



**Defence Academy**  
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# **Balkans Series**

## **The Greek Minority in Albania – Current Tensions**

Miranda Vickers



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## **Key Findings**

- The problems of the Greek minority in Albania continue to affect the wider relationship between Albania and Greece.
- Efforts to improve the situation and human rights of the minority have met with delays and difficulties as both past and present Albanian and Greek governments have been willing to use nationalism as political capital for electoral benefits.
- External manipulation of the minorities' issues by nationalist-based groups has hindered efforts to correctly evaluate the minority situation and contributed to inter-ethnic tensions.
- The election of a new government in Greece may offer an opportunity to attempt to solve some of these problems and improve regional relationships.

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# The Greek Minority in Albania – Current Tensions

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## Introduction

Upon arriving in the Albanian capital Tirana, a visitor would be mistaken for thinking that at least half the city's population was Christian Orthodox. The enormous new Orthodox church currently under construction in the centre of the city dwarfs all surrounding buildings and gives the impression that Orthodoxy is by far the largest representative religion, there being another fair sized Orthodox church nearby. In contrast, the Roman Catholic cathedral also in the city centre looks small by comparison, and unlike some other Albanian cities, Tirana does not have a large mosque, only several small mosques dotted throughout the city. Alone of Albania's four main religions, the Orthodox Church is closely linked with the ethnic Greek minority in the south of the country, and the efforts by that minority to maintain their identity.

Albania's ethnic Greek minority constitutes a linguistic, cultural and religiously distinct minority, the majority of which live south of a line running roughly from the Adriatic port of Vlore to the eastern town of Korce, with a particular concentration in the Drin Valley. When mentioning the Greek minority in Albania to foreign officials, their reaction is one of surprise that there is still a minority to speak of – "what minority?" is the most common response. Indeed, in marked contrast to the early 1990s, the Greek minority is noticeable largely by its absence. With the exception of a few elderly women dressed in black, the villages of the minority areas are eerily deserted. Since the end of the one-party state in 1991, up to two-thirds of the minority population, along with tens of thousands of ethnic Albanians, have gone to live in Greece, leaving mostly elderly relatives to act as caretakers of their Albanian property.

Estimates of the ethnic Greek minority in Albania range from two to seven percent of the total population, but the generally accepted view is that today there are approximately between 45-50,000 ethnic Greeks in Albania, roughly 2 percent of the total Albanian population. According to the 1961 census, the number of Greek speakers was 40,000, and by 1981 the figure had risen to 58,758, a rise in proportion to the general increase in Albania's population. Most Greek sources, however, claim a Greek minority figure of 250–300,000. Yet this could only be realistically achieved if we include Orthodox Albanians as well as the Vlach community, who are also Orthodox by faith.<sup>1</sup> In Albania it is generally believed that many of those who are considered part of the minority are in fact Albanians, who just happen to speak Greek due to their having worked in Greece or to their proximity to the minority, or that they are really Vlachs in origin and have been classified as minority persons due to their Christian Orthodox religion. Confusingly, Vlachs often claim to be Greek to get Greek passports and visas, and there has also been a high rate of 'conversions' of Muslim Albanians to Orthodoxy as a result of economic pressures. Given the urge by many to escape Albania at all costs, it would certainly be tempting to claim Greek consciousness.

Greek nationalist groups such as the American Hellenic Institute claim that the population figures for the minority are grossly distorted, citing the CIA World Fact Book (1992), which records the Greek minority at 8 percent of the total population, and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples

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<sup>1</sup> Vlachs are semi nomadic pastoralists, who speak a language akin to Romanian and live in southeastern Albania, northwestern Greece and southern Macedonia.

Organisation which estimates the Greek minority at roughly 8.75 percent of the population of Albania.<sup>2</sup> The problem here is that since 1992 around a million Albanians, including ethnic Greeks, have emigrated in search of work, and therefore the CIA 1992 Fact Book, which cites figures taken before the collapse of Communism, is hopelessly out of date. Clearly, much needs to be done to clarify the exact size of the Greek minority.

