



UNKNOWN



ALBANIA



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A Case Study: Cultural and Environmental Tourism

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Introduction

By **Ramesh Jaura**

Since the end of the East-West cold war, Albania has made significant strides in establishing the foundations of democratic institutions and a market economy, including its 1998 Constitution. In 2000, Albania became a member of the World Trade Organisation, which illustrates its determination to build an open and integrated economy.

And yet it remains Europe's last "unknown" country - in part, because it is not an easy tourism destination for international markets to understand. But the fact that the country maintains a cultural "authenticity" with its wide range of historic and natural attractions could hold great allure for the outside world. With this in view, Albania has turned its focus to tourism development. In the process, the quality of life of a significant number of Albanians could be improved - in tune with the country's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals.

UNDP Albania is working closely with the Government of Albania, in particular with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports and the National Tourism Organization to implement the country's eco and cultural tourism strategy.

UNDP is assisting the Government to create the right circumstances for tourism-driven development, as well as providing assistance to local tourism development.

Culture and environment can indeed be important parts of the tourism industry, and a boon to rural communities. IPS examines this approach - and to what extent it finds success -- using Albania as a case study in a globalised world with funds from UNDP Albania.

This publication compiles all articles that have been written by independent journalists from the IPS European network and disseminated through IPS website, in special publications, newsletters and by way of translations among others into Dutch, German and Spanish. The articles in English are available in internet at a special website: www.ipsnews.net/new_focus/tourism/index.asp

In the six months since the special website went online, thousands of people from around the world have visited it. Nearly one quarter of a million page views underline the great interest IPS has created in Albania's cultural and environmental tourism efforts.

Berlin, December 2007

Ramesh Jaura, Project Coordinator | IPS European Director



Llaman Beach close to Himare with a colourfully decorated bunker to the right (Klaus Friedl 2007)

European Integration Takes More Than Attitude

By Alba Çela

Tirana - Albanians are among the most Euro-enthusiastic people in the Western Balkans, surveys show. But that does not mean they believe they will join the EU in a hurry. As many as 93.8 percent want to join the European family, according to a study 'Rethinking EU Integration: Albanian realities and perceptions 2007' by the Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS). The AIIS has been gauging perceptions about the EU and the integration process for the last five years, and has found approval rates for Albania's entry to the EU always above 80 percent. The enthusiasm is fed in part by the growing number of European visitors who have been coming to Albania as it puts infrastructure and environment improvements in place to bring itself up to EU standards.

Opening of markets

In 2005, the approval was 83.9 percent. In 2006 it jumped to 92.5 percent, following the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU in July 2005. Such an agreement is a first step towards eventual membership. "One of the most important conclusions of our study is that Albanians see the EU as their country's most strategic partner," AIIS executive director Albert Rakipi told IPS. The AIIS study found internal nuances of attitude among the polled people. The business category seems to be more skeptical, and is concerned about the economic costs of accession and the opening of markets. But even so, the vast majority of businesses are positive about EU accession.

But though Albanians want to join the EU, their expectations are different. "One of the main findings of the survey is that despite the extremely high level of support for integration, Albanians have no illusions as to their country's readiness to enter the EU," Maklen Misha, director of research at AIIS told IPS. As many as 82.8 percent of the people polled said Albania is not ready to join the EU. The majority of Albanians place their accession date no earlier than 2020. This reflects the

pessimism expressed by every visiting EU representative. Commissioner for education, training, culture and youth Jan Figel told the media on a visit to Tirana last month that Albania has made progress on its road to the EU, but that much remains to be done. "It is up to Albania to do its fundamental homework as it is your own country, and we can only support you all the way," Figel said.

Aspirations for the EU have in the past been controversial. One of the most powerful slogans raised by Albanian protesters who challenged the communist regime in 1991 was, "We want Albania to be like Europe!" Significant reforms are necessary before Albania can hope for EU membership. The government is trying to come to terms with a range of political and economic problems that impede the integration process, among them widespread corruption and an energy crisis. "Albanians and people in the Balkans generally will benefit largely after integration, in terms of democratic stability, economic modernisation and social welfare," Xavier Vidal-Folch, deputy editor of 'El Pais' told Albanian journalists at a training session in September.

Ticket to free movement

"On the other side, they will have to sacrifice time and effort to convince the existing members of the added value. This should be done by the aspiring countries' political class, intellectual elite and journalists." But the move to the EU gets more difficult with time. "The larger the EU gets, the harder it is going to be to make it larger. Members will seek guarantees that expansion will be for the better of the Union," Vidal-Folch told IPS. For most Albanians, entry in the EU means a ticket to free movement. But a first step has been taken with the signing of the visa facilitation and readmission agreements in Brussels Sep. 18. Meanwhile, Albanians remain keen on something they do not believe will happen in a hurry. *(Reported in November 2007)* ■



The ferry harbour of Brëgelumë (Klaus Friedl 2007)

A Few Greeks Discover Their Neighbour

By Apostolis Fotiadis

Athens - Some years ago most Greeks knew Albania only as an unknown frontier. It was a country from which impoverished migrants crossed into Greece in search of a job and a better life; a place that people were leaving, where nobody wanted to go. A gradual if limited integration of the newcomers and the opening of a newborn market for Greek business in Albania has created an opportunity for a few in the Greek public to learn more about their neighbour.

