

Doing the homework

Roads and bridges in the vicinity of the city of Burrel in the Mat area, Albania

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One of the new bridges in Gurrë e Vogël. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

In September 2005 Qemal Minxhozi, the newly elected deputy for the Burrel area in Mat, Albania, invited me to visit some villages in the vicinity of the city of Burrel.

One of the villages is Gurrë e Vogël, south of the city. It is quite easy to drive the first kilometres, but the by-way to the village is quite stony and bumpy. To drive this road with an ordinary car, a Volkswagen or a Mercedes, would not be a splendid idea, you will have to use an off-roader - and you will have to be a skilled driver to approach.



Had you taken the journey into this beautiful area a little while ago, you would - after some kilometres - have reached an end marked by a river, low at summer, high and heavy in rainy winter.

In one direction you could continue by foot over a narrow and fragile bridge. In the other direction you had to continue - also by foot - by descending the bank-side, passing some stepping stones - and ascending the opposite side. Some few years ago a person drowned during the passage.

To pass the river in these two directions by car, may it have been an off-roader, would have been out of question.



The old bridge in Gurrë e Vogël. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

During the election campaign this summer Qemal Minxhozi heard about the severe infrastructural problems and began considering what could possibly be done.

When elected July 3rd he roughed out a plan and began to discuss it with friends and people from the area. Maybe this was a matter for the local authorities - or even for the government - but a solution would not come easily or quickly this way round. Instead he thought of making some sort of a joint venture.

If the villagers would participate with all necessary labour, others maybe would contribute with cement, wood and machinery?

Qemal Minxhozi was helped very much by the Ministry of Defense, which decided to assist with a military bridge of the good old Bailey-model.



The Bailey bridge in Gurrë e Vogël. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

So, during August and September the construction of the first of the bridges was nearly completed. When I visited the area some weeks later on, the bases were established thanks to some construction companies in Burrel - the Neziri, the Gjoka and the Koliqi companies - and the Bailey was put in the right position; missing was only the ramps - but they would be constructed as soon as the cement had hardened.

The villagers participated from the very beginning - and during the process they became even more enthusiastic and decided to participate in the next project, happy as they were seeing the infrastructure being so much improved. Among the villagers and other participants the bulldozer-driver, Isuf Kurti, Sefedin Muharemi and Avni Kurti have to be remembered.

This next project was a little bigger than the first one, since only one Bailey was available - and therefore some financial support from the outer world was needed.

Qemal Minxhozi succeeded in convincing an Albanian bank-company - the Banka Popullore - to make a donation, and some more construction-companies decided to support the project too - among those Dode Doci from the Lura-company contacted Qemal Minxhozi to offer his assistance.

In mid-September the construction-work began, and this second bridge will be inaugurated before winter.

The importance of these projects is obvious. Many villagers, especially in the younger generations, have left the villages in the last 10-15 years, most likely never to return to settle. With a bad and highly insufficient infrastructure it is more prosperous to leave for good and ever than to stay.

This migration to the cities in Albania - and to Greece, Italy and other countries - can not be expected to stop since not all children will like to be farmers as their parents, but *hopefully* the migration from the area will weaken.

It will be easier to work outside the village and drive to and fro - and it will be easier to bring agricultural products to the city-market. By that the income of the villagers will raise, and subsequently the villagers will buy more commodities in the city. Last, but not least, it will be easier to maintain and even elevate the level of education in the area, then not so remote as in recent years.

Since the European Union and Albania have signed an agreement this summer about legal and illegal emigration to the countries in the Union, an improvement of the infrastructure in the Albanian villages is the more necessary.



The mayor of Burrel, Dr Skender Lleshi, to the right. Qemal Minxhozi to the left. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

I had the opportunity of a friendly coffee with the mayor of the city of Burrel, Skender Lleshi, of profession a medical doctor. Dr Lleshi has been abroad some times and is familiar with the opportunities there, so he and the members of the city council have made an ambitious plan for developing the city. Dr Lleshi is a Democrat, Qemal Minxhozi a Socialist, nevertheless he

appreciated very much the road'n'bridge-initiatives. To his mind all the area will benefit when the infrastructure is being improved in the villages surrounding the city of Burrel.



Do you have the Google Earth-application (<http://earth.google.com/>) installed, you can download a closer look of the area: <http://bjoerna.net/albania/Urake.kmz>.
The Mat Hydropower Station is situated to the west.