The actual size of the minority is especially contentious because it is inextricably linked to the historical territorial claims on southern Albania by various Greek nationalist groups, as well as some elements within the Greek church and state, which claim that part of southern Albania – known to the Greeks as Northern Epirus – belongs historically to Greece.<sup>3</sup> These claims are based upon decisions taken by the Ambassadors' Conference held in December 1912 - January 1913 in which Albania was allocated its current boundaries. At that time there was said to be a Greek minority of around 35,000 – a figure which Greek nationalists have always claimed to be a gross underestimate. In the years before that, there was bitter inter-ethnic conflict in the minority regions of Korca and Gjirokaster.<sup>4</sup> The ethnic Greek minority were, and are, the only minority in Albania large enough to have political, economic and social significance. This is augmented by their proximity to the neighbouring Greek state and to which they seek ever closer economic and cultural links.

The Greek minority are represented by the Democratic Union of the Greek Minority, OMONIA, and by the political party the Union of Human Rights Party, UHRP, which has been in coalition with both the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party.<sup>5</sup> The UHRP was established in February 1992 following the enactment of legislation banning parties based upon “ethnic principles”. The party became the electoral successor of OMONIA, winning two Assembly seats in March 1992 as against OMONIA's five seats in 1991.

## Historical Background

As with the population statistics, the origin of the Greek minority in Albania is bitterly disputed. During five centuries of Ottoman rule, there was no official distinction between Albania and Epirus. Although Greek historiography claims that ethnic Greeks settled in what is now southern Albania during the pre-Christian period, Albanian historians argue that southern Albania was largely inhabited by Illyrians and that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whilst under the effective control of Albanian feudal lords, a major influx of Greeks settled in the present day Gjirokaster district of southern Albania to work as agricultural labourers. Ottoman sources and accounts by English travellers suggest that during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the Drin Valley was largely Albanian.

The district of Himara, however, on the southern coast, appears to have always have had a Greek population. In the latter period of Ottoman rule, Himara enjoyed a considerable measure of practical independence from central authority. The town and its six surrounding villages, with a population of 20,000, paid a yearly tribute of 16,000 francs to the Sublime Porte in Constantinople. In 1912 the Greek government sent gunboats to Himara to attempt to prevent the incorporation of Himara district within the new Albanian state.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Greek historiography claims that since its inception in 1912, the Albanian state has attempted to de-Hellenise the southern part of Albania.

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<sup>2</sup> Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO), *Hellenic News of America*, 9 August 2004.

<sup>3</sup> See Metropolitan Sevastianos of Dryinoupolis, *Northern Epirus Crucified*, Athens, 1986. In essence, the Northern Epirot agenda has remained unchanged since the end of the First World War and has always sought to “recover” this region for Greece.

<sup>4</sup> For a vivid and powerful, albeit pro-Greek, description of inter-ethnic conflict in this region see: Rene Puaux, *The Sorrows of Epirus*, Hurst and Blackett, London, 1918.

<sup>5</sup> OMONIA was formed clandestinely in December 1989 and was officially launched a year later in order to promote the interests of the Greek minority in Albania.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the history of Himara see: *Himara ne Shekuj*, Akademia e Shkencave, Tirana, 2004 and James Pettifer, *The Blue Guide to Albania and Kosovo*, London, 2001, pp447-8.

The present Greek-Albanian border has been disputed by elements within both Greece and Albania since the Protocol of Florence (December 1913) ceded to Greece the largely Albanian-inhabited region of north-western Greece known to Albanians as Chameria and to the Greeks as Vorio (Northern) Epirus.<sup>7</sup> However, the 1921 Paris Conference annulled the Protocol of Florence and validated the borders created by the Conference of Ambassadors, thus leaving several thousand ethnic Greeks within the new Albanian state. Equally, large numbers of predominantly Muslim Albanians (known as Chams) also found themselves on the wrong side of the border. The majority of the Cham population were forcibly displaced from their homes in north-western Greece at various stages from 1913 to 1949 and today more than 250,000 Chams live as refugees in Albania and elsewhere and they are campaigning ever more vigorously for the Greek government to grant them Greek citizenship and to return their confiscated properties with due compensation.<sup>8</sup>