Historical links have been rediscovered. The flow of people has started becoming reciprocal even if marginally. Stefanos Hatzimanolis is the one travel agent to have sensed this change. The last two years he has been organising holiday packages to Albania.

"People who buy packages for Albania are either experienced passengers who want to add this destination to the list of places they have been to, or they are motivated by curiosity," he told IPS. "They are well educated, and they are usually informed about their destination."

Customers mostly from Greece

His customers come mostly from northern Greece, and are interested in four or five-day excursions which include transportation, hotels, meals and a tourist guide. "It makes it easier for the visitor since these services do not work perfectly all along the country. Currently we move more than 800 people annually by airplane or bus." The trip that the agency offers covers many sights and cities in central and south Albania.

"Visitors are usually impressed with the castle at Berat, the city of Durres, and the city centre in Tirana. The cost of the trip is between 295 and 340 euro, depending on the services someone wants to buy, plus any personal expenses. It is very difficult to convince someone to travel to Albania for more than that at the moment," Hatzimanolis said. The trip focuses on the ancient heritage and the ethnic Greek element of the country. Specific

emphasis is given to the archaeological site Butrinti, 290km south of Tirana, and other southern cities with an ethnic Greek population like Gjirokaster, Himara and Sarande. Greek tourists say they are attracted largely by ethnic ties and feelings.

Nikos Petalotis, a 33-year-old dentist, said his visit to Albania was a dream come true. "It is important for me to visit this region of Hellenic culture about which I have read many books and heard innumerable stories. I am interested in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine monuments." Andrea Litis, a pensioner, says he goes for personal reasons. "My parents came from a small village outside Gjirokaster, but they never managed to return after the Second World War. Indirectly, through their stories, I became nostalgic about these places. I felt strong emotions during my trip."

Lack of infrastructure

Despite the country's natural beauty and the attractiveness of its cultural wealth, Albania's tourism development is widely challenged by lack of infrastructure. "It is obvious that they need a new road circulation network," said Natassa Siniori, a journalist who has travelled extensively around Albania. "Distances are not calculated by kilometres but by minutes or hours. Narrow streets with bad quality tarmac make an otherwise pleasant journey tiring and difficult."

But problems with infrastructure do not deter all. Hatzimanolis says cultural and other attractions more than compensate.

"Perhaps the tourist sector and basic infrastructure still need a lot of advancement. But the will of people to improve things, and their limitless interest in opening up this market creates good conditions for cooperation. And local cuisine and Albanian culture are likely to grab the attention of the tourist from Greece and the broader Mediterranean." *(Reported in September 2007)*■

Civil Society Far From Local Needs

By Zoltán Dujisin

Tirana - Achieving environmentally sustainable tourism in Albania will also be up to the efforts of communities and civil society organisations, but as in much of the post-socialist world, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and their donors will have to clean up their act first. The dependence on foreign donors and philanthropists is still causing Albanian civic organizations to respond more to donor requests than to the local needs they supposedly represent.

Organisations fostering civil society development are powerful actors in Albania, and have been central in promoting democratisation in the formerly communist country. Donors are often accused by local civic organisations of being inflexible, withholding vital information on common projects and of putting forward abstract guidelines which are not based on any study of local conditions and needs.

Lack of altruism

"Morally civic organizations should represent those who they claim to represent, but legally they are obliged towards the donors, so I think donors should be more responsible," Auran Tare, director of the Albanian National Trust told IPS. But not everything can be expected from donors. "If local Albanians themselves don't engage in protecting the coastline and the environment, whatever donors do, it's not going to happen," says Tare. "They have their own interests, and these are never purely altruistic."

The lack of altruism is also pervasive among activists themselves. "Mostly NGOs here are opportunistic, not specialised, and they will chew on whatever is thrown at them in terms of funding," Arian Gace, national coordinator for the Global Environment Facility (GEF) small grants programme told IPS. Working for an NGO often means access to higher living

standards than the rest of the population, and access to Western goods or visas in a country that up until recently had little contact with the outside world. While acknowledging that Albania is living under a "very hard capitalism" similar to that of "150 years ago in America", Tare is even more critical of the NGOs' *raison d'être*.

Democratisation as primary goal

"Everybody makes an NGO because that's a way of making money out of Westerners. And Westerners want to work with NGOs. This creates another East-West world of corruption." Tare describes NGO work as "just a way of doing a lot of paperwork, seminars, workshops, but nothing on the ground." Asked if he could pinpoint any concrete achievements by NGOs, he said, "I don't know of any yet." Representatives of NGOs, however, disagree. Xhemal Mato, executive director of the Ecomovement Centre, says there is truth to some of the accusations, but explains difficulties faced by well-intentioned activists in Albania. "We are only given money for meetings and seminars, not for starting something concrete," Mato told IPS. "It is very important to be able to find funds to raise awareness on challenges such as illegal building in the coast or building without consideration to environmental needs."

Pushing the municipality

With donors seeing the primary goal of democratisation as having been partly achieved, funds have started to dwindle, and competition from the many Albanian NGOs for the little available funding is stiffening. "Donors are not as abundant as at the beginning of democratisation, and there is very big competition," says Mato. "Now that the political aspect is over, donors feel governments should continue doing the job." Even with poor funding, Mato believes



A traditional Albanian family (Klaus Friedl 2005)

something has been achieved. "You have some concrete examples in which you can say that without NGOS some problems could not be solved," he says. One such example, he says, is environmental NGOS pushing the municipality of Tirana to raise its waste treatment standards.

