then than quickly pass from the category of Kosovar to that of “northerners”.

The rivalry between two basic ethnographic groups is well known and originated way back in the Albanian history. During Hoxha’s regime the cultural, economic and linguistic differences between these two groups were attenuated with quite repressive policies and many interviewees reported that during the communism everything was mixed up and it became almost impossible to talk about differences between these two groups. The Ghegs from the north adopted the Tosk dialect and abandoned their clan structure which was an important step forward in the process of national homogenization. But when the communist system fell apart the old rivalries and traditions reappeared. This was particularly accentuated in the political life of the country. During the Sali Berisha’s leadership the Tosks were almost excluded from the political life and the key positions in the new government were given to Ghegs. This new political situation caused a strong resentment among Tosks. In 1997, overthrown after almost five decades of undisputed governance (Enver Hoxha’s government was predominantly Tosk) Tosks organized riots after the collapse of Berisha’s pyramid schemes and almost let the country to the brink of civil war.

The problem between Ghegs and Tosks is not only political but also cultural. Many southern Albanians reported that after the end of communist ideology same nasty habits and traditions arose from the historical ashes. Probably due to the fact that the state is weak and its institutions do not function the Ghegs revived application of the common law and tradition of vendetta. It is hard to get information about this phenomenon, but it is known that in the last twenty years in northern Albania hundreds of people were killed and that many had to leave the country to avoid blood feud. This practice is not applied in the southern Albania. “While we (southerners) are talking and dreaming about Europe our compatriots in
the north are shooting each other and continue to live in primitive communities. We will never join the EU with that people. And you know what? As far as I’m concern they can secede from Albania and join Kosovo. They are more or less the same people” said a young university student who spent the major part of his life in Trieste.

This statement surprised me but I’m absolutely sure that the young man did not really mean that the north should secede from the south. The perceived differences between Albanian north and south are real but, the territorial and national unity of the Albanian state are not in danger. I also argue that intolerance toward Kosovars is mainly based on stereotypes and prejudices. Many southern Albanians I interviewed in the last two years admitted that they did not have much direct contacts with Kosovars. In 1999 the overwhelming majority of Kosovars found shelter in the poorest regions in the north and very few people went to south. Here in Italy Albanians and Kosovars live separate lives and rarely mix up together. I’m not saying that they have no contacts but according to my interviewees they can rarely be defined as friends.

Unlike southern Albanians who showed little solidarity and understanding for problems of Kosovars their northern compatriots were less categorical about this issue. Whenever I asked my northern Albanian interviewees if there were any differences among them and Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia their first reaction was identical to those I’ve already heard in Kosovo and Macedonia. “No! We are of same flash and blood. We have the same language and customs. We are brothers”. Yet from their narratives emerged some contradictions. When I asked my young Albanian interviewee from Kruje if she had contacts with Kosovars and to tell me her opinion about them she recounted me her personal experience. “Yes of course she said. I have relatives in Kosovo and we met for the first time in 1999. Until then we did not have any contacts and I even ignored their existence. I was glad that we met because the family in Albania is very important. Yet, since the very beginning I noticed some differences above all in mentality but also in language. My cousins are Muslims while we are Orthodox Christians. Usually in Albania this is not the problem. We have a lot of mixed marriages and nobody cares if one is Muslim or Christian because we all have same more or less habits and customs and
our way of life doesn’t differ much. But those gays were real Muslims. They did not eat pork meat, and this was a great problem because we do. It’s the cheapest meat and we couldn’t afford beef. They were really disturbed with this. Yet, they did not want to share expenses and in six months they did not give us even a penny. I also remember that they did not drink alcohol and that they observed five Muslim prays every day. I found that practice so weird. I mean I respect the religion but that was really strange. Our Muslims are not that strict. We are family, same flash and blood but I found them different. I do not how to explain you this but I had impression that they belong to another nation. When the war finished they left and we do not have contacts with them. This however was not my only experience with Kosovars. I had a friend in Trieste as well. She was my work colleague but she was also strange. Closed, just like my cousins. I know she had problems at home. You know they all live together. The whole family in the same house. Can you imagine? She, her husband, their children and then her brothers in law but also her husband’s parents. If I were her I would run away!