Since 1921, Albania's ethnic Greek population has been registered as a minority living in recognised "minority zones". Amongst the first measures undertaken by the new Albanian Communist regime after the Second World War was to limit the area of southern Albania described as a "minority zone" to just 99 villages in the districts of Gjirokaster and Saranda. This "minority zone" did not include the three villages of Himara, Drimades and Palasse, which had been recognised as minority areas by the League of Nations in 1921. It also excluded ethnic Greeks who lived in Tirana, Vlore and other towns. Thus, all ethnic Greeks living outside the "minority zones" were denied minority status.<sup>9</sup> This has remained one of the key stumbling blocks in negotiations regarding the Greek minority.

In order to dilute the minority population, throughout the communist period the Albanian government encouraged the settlement of Albanians in Greek-inhabited areas, and the movement of ethnic Greeks to Tirana and some northern districts. To further dilute the ethnic purity of southern Albania, both Vlachs and Chams were settled in strategic border districts. From 1944 until the fall of communism in 1991, the Greek minority suffered discrimination and violation of human rights, as did virtually the entire Albanian population, although it can be safely argued that the Roman Catholic population suffered proportionally the worst.

## **The Greek Minority in Post-Communist Albania**

During the presidency of Sali Berisha (1992-1997), Tirana's relations with Athens were cool and at times distinctly frosty, with the ethnic Greek minority often being treated as pawns by the two fractious neighbours. In the spring of 1993 a Greek priest, Archimandrite Chrysostomos, was expelled from Albania for allegedly subversive anti-Albanian activities. Tirana accused him of abusing his ministry by preaching Enosis – union with Greece. There followed wide scale attacks on Greek-owned property in southern Albania. In April 1994 the first armed violence broke out, when an ultra-nationalist ethnic Greek militant group, the Northern Epirus Liberation Front (MAVI), attacked a small Albanian military post near Gjirokaster, killing two soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Five ethnic Greeks belonging to OMONIA were arrested and tried for complicity in the attack. Greece responded by vetoing a major European Union loan to Albania.<sup>11</sup> The Greek police also began

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on the background of the Protocol of Florence, see: Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians – A Modern History*, I.B.Tauris, London, 2006, Chapters 3 and 4.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this subject see: Miranda Vickers, *The Cham Issue – Albanian National & Property Claims in Greece*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, April 2002; and Miranda Vickers, *The Cham Issue – Where to Now?*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, January 2007.

<sup>9</sup> *The Greek Minority in Albania, A Documentary Record (1921-1993)*, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki, 1994, p21.

<sup>10</sup> On 20 January 2001 the same group carried out a grenade attack on an Albanian target in Athens, damaging several vehicles.

<sup>11</sup> From the outset OMONIA contended that any territorial change between Albania and Greece should come only from negotiation and agreement, thereby publicly distancing itself from such militant ethnic Greek groups as the Northern Epirus Liberation Front (NELF). However, some OMONIA members openly supported the activities of the NELF.

their own investigation, arresting three Greek citizens and four Greek Albanians following another thwarted MAVI border raid in the spring of 1995.

From this low point, relations gradually improved as both countries recognised the benefits of strengthening economic relations. The release of the five OMONIA defendants in 1995 paved the way for the successful visit of Greek President Konstandinos Stefanopoulos to Tirana in 1996, following which the two countries signed a Treaty of Friendship whereby Greek minority rights were to be respected and more Greek language schools were to be opened. Pursuant to this agreement, several such schools were duly opened, and a Greek-language faculty was established as a branch of Gjirokaster University.

## The Church

The dispute between the Albanian and Greek governments over the number, status and rights of the ethnic Greek minority in southern Albania inevitably made the resurrection of the Orthodox faith in Albania more controversial than that of the other principal religions.

The Albanian Orthodox Church was founded in 1908 in Boston, Massachusetts, by Bishop Fan Noli, and despite severe and continuous opposition from Greece, was finally recognised as autocephalous by the Patriarch of Constantinople in 1937. Alongside other religious denominations in Albania, the Albanian Orthodox Church suffered extensively from the effects of the official ban on all religious practice in 1967, when the State closed all churches and mosques and imprisoned, exiled or executed all clergy and imams. Church lands were confiscated and many churches were razed to the ground. The collapse of the one-party state in 1991 paved the way for the gradual reintroduction of religious practice.