Other important projects promoted by NGOs, such as an awareness campaign in ecotourism, remain only on paper as the organisations struggle to obtain government support. Unfortunately for Mato, his group and other NGOs feel the government is not on their side precisely as a result of one of their positive functions.

"Because we frequently are a second voice for journalists in contradicting the government, the government doesn't really like NGOs." Others

think environmental groups in Albania have not achieved enough from lack of experience in negotiating and reaching compromises. "Albania is not in a position to make great sacrifices to save the environment, and we have to make the most we can from what we have," Gace told IPS. "Part of the coast will have to be sacrificed and other parts protected as part of a sort of social pact."

This is what Gace feels environmental groups have not yet grasped. "The NGO community would have gotten much more if they would come to the table with options and be ready to actually bargain, because otherwise the other part will make a decision anyway," he said. "I've seen them reacting too much emotionally, they've been saying we'll protect everything, everywhere, all the time." *(Reported in August 2007)* ■



Bunkers dot several Albanian landscapes (Klaus Friedl 2005)

Forget Communism...Or Sell It

By Zoltán Dujisin

Tirana - Bunkers? Underground catacombs? Submarine bases? Albania has been shaped by one of the most bizarre communist regimes ever and the potential to exploit it for tourism is inestimable. The possibilities for what has been termed as 'communist heritage tourism' are present, but as with other post-socialist countries in the region, the attempt at creating a communist-free national identity since the 1990s is in conflict with Western tourists' increasing interest in remnants of the communist past.

"If there are people interested just in these 50 years of history, why not offer it?" says Nevila Popa, business development specialist for USAID in Albania. While it remains a niche market, some, as Gent Mati from the tourism agency Outdoors Albania, confirm "there is interest for this paranoid, psychotic regime." Several monuments suffered destruction at the hands of angry crowds when state socialism collapsed, but much remains for the curious eye.

Architecture of socialism

"We have so many elements of communism that it is unavoidable; anywhere we drive you see the signs," Mati told IPS. "It's an integral part of Albanian history and more constantly present than other monuments you would have to seek." On arriving in capital Tirana it becomes obvious that the architecture of socialism dominates the urban landscape. A visit to the National Historical Museum, itself an example of socialist realist art, will suffice to grasp just how much weight communism had in Albania's recent history.

Communism came to Albania in 1944, and relations with other socialist states were normal up until 1961, when the country's leader, Enver Hoxha, broke with the 'revisionist' Soviet Union and decided to draw closer to China. Hoxha imitated the concept of 'cultural revolution' from China, but the alliance lasted only until 1978, when Beijing normalised relations with the United States and angered Tirana. Albania decided to go its own, nationalistic and still Stalinist way, resulting in complete isolation and even harsher economic conditions.

The political isolation made the regime paranoid, the most telling example of this being the

building of around 750,000 bunkers between 1974 and 1986 to protect Albanian citizens from what Tirana perceived as a hostile international environment. The engineer who designed them was said to be so confident of their indestructibility that state officials had a bunker tested against rockets with the designer himself inside. The engineer survived, and mass production of bunkers commenced.

Bunkers are omnipresent

These are now one of the trademarks of the Albanian landscape. Some, mostly Albanians, think the bunkers spoil Albania's beautiful countryside, whereas others, mostly foreigners, see in the mushroom-like structures a chilling but fascinating sign of an obscure political history. What is undeniable is that Albania's bunkers, whose concrete could have solved much of Albania's housing problems, are omnipresent: outside cities and towns, on mountain slopes and hills and on the seaside, in varying sizes. They are mostly abandoned, and used as public toilets, waste containers or lover hideouts.

Yet some have been given a more creative function: a few concrete structures have been covered with psychedelic pink and purple motifs following an initiative of the culture ministry. In the coastal resort of Durrës, less than an hour's drive from Tirana, bunkers have been re-interpreted in a more commercial fashion, and now serve refreshments to sun and water bathers.

Yet some of the attractions of the potential communist heritage tourism are not as ubiquitous, and one will literally have to sink deep to find them. "The ministry of defence is being lobbied to open unused military bases, some of which are at very beautiful places, and which could be restored at museums," Mati told IPS.

One of these places is the bay of Palermo, on Albania's southern shore, where a former Soviet submarine base, now abandoned, is begging for visitors. The World Bank, in cooperation with the ministry of tourism, is already on the case trying to open up the infrastructure for tourism. The base is carved on a cliff in the idyllic bay, which also happens to be one of the most attractive spots for unspoiled Mediterranean swimming. *(Reported in August 007)* ■



The picturesque downtown Gjirokaastro (Klaus Friedl 2007)

UNESCO Not A Life Saver

By Zoltán Dujisin

Gjirokastrë - Good looks have not sufficed to make Gjirokastrë, a picturesque historical city in Southern Albania, the wealthy and successful tourist destination it aspires to be. Tourism is practically the only aspiration for the 30,000-inhabitant town where most of its formerly important light industries have gone bankrupt. In 2005 the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations (UNESCO) included the southern Albanian town in its World Heritage List, a status-granting achievement that helps with maintaining and cataloguing sites of cultural interest.

