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Danish sociologist's thoughts on Albania's past, present and future

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Bjoern Andersen's first visit to Albania was in the middle of the 1970's when he joined a group of enthusiastic Marxists from Western Europe to explore what was then a forbidden country for almost all the rest of the world. Then, in 2003, after participating in an international conference in Tirana about religious tolerance he decided to come back every year. He agreed to confess to *Tirana Times* his observations, talk about the big differences between the situation in the middle of the 1970's and the situation by now, and disclose some of his plans related to a seminar he is planning about the figure of Skenderbeu.

Albania, then and now

I have always met an overwhelming hospitality and some nice curiosity. In the middle of the 1970's borders were closed in both directions. Only high-ranking officials and specialists, or people on guided tours were allowed to visit from Western Europe and the United States. Anyways, back then, I got some good impressions from different parts of the country -Korça, Elbasan, Tirana, Durrës and Shkodra - and from different sectors: the

factories, the cooperatives and the state-farms – and from a very little private market as well. Now, the country has opened its borders in many respects. It is really good, even when some very important problems are appearing too: illegal emigration, heavy crime related to drugs, trafficking and smuggling – and corruption at different levels. In the Northern parts of Europe from where I come we are not at all happy with these sinister aspects of the open borders, we do not accept either the quantity or the “quality” of crime. To my opinion the crime presents an important hindrance when speaking about the possible Albanian membership of the European Union.

Positive changes

One of the really good things is the improvement of the free debate and the improvement of printed and air borne media. Some of your newspapers have developed considerably in quality and the education of journalists has improved too. The debate has improved considerably in quantity and quality through the years. For example I have observed a long and sincere discussion about your great writer Ismail Kadaré. Some Danes know Kadaré, actually one of his books – “The Successor” – was published just recently and got very good commentaries in newspapers. The Danish-Albanian Association ‘Miqësia’ has just invited Kadare to visit Denmark and to give a lecture, hopefully he will find the time in 2007. The discussion between Rexhep Qosja, Dritëro Agolli and Ismail Kadare, three different and very skilled writers with different approaches to the Albanian past, strikes me as positively serious. I am grateful to Shaban Sinani who has published his very important studies about the “Kadare archives”. Just recently a special edition came out in French together with a very good interview by Stéphane Courtois. I will recommend that edition and the interview to everyone interested in the works of Kadare and in his artistic interpretation of Albanian history. Hopefully, the interview will appear in Albanian, English and Danish as well.

I am not at all an expert in politics, and I can only speak on my own behalf, but on the one hand I have observed impressing and very good steps concerning elections and political working together in certain matters. Now you will only find a few examples of the type of boycotting parliamentary work. On the other hand, the nation would benefit quite a lot, if the politicians forgot – from time to time at least – to get and to obtain power. Politics is very much about such issues, so I will not recommend a naïve approach – nevertheless things would be much better if the politicians focused much more on real issues: economy, exports, security, corruption, infrastructure, education and health-care.

Observations about economy

Obviously your economy has improved during the last years. But still there is a very high trade deficit. The imports are – compared with the exports – tremendously high. The exports are – to a certain extent at least – improving, but it is not so easy to find good markets. I understand that you meet a lot of obstacles. Often you have to import electricity, especially when the quantity of electricity from the rivers is too little to meet rising demands; you have to buy some commodities abroad, cars for instance – but you could meet much more of the internal demands pretty well with Albanian commodities, especially if quality or design was improved. Your dairy commodities are better in quality, good milk, good cheese etc. You are also very good in vegetables, especially you have the opportunity of exporting early tomatoes, onions, cucumbers and the like. You are very good at grapes, but many other regions in the Adriatic and the Balkans are highly productive and cost-effective. Also, you are wine-producers, but there is a reason why even Albanians prefer to drink wine from other countries. To my opinion Albanian wine – in

general – is not meeting the European market standards. If you will stay in the market or even get a better position, you will have to do something seriously, I am afraid. Anyway, you have an advantage, I think: You are not using fertilizers that much, and therefore you possibly can get a good position in the market of organic vegetables and herbs. Obviously, you will have to improve in organizing exports and in marketing.

You have a big informal – or black – economy. To some extent it is about trading between acquaintances and friends, hard-crime money is involved and this definitely is a serious question for the police and other authorities.

Definitely, this is not only an Albanian problem, a black economy has developed in countries like Denmark too – especially when hiring workmen and service-people, possibly because the taxes in Denmark are considerably higher than in Albania. The big informal or black economy is somehow a catalyst, nevertheless you do not get taxes from it, therefore you are in a shortage of money to invest in infrastructure, education, health-care and the like, and that is a serious problem, since education is a prerequisite for economic and social development.

Suggestions:

1. Military spending

You could consider, I think - and in that point I definitely disagree with many Western governments - to lower the costs in the military sector and to use the money to improve the more in other sectors? Do you have any serious enemies by now? I do not think so. Then why do you not leave it to bigger countries to secure the region militarily and instead use your money to solve your problems?