The Orthodox Church lay in ruins with no administrative structure, and with only 15 surviving elderly priests. As with other denominations, there were almost no indigenous priests available. The absence of a trained Albanian clergy led to a strong reliance upon priests from Greece, Cyprus and distant areas of the Greek diaspora.<sup>12</sup> In 1993 an ethnic Greek, Anastasios Yannulatos, was appointed by the Patriarchate in Istanbul as Albania's archbishop. But whilst the appointment may have pleased the ethnic Greek minority, it inspired revulsion and alarm amongst most Albanians, who saw the move as a threat to the independence of the Albanian Church and, more importantly, as a plot by Greece to Hellenise and later annex southern Albania. They demanded the chief prelate of the Albanian Orthodox Church to be of Albanian birth or heritage, citing the Albanian Church constitution of 1929, which says specifically that only Albanian citizens, or people of Albanian descent, may be nominated for the post. Following an outcry by Albanians at home and in the United States, including both Roman Catholics and Muslims, the Albanian Orthodox authorities in Tirana eventually annulled Yannulatos's appointment, citing the clause in the Church's statute requiring its primate to be of Albanian nationality and citizenship.

Ever since the fall of the one-party state in 1991, the Orthodox Church in Albania has attempted to foster good relations with whichever government was in power in Tirana in order to continue the protracted negotiations over the return of pre-1939 Church-owned land. In 1964 the main Orthodox Church in Tirana – the Annunciation Cathedral – was destroyed to make way for the construction of the Tirana International Hotel. In the early 1990s, the Church began to seek compensation from the government for this loss of property. After 10 years of repeated requests a site in the centre of the city was finally allocated and by 2009, the enormous new church was nearing completion. As with the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church in Albania acts in a proselytising manner to win hearts and minds, and is heavily involved in all manner of social activities, including summer camps, schools, environmental campaigns, icon restoration, candle

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<sup>12</sup> For a beautifully illustrated account of the restoration of the Orthodox Church in Albania, see: *Resurrection 1991-2003*, The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania, Tirana, 2004.

factories, rebuilding of ruined churches, youth activities, theological education and other activities, some of which benefit non-Orthodox Albanians.<sup>13</sup>

## Himara

The tiny, drab, little town of Himara on Albania's southern coast, plays a hugely disproportionate role for its size in Albanian - Greek relations, especially around election time, when the activities of its inhabitants provide a useful barometer of Athens' relations with Tirana. In virtually every parliamentary and local election in Albania, there are tensions in Himara and numerous incidents concerning the Greek minority. The town is used as a useful pawn by Athens in much the same way as the Albanian Democratic Party used the equally maverick and unprepossessing village of Lazarat on the outskirts of Gjirokaster to try to destabilise the south of Albania in the aftermath of the 1997 uprising. Although they occurred almost a decade ago, it is worth mentioning the controversial local elections in October 2000, because they were characterised by strong nationalist overtones from both Albanian and ethnic Greek political parties that have characterised politics in Himara ever since.

Tensions rose after the UHRP invited Greek legislators to speak at local election rallies. Albania's electoral code prohibits the participation of foreign citizens in election campaigns. Several Greek MPs and diplomats also went to Himara to observe voting in the second round, which was reported in the Greek media as a visit to "a bastion of Hellenism in Albania". Their visit so angered ordinary Albanians that even the moderate daily newspaper *Koha Jone* responded angrily, declaring that "Albania's politicians should react against such interference by a neighbouring country in its internal affairs, with the aim of Hellenising Himara and using Albanian land as Greek land."<sup>14</sup> The Albanian parties accused the UHRP of trying to buy votes and spread Greek influence by suggesting that Greek investments would flow into the area if the UHRP won.