Gjirokastrë, the birthplace of former communist ruler Enver Hoxha, began flourishing under Ottoman rule, and its architectural evolution boasts some unique 17th and 19th century styles. National recognition of its cultural value came before, in 1961, when authorities granted it the status of a 'museum city'. The former communist ruler was very fond of his hometown, which still votes overwhelmingly socialist, and hundreds of people were employed in preservation of the town, which was taken for granted by residents.

Status of a 'museum city'

But today the local office of the Institute of Monuments is highly understaffed. The town's traditional houses formally enjoy very strong legal protection, but in practice neglect and lack of aesthetic care are often visible, and illegal construction, as elsewhere in Albania, is taking a toll on Gjirokastrë's landscape. "In the museum zone of the city there are hundreds of bits of illegal construction not following historical guidelines," David Bragg, a U.S. citizen who was assigned to Gjirokastrë by Peace Corps, a humanitarian organisation, and who is now helping get tourism information across through a series of projects in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) told IPS. "And while laws are there, there is no will or capacity to implement them."

When the town was included in UNESCO's heritage list, many locals thought the West had come to save Gjirokastrë from its neglect. But little has changed and high expectations have given place to sour feelings. "Nothing has improved here," Sofia, an aged local ethnic Greek told IPS. "Ever since the change of regime things get worse by the year." "The perception is that UNESCO would solve its problems," explains Auron Tare, director of the

Albanian National Trust, "but UNESCO does not give money, it is just a prestigious title." Tare told IPS that UNESCO status increases awareness so that "local people try to do something for their own town rather than expecting UNESCO or other organisations to help them."

Bragg says the Albanian government makes investment difficult, precisely when there is a pressing need for wealthy foreigners to save decaying buildings. While foreigners can purchase property in Albania, the most valuable buildings are not accessible to them. Moreover, foreigners who invest in Albania often consider these investments to be risky. The World Bank's latest 'Doing Business' report ranks Albania among the worst countries when it comes to protecting foreign investment, in 162nd place. But this city still offers many opportunities for those wishing to invest in tourism, while saving the town's architectural patrimony.

Infrastructure before marketing

Kate Yarhouse, also part of the Peace Corps programme to promote tourism in the city, told IPS that many of the endangered houses could be turned into bed & breakfast places, "which would still be worth the investment in spite of the high cost of renovations." Marketing would only be prioritised once the city offers minimal conditions to tourists. "We are trying to put infrastructure before marketing," Yarhouse said. The danger with focusing on marketing lies in the high expectations tourists invariably have when arriving at a UNESCO site. "If they are not properly prepared, tourists might go back and say they did not find the image that was being promoted to correspond to reality," Tare told IPS. "People are not coming to Gjirokastrë because of the lack preparedness for tourism."

Tare is also among the founders of one of Albania's most successful tourist destinations, the Butrint National Park in Southern Albania that due to its archaeological and environmental value has become, together with Gjirokastrë, the only other UNESCO site in Albania. "Butrint was successful because we invested and built bridges with the communities," he says. "The moment you don't engage them you are going to have problems. They are shareholders of what happens to their places. Doing tourism with the presence of locals is something very new in Albania, it should become a national strategy." *(Reported in July 2007)* ■



The ancient city wall and towers of Durrës (Klaus Friedl 2007)

Ambitious New Framework To Regulate Tourism

By Alba Çela

Tirana - Tourism, one of the economic priorities of the administration, will now be regulated by a new law. The law replaces the older 1993 legislation, and takes into account the market conditions under which the tourism industry is coming up. The law targets major issues related to tourism such as licensing and monitoring tourism operators to guarantee quality of service. It provides for production of continuous and reliable statistics on tourist numbers. And it holds out a comprehensive vision for tourism development.

The law passed in May is among a series of measures taken this year, such as development of the National Cultural Tourism Strategy and the Tourism Development Strategy 2012 with the aim of generating at least 15 percent of gross national income by that year. 'Albania, Europe's last secret!' is the slogan of the season accompanying the new policies. The limitation of Albania's exposure is being built now as its strength.

“Europe's last secret”

The new law liberalises substantially the granting of licence to tourist agencies in a move to increase competition. The law also guarantees that Albania will soon have healthy auditing and inspecting capacities. The law seeks to protect tourists, and the image of Albanian tourism, from unprofessional practices. "It will also prevent ugly deformations such as the advent of sexual tourism or money laundering through this trade," former tourism minister Bujar Leskaj, who was a member of the drafting committee for the new law, told IPS.

One of the more positive provisions of this new law is financial assistance through a special development fund for small, private businesses. The fund will be administered by the National Tourism Agency operating under the Ministry of Tourism. The agency will also coordinate efforts of the central and local government as well as non-governmental organisations and local businesses to promote tourism.

The provision of a strong legal framework for protecting tourists is central to the new law.

Tourists have been given rights to register claims and complaints in order to receive refunds. This procedure has been assigned to the Office for Tourist Assistance. A tourist community protected by law is now seen as the first serious step towards improving the business climate of tourism in Albania. But the increased regulation has brought some complaints too, and not everyone has welcomed all the new provisions.