Regarding the issue of the Albanian national unification the same woman said: “No I do not think that we should unite. We are too different. Maybe one day. I do not know. To be honest I never considered that option. We Albanians already have a lot of our internal problems and I do not think that would be a good solution. Maybe one day the process of European integrations will bring us together.

Yet, not all my interviewees had the same opinion. Some of my interviewees stated that they consider Kosovo, Western Macedonia and some parts of Greece as an integral part of an Albanian motherland. A young woman proudly declared that all Albanians should first unite in a common state and only afterwards join the European Union. “We and Kosovars are the same people, divided by the Great Powers hundred years ago and I believe that the time has come to correct that great historical injustice. Our brothers suffered so much during the Serbian regime. I heard some horrible stories about what happened in Kosovo and I was really shocked. I heard about the girl from Kosovo who was raped in front of her mother and her house was burned. I really think that we should help them”. To my remark that the war is over and that Kosovars today do not need arms but rather that the
realization of a Greater Albania would require serious political commitment, strong public support and significant sacrifice she did not seemed that convinced any more. “Well I really think that we should unite but the people are selfish and they only mind their own business. I do not think that my compatriots are willing to give up all our achievements (she was referring to the fact that Albania one year ago joined the NATO and that few months ago EU decided to abolish the visa system for Albanian citizens) or to endure more suffering for national cause”.

Her father, for example, was one of those people. Fifty eight year old man form Shkoder stated that as far as he is concern the national unification is not an interesting subject of discussion. “Do not pay attention to my daughters’ statements. She was too young when the war started and she saw all those refugees. That impressed her. I remember well that period. We did not host any Kosovars in our house but the town was fool. The newspapers were full of news from Kosovo and we were shocked by the stories of refugees. It was the first time that we seriously took into consideration the possibility that Kosovars maybe have serious problems with Serbs. Until 1999 we considered them a normal Diaspora community who had much more possibilities and opportunities than we did. For us Kosovars were rich and lucky people. Then we heard their stories and that woke up some nationalist sentiments. I remember our corrupted politicians who spoke of the unity of the Albanian nation and of solidarity with Kosovars. There were also demonstrations in support of Kosovars but this nationalistic enthusiasm did not last long, maybe few months. Then we returned to our domestic issues and concerns. With regard to Kosovars I think that we are all Albanians but I do not think that we should unite. For me it’s important that they are not oppressed any more. I can not tell more about this argument because I do not have Kosovar friends and I do not follow what is going on there. To be honest I do not follow the political situation in Albania either. Now we live here and have other problems”.

I’ve also heard other testimonies, some even very “radical. I remember a young man from Peshkopi, a small town near borders with Kosovo and Macedonia, who stated that he would be ready to die for the idea of a “Greater Albania”. “Please do not use the expression Greater Albania. That expression has expansionistic connotations and I do not like it. I prefer to speak of “ethnic
Albania”. We Albanians are ten millions and we like other European peoples have rights to live together in the same state. Greeks, Serbs, Montenegrins, Macedonians stole our lands and if today we are poor that’s because we were divided and our neighbors took the best part of our territories. If we were ten millions we would have been the most important political factor in the region”!

When I asked him if he was ready to fight for that idea and go to war he was not so sure that he would enlist as a volunteer. “Well I did not really mean that I was ready to die in a literal sense. But yes, I support that idea. I was convinced that Americans and Europeans have finally understood our problems and that they would help. Politically and economically. But they did not. Unfortunately here in Albania we have incapable and corrupted politicians (Generally speaking there is a great distrust among Albanians toward politics and politicians who are often regarded as dishonest liars who pursue their personal goals and do not care about the country and its population. They also believe that they move in vicious circle where sometimes wins North – Berisha’s Democratic Party and sometimes South – Albanian Socialist Party but both are incapable to improve the situation in Albania). The only one who could lead such project are Kosovars. They have sense for business and more political initiative then we do”!

To my remark that regardless their “sense for business” and great political initiative Kosovo today is the poorest region in the Europe with the highest unemployment rate (according to some statistics about sixty percent) he answered: “Well I did not mean that we will join in a common state now. Now we (Albanians) have higher living standards than in the past but we still can not afford such ambitious project. Kosovars first have to rebuild their economy and to straighten their institutions and than we will see”.