One of the most telling indicators of Albanian nationalism occurred when Socialist Party Secretary Petro Koci called upon the main parties to join their vote against the UHRP. In response, non-Greek parties formed the "Alliance for Himara", which encouraged all candidates not involved in the second round run off to ask their supporters to vote for the Socialists. In an unprecedented move Besnik Mustafaj, the then Secretary of Foreign Relations for the Democratic Party (DP), called for DP voters to support the Socialist candidate in Himara. This was the first time such political unity was displayed, and was even more remarkable given that it came so soon after the bloodshed and violence of 1997-8 between supporters of the DP and the Socialists. Despite accusations of ballot rigging, violence and intimidation, it gave victory to the Socialist Party in both rounds of the local polls.

In this acutely sensitive context, the ethnic Greek minority decided to boycott the 2001 population census. OMONIA chairman Vangel Dule accused the Albanian authorities of trying to force the Greek minority to declare themselves Albanians, citing the census because it did not refer to ethnicity or religion.<sup>15</sup> OMONIA urged the minority to boycott the census in order to halt the "Albanianisation" of minority areas.

## Recent Developments

From a low point during the first Berisha administration, relations between the minority and the Albanian authorities improved under the Socialist-led government from 1997 to 2005. Apparently, however, the situation began to deteriorate following the re-election of Sali Berisha's

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<sup>13</sup> The Greek government has also financed the construction of numerous social institutions, such as schools and medical clinics, that benefit all Albanians regardless of their faith.

<sup>14</sup> *Koha Jone*, 11 September 2000.

<sup>15</sup> The Macedonian minority also boycotted the census for the same reason.

Democratic Party in the parliamentary elections of July 2005. In May 2006 a group of Greek minority leaders from Gjirokaster sent a petition to Albania's main institutions and international organisations demanding an "end to discrimination by the government of Sali Berisha". The petition was made public during a meeting in the village of Grapsh between OMONIA members and representatives of the OSCE office in Gjirokaster. The petition read: "We have denounced forcefully and repeatedly to our mother country (Greece), the Albanian institutions and the international organisations, the climate of vendetta and the growing persecution of the ethnic Greek minority by the state structures since the election in July 2005." The petition dwelt upon the dismissal of more than 30 minority members from state institutions. The fact that Athens apparently ignored such complaints by the minority was particularly humiliating, although minority leaders must have been aware that simultaneously hundreds of opposition employees were also dismissed from state institutions simply because they supported the previous Socialist-led government.

In November 2006 the Albanian government approved the granting of dual citizenship to registered members of Albania's ethnic Greek minority. As with anything concerning the Greek minority, the decision proved highly controversial, with many Albanians seeing the move as an attempt to shift Albania's borders in favour of Greece. Approximately 20,000 Albanian citizens were issued Greek passports, prompting large numbers of ethnic Albanians to try to claim some form of Greek identity.

Having gradually improved over the previous few years, relations between Tirana and Athens again became tense as international talks on Kosovo's independence got underway in 2007. Mindful of the demands of the Kosovo Albanians, Greek President Karolos Papoulias, called for more respect of the rights of the Greek minority in Albania, arguing that the ethnic Greek community continued to struggle for its rights.<sup>16</sup> The controversial mayor of Himara, Vasil Bollano, has on more than one occasion declared that he would like to see an autonomous area of Northern Epirus. In April 2007, Bollano made yet another highly provocative statement that Northern Epirus (southern Albania) should be independent and that the Greek minority was demanding nothing more than what Albania was demanding for Kosovo. An outraged Tirana dismissed his demands for "special status" or autonomy for the Himara district, arguing that the size of the local Greek community was far too small to warrant such status.

There was an immediate outcry in the Albanian media. One prominent daily even went so far as to say that a new "cold war" had begun between Greece and Albania, claiming that:

*The intrigues of Greek policy are clear for everybody to see and now no one can deny that a cold war is going on between the two countries. Greek policy towards Albania and the Albanian nation is ever on the attack through its three stooges: Bollano [head of OMONIA], Dule [head of the Human Rights Party] and Yannulatos [Greek Archbishop of the Albanian Orthodox Church]. Why does Greece not want the independence of Kosovo? Greek politicians know full well that after the proclamation of Kosovo's independence the issues of the Chams and other nationalities living in Greece will have to be discussed beyond the absurd limits of "bilateral solutions".<sup>17</sup>*

This was indeed the case as ethnic minorities such as the Macedonians, Bulgarians and Turks were becoming ever more vocal in Greek political life.