"The government requires us to present a list of customers 48 hours before they reach the border checkpoint," Pandeli Sotiri, owner of a tourism agency in Saranda told IPS. "But we operate on the basis of attracting tourists just for one day. These customers usually come from Corfu and spontaneously decide to spend one day in Saranda. I don't know how to cope with this new regulation." But a solid legal framework can be good news for business if correctly implemented. It guarantees stability and standards, and sends a positive signal to customers that in turn helps business and investment.

Investment of two million euros

New investments in the field are not lacking. "An investment of two million euros has been committed to Durres for this tourist season," says Andrea Xhovara, head of the Chamber of Commerce of Durres. Durres has traditionally been the biggest tourist draw, bringing in revenues last year of 120 million euro from 150,000 tourists. The law requires government agencies to coordinate their actions efficiently in order to facilitate tourism. In a recent decision the Interior Ministry used this framework to ban heavy load trucks from roads linking tourist sites, in an attempt to ease traffic congestion and make the sites more appealing to visitors.

As the tourist season progresses, many businesses are looking to more rapid implementation of the new law. The new law was initiated to comply with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) signed in June last year to take Albania on the road to the EU. The country is now on its way. *(Reported in July 2007)* ■

No Time To Waste

By Claudia Ciobanu

Tirana - Albania cannot hope to become a major tourist destination unless it solves its waste management problem. Seeing this, authorities are wasting no more time in taking action. Driving along the coast of the Adriatic and Ionian seas from capital Tirana to southern Bëtrint presents picturesque scenery, most impressively the high mountains reflected in the transparent sea of the southern riviera. But a closer look reveals the destructive effects of human activity. Piles of trash, comprising very visibly beer bottles and plastic wrappers, are a common sight on the coast, even in remote pastures. There are not enough waste bins along the way, or at restaurants.

Rapid increase in consumption

"One of the things tourists coming here complain most about is garbage," says Kate Yarhouse, working for Peace Corps USA for the promotion of tourism in Albania. Albania's waste management facilities were overwhelmed by the rapid increase in consumption in the 1990s after the fall of state socialism and the consequent opening up of the country. Proper waste treatment systems were not set up. Garbage collection facilities since then have simply not coped with the mounting waste. The sewage produced by Albanian cities ends up, untreated, in the sea. Merita Mansaku-Meksi, an expert in waste management working for the Environmental Centre for Development Education and Networking, warns that although the water is largely safe for swimmers at the moment, the situation is not sustainable.

"Not only is sewage water dumped into the sea, but also used oil from restaurants and industrial production, and this increases the danger," Mansaku-Meksi told IPS. Arian Gace, national coordinator at the Global Environment Facility (GEF) Albania, says that most coastal towns in the country now have plans to develop sewage collection and treatment facilities. Kavaja, close to Tirana, has already built a modern system of sewage collection, with financial assistance from the German KfW Development Bank. But most municipalities are still at the planning stage.

The country faces similar problems with solid waste management. Traditionally, the au-

thorities have simply dumped trash into empty fields close to the residential areas. Two decades ago, when the rates of consumption and waste production were much lower, the inappropriateness of the method passed unnoticed. Now, the trash is too much and too pollutant.

Piles of trash, clouds of smoke

Over the past years, the authorities and specialised civil society organisations have started working their way through the problem of solid waste. Fadil Nasufi, mayor of Berat, one of the most important towns in the country, says his municipality is preparing a plan to build an ecological waste processing system. The population will be charged a yearly tax for a solid waste plant to be built and operated close to the town. The mayor offered few details about the project, or on how waste is being handled presently. But from the beautiful medieval castle towering over the town, one can see piles of trash emitting clouds of smoke. The picture is similar in most Albanian cities. Capital Tirana and the nearby urban areas comprising the large city Durres dump their waste in nearby Shara fields. The population of the neighbouring villages is now getting increasingly concerned about the health risks arising from the garbage, and the municipality now plans to build a landfill. Tirana is one of only three cities in Albania to have concrete plans for constructing a landfill. The other two are Vlora and Shkoder. The rest of the municipalities, like Berat, have good intentions, not projects on the way.

Waste from Italy

But people are becoming increasingly aware of the need to deal with the garbage ecologically. Xhemal Mato, executive director of the Ecomovement Centre sees hope in the successful campaign led by his organisation against the building of an incinerator for Tirana.

The authorities had signed an agreement with Italian company Albanianbeg Ambient for building such a plant. Under those plans, the Albanian government would support the cost of constructing the incinerator with credit from



*The thermal springs in Elbasan are mostly used by the locals, who ignore the rubbish that is cumulating
(Klaus Friedl 2007)*

the Italian government. Given that an incinerator needs to be used at full capacity to operate properly, and that the trash produced by Tirana would only require 40 percent of the capacity, it was planned that Albanianbeg would bring waste from Italy to be incinerated in Albania.

But the local population did not want Italy's trash burnt in Tirana. Mobilised by NGOs, they staged protests against the incinerator and forced their politicians to cancel the deal. "We are

not sure that this means the incinerator will never be built," Xhemal Mato told IPS. "But it is an important step for us."