Despite the fact that some of my interviewees declared that they and Kosovars should unite (it is important to notice that in their narratives they rarely mention Albanians from Macedonia) and had openly declared their adherence to the idea of Greater Albania I believe that their nationalism is nevertheless limited. They are ready to dream of national unity but without being personally involved or ready to sacrifice themselves for the “common cause”. As they see it, it would be really nice to be a part of the state of ten million inhabitants! but somebody else should take care of that project. Maybe the Albanian state, or Kosovars or maybe even EU,
they are not sure about that. In the mean time they live their every day existence peacefully and are very much concerned how to earn their living, find the house, sent their children to school, renew their documents or bring their parents, wives and children in Italy.

With regard to the delicate problem of integration the general judgment of my Albanian interviewees is that their community is well integrated in the local community. The middle aged generation is quite satisfied with their living standards and although they sometimes highly educated they accept low paid and sometimes inadequate jobs for their level of education. “In Albania I was a high school teacher and here I work as a simple blue collar but I do not suffer about that. It’s normal. We are immigrants. I did not expect that here I’ll find an adequate job or that this state will recognize my university degree. I’m fine here. I live much better that in Albania and what is important I believe that my children here will have better opportunities than in their homeland”.

The younger generation told me similar stories. Many young Albanians arrived in Italy with their families when they were children. Here they took the high school diplomas and many have decided to continue with their university educations. Their Italian is often almost perfect. They grow up here and have Italian friends and fiancés. But when it comes to find the job they believe that they have fewer opportunities than Italians of same age. Often the jobs they are offered do not meet their expectations.

“After I graduated at the faculty of economics the only job I found was in a fast food restaurant. I accepted because it was the only way to convert my permit of stay and to stay here. Yet, I can not imagine that I will be doing this job for long. It’s frustrating. I was also considered to go back home. You know with Italian degree I could find better job but after a while I abandoned that idea. I’ve been living here since 2002 and this is my home. I do not have friends in Albania, I do not have anything there. Albania should be my homeland but I’ll be honest. When I go there I feel little bit like a foreigner. I grow up here and the people in Albania have different mentality. I really do not know what to do”.

This story echoes similar stories I heard in the course of my research and I believe that such perceptions are very possible source of future social conflicts here
in Italy. However, these perceptions are not limited only to the Albanian community but are widespread among young immigrants, regardless of their nationality. The first generation of immigrants generally accepts their lower social status but I’m not sure that we can state the same thing also for the second generation. I also argue that the problem of young immigrants can not be reduced to a simple problem of social status and includes the identity field as well. In the course of their existence all immigrants inevitably experience some sort of identity crisis. This would be a very interesting subject for further studies.
Conclusions

The main aim of this research was to gain deeper knowledge about so-called “Albanian Question”. Through numerous interviews with members of Albanian, Kosovar and Macedonian/Albania communities I tried to investigated the reasons and possible further developments of this phenomenon. I was also interested in showing the instable and ongoing nature of national identities. Building on a vast literature and previous works of scholars like Hall, Paff, Biling and other theorist of nationalism and identity creation, I argued that, the group identities are far from being fixed forever in some essentialist past but rather subjects to continuous play of history and power. (Hall, 1996)

In second chapter, in order to support this argument I described the history of the identity formation of three major Albanian communities in the Balkans from the Turkish era to the present times. I also investigated the main characteristics and some problematic aspects of Albanian nationalism.