As the talks on Kosovo continued, tensions were running high. In June 2007 some Greek-language road signs in the villages of Dropulli and Poshtem were erased and replaced with the letters UCC (Chameria Liberation Army) written in blue. An Orthodox prayer site in the nearby village of Goranxi was also seriously damaged. The local minority population saw the incidents as a gross provocation designed to damage relations between the minority and their Albanian neighbours. The head of OMONIA in Goranxi, Vasil Qiqi, said that the OMONIA organisation had

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<sup>16</sup> *Albania Daily News*, 29 January 2007.

<sup>17</sup> *Balkan*, 24 April 2007.

lobbied hard with the Albanian state to ensure the road signs were in Greek, but there were obviously those who sought to insult and provoke the minority, and that the state should stop such dangerous acts.<sup>18</sup> In December 2007, Vasil Bollano had ordered the dismantling of road signs along the busy coastal road because they were not bilingual. The removal of the road signs caused traffic chaos because they were along a section of Albania's coast which is very popular with tourists.<sup>19</sup>

Following the actual declaration of Kosovo's independence in spring 2008, Prime Minister Sali Berisha attempted to allay fears by Athens and the Greek minority about the notion of a "Greater Albania", by stressing that "there are some property and legal issues in the region (southern Albanian border districts), but the borders are untouchable".<sup>20</sup> Measures to address some of the Greek minorities' demands were also adopted. After lengthy negotiations between representatives of the minority and the government, Tirana finally allowed the erection of bilingual road signs in the "minority zones", but these still excluded Korca and Himara.

The following month, Albanian high school students from Saranda staged demonstrations during which they burned the Greek flag and chanted "Himara is Albanian". They were protesting against an inscription "Himara is Greek" which had been scrawled on the wall of a school in Saranda. Many Albanians held Greece responsible for the actions of Himara's mayor and its inhabitants, arguing that Greece could easily have silenced Bollano. In August, OMONIA called for the Albanian government to declare the Greek language as the country's second official language, following the example of the Macedonian government's recognition of Albanian as Macedonia's second language. The Albanian government dismissed the request out of hand due to the glaring disparity between the size of the Albanian minority in Macedonia – around 35–40 percent of the population, and the Greek minority in Albania – around 2 percent of Albania's population.

Tensions and ethnically-related incidents in the Himara district, however, remained high. In April 2008 a group of sixty members of the Greek minority stoned a police station in Himara in an apparent revolt against the arrest of two members of OMONIA for refusing to show identity documents. Albanian police were forced to fire warning shots to disperse the protesters, who waved banners claiming that "this is Northern Epirus", and "this is Greek territory". The Albanian media accused Vasil Bollano of organising the protests. This event was the straw that broke the camel's back. The patience of the Albanian government had run out. In their view it was time to silence Bollano before southern Albania erupted into inter-ethnic violence.

In March 2009, Himara's mayor was finally indicted by the Albanian prosecution for ordering the dismantling of road signs because they were not bilingual, and for causing traffic chaos and damage to public property. In his defence, Bollano said that he had ordered the removal of the signs because they should also have been in Greek, because he considers the area a Greek minority zone and he was merely attempting to highlight the marginalization of the Greek language. Tirana had been treading carefully with the mayor, mindful of its powerful neighbour to the south, which is host to around 800,000 Albanian emigrants whose remittances are important for Albania's economy. However, the government's muffled response to the ever more provocative incidents in Himara was causing increasing anger amongst Albanians, who felt Tirana was being far too lenient towards Bollano. They were infuriated by his warnings that if the authorities made any moves against him, Albania's EU aspirations would be compromised. Although Athens in theory supports Albania's goal of eventual EU membership, it has shown it is ready to use the fate of Albanian emigrants in Greece as a pawn when bilateral relations wane. In April 2009, a court in the city of Vlore sentenced Vasil Bollano to six months in prison and a 500,000 lek (Euro 3,800) fine. Bollano was also banned from holding public office for three years.