Merita Mansaku-Meksi also has some small victories to boast in the battle against waste. Her NGO is running awareness campaigns about recycling in 14 schools in Tirana. She is also involved in a project to teach small local communities around the capital how to separate and recycle their trash. *(Reported in July 2007)* ■

Preserving A Beauty Called Biodiversity

By Vesna Peric Zimonjic

Velipoja - It takes a short walk from the famous Velipoja beach in Shkodra town on the Adriatic coast to put behind the stresses of modern life, and the beach attractions themselves. The walk takes you to the Buna River Delta Reservation, a marshy confluence of the 44 km waterway that flows from Shkodra Lake into the Adriatic. The silence of the cool forest is broken only by twittering birds and the whispers of rare visitors heading for bird watching towers or exploring the banks of the Buna. The bird watchers will see loggerhead turtles, pygmy cormorants, Adriatic pelicans and rare Levant sparrow hawks, among many others. Parts of this large nature reserve are home also to boar, foxes and jackals.

Forty-five years of isolation

This reservation is one of several in Albania. Forty-five years of isolation under communist rule did mean some protection to wildlife and biodiversity. Post-communist development over the last 17 years has brought new challenges, and the reserves are now a vital preservation move. "We have seen the pollution costs of development," Xhemail Mato, head of the Association for Environmental Protection told IPS. "This country was dubbed the first in Europe for its biodiversity not so long ago. However, things have changed since 1990. Now, a lot has to be done to preserve the good nature."

Studies by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) show that Albania suffers from one of the highest rates of biodiversity loss in Europe. Deforestation, soil erosion, uncontrolled land use and pollution are rapidly destroying precious resources. "Some 30 percent of Albania's forests have been destroyed since 1990," Mato said. "Destruction is faster than the process of raising awareness among people."

The battle for preserving the richness of biodiversity and natural resources is now on. Environmentalists are fighting to raise awareness among

people and the "wild developers" out to exploit natural resources without concern for consequences.

Albania has ratified most international protocols on environmental issues, but it lacks the mechanism to implement them. "Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that work to raise awareness are often viewed as enemies," Mato said. "However, we did have some important success. It was the action to prevent adoption of the law that would allow genetically modified organisms (GMOs) freely to enter the country. We are very proud of that."

Albania still has naturally grown food of excellent quality. Neat fields of wheat, maize or sunflower are spread out in the lowlands of central and northern Albania. Homegrown quality vegetables are the pride of the nation. Sheep and cows can be seen in green fields along the roads that connect capital Tirana with the central town Berat and northern town Shkodra. Hens and ducks can be seen in the backyards of modest farmers' homes, well fed by home-grown corn.

Last development chance?

"Albania wants to develop tourism, and this is its last development chance," Mato said. "In order to achieve that, it counts on its good nature. We have to develop eco-awareness here in order to accomplish that goal." Among the most interesting spots for tourism development are the five lagoons along the Adriatic and Ionian coast. They once spread over more than 70,000 hectares. But more than 15,000 hectares were drained in the 1960s to reclaim fertile soil and to eradicate malaria. One of them, the Karavasta Lagoon in the south, is considered of particular importance. It has been placed under a special management and protection programme now to save its unique biodiversity of plants, birds and animals.

Another two, Narta and Orikumi, are also under environmentalists' watch. Efforts to halt illegal sand digging, illegal construction and



The ancient castle above the city center of Shkodër (Klaus Friedl 2007)

waste dumping are under way. Tree planting has started around Orikumi, but Narta is facing problems. Oil-drilling has begun here, preventing further environment protection projects.

Despite such setbacks, considerable progress is afoot across Albania. "All the projects for environment protection need to have measurable impact on biodiversity," says Arian Gace, national coordinator for the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), an NGO that helps developing nations fund programmes to protect nature.

"Programmes for biodiversity protection should also be coupled in time with investment for the improvement of life of people." Gace is critical of the funding that came to Albania for years, driven by romantic views on nature among

both international organisations and local NGOs. "The system needs to be changed," he said. "Organisations boasted that 'money went for wolves' or 'money went to pelicans', but no one said there were no roads to reach the wolves or pelicans. One has to keep in mind the human dimension of projects in order to have success."

Albania is not making its efforts alone. It is cooperating with neighbour Montenegro. The two share the large Shkodra Lake and Buna delta. The neighbours are involved in a joint project for sustainable development through a broader engagement of people from local fishing villages, and employment of the young in the tourism industry. This also means saving the unique biodiversity of the shared delta. *(Reported in July 2007)* ■

Energy Needs Clash With Tourism

By Claudia Ciobanu

Vlora - The building of a thermal power plant in Vlora could reduce Albania's electricity deficit, but it would also damage one of the country's most beautiful tourist destinations. The local population is fighting to have the factory built elsewhere. The 3.2 million inhabitants of Albania have gotten used to daily power cuts. At the moment, the country can only meet half its electricity needs. Roughly 90 percent of these are covered by hydropower, and this generation is dependent on weather conditions.

Power consumption has increased dramatically over the past two decades. Formerly a state socialist country, Albania has established a democratic system and is moving to liberalise the economy. In order to increase domestic power production, the Albanian Power Corporation (KESH) -- in cooperation with the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB) -- plans to construct an oil-fuelled thermal power plant in Vlora, about 100km south of Tirana.

Not a tourist attraction

Situated off the Adriatic coast in south-western Albania, Vlora is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country. Beautiful beaches and lagoons, as well as ancient and medieval monuments make it an appealing travel destination. Vlora is also famous for its biodiversity and its wine, olive oil and fish. "The Vlora power plant will contribute to an increase in Albania's electricity production, diversify domestic generation and reduce excessive dependence on electricity imports," says Iftikhar Khalil, World Bank manager for the project.