Like many other peoples in the Balkans, Albanians as well like to present themselves as ancient and continuous inheritors of long and honorable pedigree. However the historical sources clearly indicate that in the past this identity was not well defined and expressed. Like other subjects of the Port, Albanians as well considered themselves and were considered by others, as members of different clans, Turks or simply Christians. Due to the serious external and internal obstacles the rise of national and patriotic ideas in Albania came late. The Albanian “founding fathers” had a very difficult task in transforming scattered array of clans into nation and in order to achieve this goal they used all means at their disposal. The Albanians had distinctive language, traditions and some ethnic memories but these elements proved to be insufficient in erasing internal differences and ensuring the survival of the nation in Balkan surrounding. In order to support the national consolidation and to justify the claims to the land they inhabit they introduced a series of myths. These myths were afterward developed, transformed almost in a religious belief and successfully exported abroad, mainly in Kosovo and Macedonia. The final outcome of this nation building process is that today Albania is not the state of three but an “imagined community” of seven or maybe even ten million people.
Seduced by a nationalist ideologies, but also I would say, strongly influenced by the hostile surrounding, Kosovars and Albanians from Macedonia have lived for decades with a strong belief of being a part of the great Albanian nation. But when the events made it possible to different Albanian communities to finally get closer to each other, they discovered to their great surprise, that they do not know each other and that the differences among them are substantial. Instead of a fairy tale homeland “where free people raise their own flag” what they found when they went there for a first time was a poor and backward country whose inhabitants are often depicted in the light of negative stereotypes. In the narratives of my Kosovar and Macedonian interviewees the Albanians from the homeland are often referred as “ill-mannered”, “crime ridden”, “presumptuous” and “egoists” who in the last twenty years showed scarce commitment to the so-called “National Issue”

In spite of everything, the overwhelming majority of my interviewees from Kosovo and Macedonia reported that they still consider themselves as a part of a “unitary” Albanian nation who had been unjustly divided in 1912. If there are some differences, they argue that they are just skin deep and anyway surmountable. In the last fifteen years the two major Albanian Diaspora communities made a significant effort in order to approach the cultural standards of Albanians form the homeland. In this process the language issue has a very important role. Regardless the fact that the Albanian official language based on the Tosk dialect, so-called Letrare has never been used in Kosovo and that the overwhelming majority of Kosovars do not feel very comfortable with that language the Letrare was recently introduced in formal interactions and public life. On the other hand religious and conservative Albanians in Macedonia were strongly encouraged to break the structure of their traditional society currently involved in a very dynamic process of modernization and emancipation. Yet, these efforts did not give the expected results because at present the sense of community does not cross the border.

Considering this situation I wanted to tackle with my Kosovar interviewees a delicate issue of a separate Kosovar ethnic/national identity. Recently this argument has become an object of public debates but any my observation about their “regional peculiarities” caused a strong resentment and was taken as an attack on their national sentiment. Although the idea of a separate Kosovar identity is still a taboo
and strongly opposed among its citizens, I truly believe that this will change. The new state has been established, with its new symbols and borders and like all other states worldwide the Kosovar as well, will have to the achieve the necessary level of social, national and cultural cohesion. This will be done through state institutions and the education system. Of course this will not be enough, so they will need some history and new national myths. Through the inevitable process of state building in a few decades I believe that they will learn who they are. Like we all did in the 19th and 20th century. Moreover I argue that the necessity to stress ethnic ties with the “homeland" will significantly diminish now that the external threat (Serbian oppression) has disappeared. The last, but not least important, thing is that to create a union between two territories there must be a consensus on both sides of the border.

In the narratives of my southern Albanian interviewees Kosovars were portrayed as “violent” and “intransigent mountain people who caused nothing but trouble while the question of national unification was not considered as an interesting object for further discussions. Unlike southern Albanians who showed little solidarity and understanding for problems of Kosovars their northern compatriots were less categorical about this issue. Whenever I asked my northern Albanian interviewees if there were any differences among them and Albanians from Kosovo and Macedonia their first reaction was identical to those I’ve already heard in Kosovo and Macedonia. “No! We are of same flash and blood. We have the same language and customs. We are brothers”. Yet from their narratives emerged some contradictions and closer examination revealed that their commitment to the so-called national issue is only rhetorical.

However the Albanians from Albania and Kosovars are not the only people in the Balkans concerned about their identity. In the new political situation Albanians form Macedonia feel excluded from both Albanian nations. Although this group has a great potential for ethno-political mobilization and many ethnic Macedonians fear their secession I argue that their Albanian compatriots will not seek an extreme “exit” solution. This is not because their nationalism is less aggressive but simply because the Albanians from Macedonia have no other choice.
The mother Albania definitely abandoned her “children” and Kosovar state is too week for such ambitious project.

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