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<sup>18</sup> The Albanian Daily *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 16 June 2007.

<sup>19</sup> In March 2004 the Albanian parliament approved a law allowing bilingual road signs in areas inhabited by the Greek minority. However, this did not include the district of Himara with its significant ethnic Greek population – a fact that was bound to cause controversy.

<sup>20</sup> *South East Times*, 10 March 2008.

## Education

Education in the minority areas has historically been problematic ever since King Zog closed down all Greek language education in 1933. Under communism, primary schools and some secondary schools existed in the larger minority centres, but the lack of higher education in Greek and the exclusively Albanian nature of the curriculum, with little opportunity to study Greek literature or philosophy, were recurrent grievances for the minority. In general, post-communist Albanian governments have supported the opening of Greek language schools. The first church-run nursery school was established in 1994 and today there are 15 such schools throughout Albania. In 1996 three Greek language schools were opened and several more were opened in 2002. In a major concession to the minority two schools have also been granted an operating licence outside the official "Greek minority zone", one in Korca and the other in Himara.

Every village in the minority zones now has its own elementary school in the Greek language, despite a decline in the number of students in the past decade due to emigration. In the field of higher education several professional Greek-language training institutes, which offer instruction in business and computer studies and icon restoration, have also been opened in towns with a Greek minority population, and new departments of Greek studies have opened in the Universities of Tirana and Gjirokaster. The Albanian government has also agreed to cooperate in the building of a Greek language university in Gjirokaster, which will be funded by the Greek government. Nevertheless, whilst Greek language public elementary schools are common in the southern part of the country, OMONIA complains that the community needs more Greek-language classes both within and outside the minority zones, especially in Tirana. Many Albanians, meanwhile, are asking when the Greek government will start opening Albanian-language schools for the estimated 800,000 Albanians living in Greece.

## Conclusion

Ever since the foundation of the modern Albanian state in 1912, the relationship with Greece has been complex and unstable. Today, however, Albania's relations with Greece have advanced considerably from their low point in the mid-1990s. On the whole, aside from minority issues, these relations can be described as good. Now that Kosovo has achieved independence, and Albania has joined the NATO Alliance, maintaining good relations with her regionally influential southern neighbour Greece is arguably the most important factor in Albanian foreign policy. Although Albania's relations with Greece have improved significantly over the last few years, many bilateral problems remain, most notably the status of the estimated 800,000 Albanian migrant workers living in Greece, the property and restitution rights of the exiled Cham community, and the ethnic Greek minority in Albania.

Tirana has had to deal with the minority issue in a very measured way in order on the one hand not to anger Albanians by appearing too lenient in response to nationalist demands, whilst on the other hand recognising the importance of not upsetting Athens. The Greek remittances from Albanian emigrants have given Greece a great deal of leverage over the Albanian economy. Both of Albania's main political parties - the ruling Democratic Party and the opposition Socialist Party - are mindful of the enormous importance of Greek investment in Albania. For its part, the Greek government recognises that it is viewed with deep distrust amongst many Albanians, who see every move by Athens and the Greek minority leadership as part of an ulterior plan to Hellenise southern Albania. The total absence of any educational provision for Albanians resident in Greece in the Albanian language compounds these fears.

One element that tends to aggravate the situation regarding the Greek minority is that of the vocal Greek diaspora in the United States, which lobbies hard in Washington to influence US government policy in the southern Balkans. The Obama administration, with the strong Greek influence in the Democratic Party, is likely to be more open to these views than the Bush administration. As with other diaspora groups, Greek American organisations such as the Pan Epirot Union (PEU) and the Greek American Membership Organisation (GAMO), are often ill

informed about the true situation on the ground, and therefore provide inaccurate information. For example, GAMO's 2006 policy statement on Albania reads as if it was describing Albania during the height of the uprising in 1997 rather than 2006: "The personal safety of ethnic Greeks in Albania is at risk of direct intimidation by security forces and the burning of schools, churches and businesses by lawless bands that the police allow to operate with impunity."<sup>21</sup> To a large extent this was true of the situation in southern Albania during the uprising in the spring of 1997. By 2001, however, law and order had been fully restored and by 2006 it could be argued that Albania was one of the safest places in Europe. This sort of inaccurate and inflammatory reporting is irresponsible and contributes to inter-ethnic discord.