The plant is expected to have a production capacity of 97 megawatts. The construction costs are estimated around 110 million euro. To cover the expenses, KESH will take a 40 million euro loan from EBRD. The World Bank and the EIB will also cover a part of the expenses - as present plans go. Under the project, the thermal plant will run on fuel brought through the oil and gas terminal La Petrolifera Italo-Rumena and the projec-

ted Albanian Macedonian Bulgarian Oil Corporation (AMBO) pipeline. The 870 km Burgas-Vlora oil duct is still in the planning stage. When completed, it would carry around 35 million tonnes of crude oil yearly, brought from Russia and the Caspian Sea.

Inhabitants of Vlora protest

While the international financial institutions and the Albanian authorities speak of the benefits of the thermal plant, the inhabitants of Vlora have been protesting for the past three years against the plant. "Despite the government's assurances that the power plant should provide a remedy to the increasingly acute energy situation in Albania, there are indications that the fulfilment of Albania's energy demand features only as secondary to the export of electricity to the European energy market, particularly the Italian market," Aleksander Mita, representative of the Alliance for the Protection of Vlora Gulf said in a report prepared for the CEE Bankwatch Network, an independent group monitoring loans in the region.

As a condition for the granting of loans by the international financial institutions, Italian electricity company ENEL is assisting KESH to manage Albania's power production and distribution system. Still, the main concern of the inhabitants of Vlora is not where the energy will go; it is the chosen location of the plant. "Albania needs a lot of energy, and we are not opposed even to oil-produced energy, but we are opposed to the site - the beach resort and protected area chosen," Aleksander Mita told IPS. The plant would be part of an industrial park to be created in the region. The industrial park is projected to cover a 560 hectare area, close to several protected lagoons. Given that the entire city area of Vlora is 1120 hectares, and that the industrial zone will be located 1.5 km from the centre within a residential area, town people are worried about the negative impact on social life and on the tourism potential.

According to the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) done at the request of the World Bank, the building of a thermal plant in Vlora will entail a series of negative consequences: polluting emissions in the air (sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and trace



The 'Albanian Riviera' stretching between Vlorë and Butrint (Klaus Friedl 2007)

metals), oil spills, noise, water intakes and temperature changes that will alter the ecosystem of the lagoon waters.

The World Bank insists that measures will be taken to limit the damage, and to adhere to European Union level environmental standards. But in spite of efforts by the international financial institutions to reassure them, the inhabitants of Vlorë remain suspicious about the plant. Local NGOs have been organising numerous public protests. They have also appealed to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee, whose provisional report in March 2007 declared the Albanian government non-compliant with several articles of the Aarhus

Convention (on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters).

The NGOs have also been complaining to the World Bank, ERDB and EIB, and have filed criminal charges against the minister for energy and transport for abusing the legislation on protected areas. A World Bank inspection panel visited Vlorë Jun. 26-27 to evaluate the risks associated with the building of the thermal plant there. The executive board of the Bank is expected to take a final decision within a month whether it will keep up with its plans to have the thermal plant built in Vlorë. *(Reported in July 2007)* ■



City center of Tirana with a view of the Academy of Arts (Photo: Frank Stueken 2007)

A Provincial Capital On The Move

By Claudia Ciobanu

Tirana - Friendly, small-scale and cheap, colourful and somewhat improvised, Tirana, like its people, seems to be happy and curious about any visitor. Whether it can preserve this charm remains to be seen. The capital of Albania, Tirana, hosts roughly 750,000 of the country's total of 3.2 million people. Its population increased threefold over the past decade. After the fall of state socialism in 1989 and, consequently, the closing down of industries that were supported by the state, and after the financial crisis in 1997, many people in the country were left jobless and poor. Those who did not go abroad saw no choice but to move to the capital. In Tirana, they found more and more work in the services sector, which has been expanding following the liberalisation of the economy.

But, in spite of its rapid growth, the capital retains an air of communal life, which can be refreshing for a Western tourist accustomed to big city alienation. Tirana might be the only European capital where people are still ready to interrupt any activity they pursue in order to show a confused traveller around. Albanians are willing to communicate with foreigners and can do so in many languages. While English may be useless in some parts of Tirana, Albanians will usually understand Italian and, often-times, Greek. Many of them work in these countries. Others have picked up Italian from television.

An air of communal life

Moving in from small towns and villages, people have brought along old habits. One of the most crowded places in Tirana is the promenade next to the artificial lake. Young girls stroll up and down the alley next to the water, showing off their best. The smell of barbeque rising from the nearby terraces brings a delicious aroma to the street. That combines with the sight of fresh fruit and vegetables, sold at stands on most sidewalks in the city. From imported fruit, perfectly equal in size, to the local outrageously shaped 'heart of the ox' tomatoes, anything can be found, and cheap.

As in any other city in the Balkans, coffee shops are the most common sight on the streets of Tirana. Modest ones, with just one or two tables, where only the locals, usually men, dare to sit down, and posh ones, frequented by the Tirana youth, expats and foreign tourists, where prices compare to those in the West. And as in any other Mediterranean city, freshly washed clothes hang from all the balconies of apartment blocks, as well as from the windows of fancy hotels in the centre. "There is no other way,

we have the Mediterranean sun and it's a crime not to make the most of it," says Alba, a young journalist living in Tirana.