Urakë means oracle, I have just been told by professor, Dr Shaban Sinani, the general-director of the Albanian National Archives. Perhaps what is going to happen in Urakë has to do with messages from an oracle? You have to interpret the messages by yourself, that is to apply the knowledge from Urakë, Gurrë e Vogël and other places to your own circumstances - and you will have to use your imagination to get proper results.

Many years ago, maybe 20 years ago, the then government established the big Hydropower Station in the Mat valley.



Mat Hydropower Station. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

At that time the authorities promised the inhabitants in the area that new roads and a bridge were to be built, since the area and the infrastructure was changed radically to make the production of the highly needed electricity possible.

The government also began constructing a rail-road - but as can be seen from the picture below, the plan was not exactly fulfilled. The rail-road ends up in open space.



The open space rail-road. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

In all the years since - that is in the period of the first Democrat governments and in the period of the Socialist governments - not very much has happened. Neither the government in Tirana, nor the local authorities have taken any profound initiative to promote the infrastructure in this neighbourhood.

The roads in the area are pretty awful, both in the vicinity of the village and in the centre of the village as well. The most appropriate way to come through the area is by foot as the shepherds - or by donkey or mule.

The villagers have sent their signal to the authorities at all levels and to all the Albanian political parties. At the last election they did not vote. Not at all. None of the 450 voters gave their vote, were they Democrats, Royalists, Republicans or Socialists. They agreed to act in common - and therefore the signal is so important.

Looking at the circumstances and opportunities in this area it is obvious that something has to be done, but also that it is *possible* to do something good - even with a limited amount of money.



The Uraké-area as seen from the hillside. The village is situated to the left; the river-bed is to the right. Most of the river-bed has dried up because of the summer-heat. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

The best thing to do might be to establish a bridge across the river-bed in a length of some hundred meters. With such a bridge you could come to and fro the city of Burrel within 30 minutes by car or minibus, because the length would only be about 10 kilometres.

Nevertheless, such a bridge can not be established quickly and for a limited amount of money. To build such a bridge you will have to study the geology carefully and to think the piling thoroughly through. Maybe the construction will have to follow principles of self-sustaining?



The river-bed. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

There is another option which will be less expensive. A shorter bridge can be established in another direction - but then the distance to the city of Burrel will be prolonged from 10 to approximately 25 kilometres since another road to the city has to be used - and improved. Such a bridge will be much better than nothing, not to mention that some other villages can be served, and most of the need can be complied with at least for some years.



The other option. Photo: Bjoern Andersen



Discussion at the river-bank. Photo: Bjoern Andersen

In a short time some engineers will appear in the area to make the proper measurements in the ground; afterwards the two alternative projects will be sketched - and hopefully, a bridge can be established in a future, not so distant.

Possibly, some money could be directed to the project from governmental and local governmental sources, but since there are so many other things which need attention and money, the most appropriate and efficient way to step forward will be doing something in common and without governmental money or money from regional authorities.

Maybe a friendly construction company could donate some old construction equipment, let say a bulldozer? Maybe the villagers could participate voluntarily by driving the bulldozer and do most of the necessary work in preparation of the construction of a bridge, for example by improving the narrow and stony roads in the area, since they are in such a poor condition?

By the way, there is a flagrant discrepancy between the individual houses and fields *and* the common roads in the very neighbourhood - not to speak of the school in the village which also is in the need of a »face-lift«.

The attitude towards the authorities might have been ambiguous in recent years, nevertheless you do not have any doubts about the enthusiasm among the villagers now. When I visited the area in the company of Qemal Minxhozi and the manager of the Hydropower Station in the Mat valley, Sokol Muceku, many villagers joined us from the top of the hill and down to the centre of the village to show us the area, the obstacles and the opportunities - and to express their views about what has to be done.

In an improvised meeting in the house of one of the villagers, the discussion went on for some hours over coffee's and raki's. The voices were pretty loud, but everyone spoke politely towards the other fellows and the guests. This discussion will, I am sure, show up as an important step of uniting in the case of the 'oracle bridge'.

Bjoern Andersen is a sociologist. He has visited Albania some times through the years, the first time in 1976. In 2003 and 2004 he was a participant in the conferences about 'the clash of civilizations' and 'religious tolerance', both in Tirana. He is the author of some books in Danish about Albanian history. Recently he has published the 'Danish Law of 1683' in a digital edition - and by now he is working on a book about the Danish-Norwegian author Ludvig Holberg - who, in 1739, issued an appreciating article about Scanderbeg.

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