As a result of the adoption of legislation improving Greek minority rights, most of the minorities' cultural and educational needs have been addressed. There have also been improvements in the minorities' political representation which ensures they are adequately represented at a local level if not on a national level. The unopposed ethnic Greek participation in Albanian politics indicates that the group is unlikely to experience disadvantages from policies of deliberate group discrimination.<sup>22</sup> Over the past 17 years, massive emigration to Greece and the migration of many northern Albanians southwards have radically altered the ethnic makeup of southern Albanian towns and villages. This fusion of ethnicity has resulted in few areas of southern Albania now being identified as solely inhabited by ethnic Greeks. Yet you only have to look at all the new roofs on the village houses to know that the Greek minority have not given up on their property. An encouraging sign recently is that some members of the Greek minority, such as doctors, pharmacists and other professional and skilled people, are now returning to urban centres in Albania. There are also summer returnees in the rural districts.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, significant issues still need to be addressed, such as the opening of Greek language classes in towns with a significant population of ethnic Greeks, such as Gjirokastra, Saranda and Delvina, as well as strengthening the implementation of newly adopted minority laws. The property issue is still problematic as it is still not clear who owns what, but this is a situation that affects all Albanians. Minority leaders claim that pastures and other property formerly in the ownership of Christian Orthodox monasteries are not being returned and that the government is reluctant to fill the quota for Greek minority representation in police and army structures. Controversies also continue over the appointment and influence of Orthodox Church personnel. Minority leaders also complain of the government's refusal to recognise the possible existence of ethnic Greek communities outside the official "minority zones" and to utilise Greek on official documents and on public signs in ethnic Greek areas.

Another realistic demand of the Greek minority is that Tirana provides an accurate assessment of their true numbers. The European Union has criticised Albania's failure to accurately evaluate the actual size of the ethnic Greek population, as well as the country's other minorities. It is to be hoped that this situation will be rectified in the next census in 2011, when Albania should be able to provide accurate statistics on the number of national and cultural minorities living in Albania. Greece would also like Albania to lift the "minority zone" status so as not to pinpoint the minority legally in specific areas and also wants the whole minority issue to be tackled from an EU rather than a Greek perspective.

However, since the independence of Kosovo and Albania's membership of NATO, the role of Greece in the region has been significantly weakened. As a result, it is hoped a new realism will emerge. It is no longer possible for nationalist Greek elements to decry the lack of human rights for the Greek minority in Albania. Whilst all Albanians face high levels of economic hardship, the country's ethnic Greeks have in fact been greatly favoured in comparison to ordinary Albanians, due to the special relationship they enjoy with Greece. Members of the Greek minority have been granted highly prized Greek visas, residence and work permits, education for their children,

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<sup>21</sup> The Greek American Membership Organisation's 2006 *Policy Statement on Albania*.

<sup>22</sup> *Minorities at Risk*, University of Maryland Centre for International Development and Conflict Management, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> In April 2008 Greek Deputy Foreign Minister Theodore Kassimis visited southern Albania, where he called upon the Greek minority to encourage the return of their young people to their lands.

and have benefited from medical assistance in Greece, not to mention the generous Greek pensions of around 100-150 euros a month paid to every ethnic Greek family by the Greek government. This is an envious situation indeed for any ethnic minority in the Balkans.

Albania's Greek minority have historically had many just grievances against Albanian governments, but today the most important human rights issues have now been addressed and it is to be hoped that everyone can now move on to a new phase in Greek-Albanian relations whereby Albania's Greek minority really can become a bridge between the two countries rather than a source of division. The election of the new PASOK government in Greece in October 2009 may offer a window of opportunity to do so. The stated commitment of the new government to improve the legal status of Albanian migrants in Greece is a hopeful start, although it remains to be seen if proposed new measures will receive approval in the Greek Parliament.

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