2. Infrastructure

As mentioned before I have been visiting the Burrel area, actually both this year and last year. The roads in Burrel city are under reconstruction, and that is very good. Outside Burrel, in the village areas, for example in Uraka, the roads are pretty bad and the bridges are either missing or not good enough. Here you are facing some sort of a paradox. When the roads are in a poor condition, when the bridges are missing, you could assume that the people would stay behind the 'bars'. But, as you know, the opposite happens. The 'bars' or 'walls' are somehow one-sided; they are hindering visits from the outside, they are hindering the villagers from working in the cities in the daytime - or hindering them in bringing commodities to and from the local markets. The government, I would suggest, and the regional authorities should consider to change priorities, that is to move more money to the villages. Otherwise, more and more villagers, especially the younger ones, will move to the cities worsening the situation there - or to countries abroad – legally and illegally. When I visited the mountains in the Mat-region, I met many very nice, diligent, hard-working people, shepherds and peasants. If the roads in Uraka were bad, the roads in these mountain arrears were a real challenge. You could only approach by an off-roader or by foot. How do you think these nice people should sell their sheep, their cheese, and their nuts to the city markets or even to export it? They need support. Without good roads and modern facilities they cannot attract foreign tourists to these very beautiful places.

3. Traffic

I have met many very good drivers in Albania, drivers who manage as good musicians, to “listen” to each other and in that way they are helping the traffic to flow. But there are many bad drivers who do not have proper manners, who do not know of musicality. A very nice lady told me that she was pushed to act in traffic as an aggressive male, because if she did not she would not be allowed to drive from a smaller road into a bigger. It seems like the most important instruments in an Albanian car are the steering-wheel, the mobile phone, the speeder and the horn. Not many are using the seat-belts, some tires should be renewed immediately, and a lot of drivers should learn to slow down. Last year I observed a fast Mercedes running directly towards a car from the other direction with full speed macho. Full speed macho is an awful cocktail you do not have to export. Again, if you are dreaming of attracting foreign tourists, some Albanians have to improve considerably in the music of traffic.

Current visit and future plans

This time I have been doing three things: I have visited the Burrel area and the high mountains in the Mat-region, I have had meetings about a possible Scanderbeg-seminar in November of this year and I have had other meetings with some journalists and sociologists. One afternoon I visited the book exhibition in the Pyramid. I knew already that the Albanian publishers are producing a huge quantity of books and many of them seem to be of high quality. I was quite happy to visit the stand of the Miqjeni Publishing House. The director, Angjelina Ceka, who I met briefly in Copenhagen earlier this year – recommended the book of her husband, Neritan Ceka, about the Illyrians and the Albanians. Now, the book has been published in a very nice English edition, which I am going to read pretty soon. My meetings about the Scanderbeg-seminar went pretty well. All I have met, at the Albanian embassy in Copenhagen, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and at the Danish Embassy as well have been very supportive. I have arranged with Genc Myftiu, who is in charge of SEDA and experienced in promoting Albanian history and culture, that he will do what has to be done in organizing the seminar, and he will very soon contact Albanian historians and philologists and authorities as well. In spring 2007 I will visit Tirana once again to participate in the planning and organizing.

A memory about Albania in the 1970's

When visiting Albania in the middle of the 1970'es one 5-year plan was to be finished and a new one was on the sketch board. A quick comparative study in the original old plan and in the reports about the results – especially in the agricultural sector - made me curious since there was a big discrepancy. The results were considerable lower than the estimates. What could the reasons be? Most possibly, I thought, the original plan was built upon wishful thinking. At first I asked our Albanian guides, a teacher and two young students. The teacher suspected me, I think, to be an enemy beneath a friendly surface, so I told him that I was quite sincere and definitely not an enemy to the Albanians. He called for a party-secretary when we visited a cooperative in the Shkodra area, but the nice man was not able to explain why the outcome was so much lesser than the estimate-figures and went away a little angry, I am afraid. Some days later professor Harilla Papajorgji, a big shot in planning business, appeared, gave e lecture about Albanian economy and social structure and also took questions. I put my question to him. At first everything went quite well, but since he in fact did not explain the discrepancy, I asked

once again – and definitely as politely as I could. Then he suggested bad weather as the cause. OK, weather is always up and down, but I did not know of troubles of particular size of the kind in the previous years – and said it to him. Then there were no more space for questions. Our guides asked all to leave, and afterwards I got a reprimand in quite harsh words from the Danish tour leader (a real Marxist-Leninist) for offending Albanian hospitality! In the evening I asked the other Danish tourists whether they would like to participate in a discussion on the beach. Actually we had a nice and friendly discussion for an hour or two about Albanian economy, problems deriving from inside the country and abroad, planning issues and the political situation in general; that is, the Danish tour-leader and some of the other Marxist- Leninists, mostly “Chinese” to my recollection, kept away. Home again I concluded that Albania – may be - was on the track to prosperity, that the Albanians - may be - really wanted a political system like what they had, but also that something had turned completely wrong since an open-minded and free discussion was a prerequisite for a modern society.

Bjoern Andersen holds a MA in sociology and in Danish philology.

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' [cf.: <http://bjoerna.dk/tolerance/>] and 'religious tolerance' [cf.: <http://miqesia.dk/Summit-2004.htm>], both in Tirana. He is the author of books in Danish about Albanian history. The latest is »*To skridt frem?*« [2005] [»*To steps forward?*«]. BA is the editor of the 'Miqësia Experiences Project', cf.: <http://miqesia.dk/erfaring/experiences.htm> and <http://miqesia.dk/erfaring/>

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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