Perhaps the most distinguishable feature of Tirana is its colourful buildings. Like in most Eastern European cities, the capital's residential blocks were built during socialism in the characteristic style of the times: minimalist, functional and uniform. In the early 2000s, as a symbolic gesture of breaking with the past, the mayor of Tirana decided to have all the grey buildings painted in bright colours. While some appreciate the initiative of mayor Edi Rama as bringing change and variety, others are critical of the chaotic look of the blocks, arguably bordering kitch. As Tirana quickly modernises, its inhabitants and authorities are faced with a dilemma. Whether they are aware of it or not at the moment, the people of Tirana will choose between developing "at any cost", or expanding while also preserving the sense of community, staying in touch with old customs and natural surroundings.

Invading wild nature

A comparison between the scenery on opposite shores of the artificial lake illustrates this crossroads. On one side, continuous construction takes place unauthorised and unchecked. Invading the wild nature and ignoring urban planning, people raise high buildings in expectation of a boom in real estate. On the other side of the lake, a large park remains a favourite hideout from the heat and noise of the city. The inhabitants of Tirana say the town hall has plans to bring down the unauthorised buildings. But it remains to be seen whether the municipality can resist pressure from the businesses. The present local administration has so far proven concerned with the environment and the community. The current mayor, Socialist Edi Rama, has cleaned up the area around the central square, getting rid of the countless kiosks and small bars, a heaven for drug trafficking. Instead, he created a new park for the city. Much remains to be done though, like creating ecological solid waste and sewage management systems.

Tirana is nowadays going through one of its most dynamic periods. At the moment, it represents one of the best locations to observe the transformation from socialism to liberalism and its impact on the social fabric. "Visitors appreciate the fact that Albania is just different from what they have seen before," says Kate Yarhouse, a Peace Corps activist working in the country. "Albania is not perfect, but people who come here don't seem to mind that." *(Reported in July 2007)* ■



Downtown Korçë (Klaus Friedl 2007)

But Where Are the Differences?

By Vesna Peric Zimonjic

Tirana - People across the Balkans have much in common, forget the conflicts of the recent or distant past, and the efforts of politicians to convince them how "different" or "distinctive" they are. It takes only a couple of days for a Serb to figure in Tirana how children go to "skholla", just as Serbian children go to "skola". Their parents could work in "kancellari" (office) in Tirana, or "kancelarija" in Belgrade. At home, they tuck into that fermented yellow cheese "kachkavali" in Tirana or "kackavalj" in Belgrade, while watching "reklame" (advertisements). Afterwards in either country they might have some "supa" (soup) or "pita" (pie).

And in either country you could go shopping for "bluze" (blouses) and "pantalone" (trousers). After hundreds of years both countries of today spent under the Ottoman Turkish rule, language and ways had to find commonness. But it is more than language that evokes similarities. It's just everyday ways that are so similar. In the Albanian city Shkodra, 150 km north of the capital, neatly dressed pensioners sit on park benches, regardless of the heat, playing chess. The picture can be strikingly similar in Serbian capital Belgrade or Bosnian capital Sarajevo.

Defunct factory complexes

In the evening, a downtown stroll or "xhiro" is a must in Shkoder. So is the "korzo" in, say, Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or in towns in Serbia. But there is more to similarity than a stroll or two. Nations in the region come from a similar past, and are looking to a similar future. Albanians are struggling to leave a Stalinist past behind. That past stands like the defunct factory complexes near Shkodra and in Berat, 120 km south. These factories used to produce textiles, fertilisers and other goods.

Similar complexes, the "kombinati" (combined factories) in both Albanian and other Balkans languages, stand along the roads of Bosnia or Serbia. After capitalism entered the region in the 1990s, few were interested in buying them or investing in them. Everywhere, many of these "white elephants" of the communist era are on

sale for a single Euro, in the hope that some businessman might want to modernise the facilities and resume production. In Serbia, several old sugar mills were turned into highly profitable factories this way. The same cannot be said for once successful textile kombinati in Bosnia-Herzegovina, sold 10 years ago for one German Mark each. They never reopened. Albania is having a go at such sales now. "We plan to introduce a programme called 'Albania for one Euro'," deputy minister for foreign affairs Edith Harxhi told IPS. "We hope this might attract investors."

On the road to Europe

And like the other nations in the region, Albania is looking for new wealth through tourism. That has brought some healthy competition, but also cooperation, with many countries looking at least in part for tourists continuing on their way from the other. Meanwhile, like many other people in the region, large numbers of Albanians live off remittances sent by family members who migrated abroad. Remittances make some 13 percent of country's gross national income. Remittances had kept many going in Serbia during the years of the sanctions, from 1992 until 2000. Work was not an option at the time, just as it is not in today's Montenegro.

"This makes people lazy," environmental activist Arian Gace told IPS. "But it cannot be stopped; we lack the culture of parents being strict with their children. They let them do whatever they want, as if they want to recover the time lost in the past when we had nothing." "We have so much in common, all people around," Ajet Nallbani, manager of the Berat Institut of Cultural Monuments told IPS. Albanians, Bosniaks, Kosovars and Montenegrins are all "on the same road," he said. "That is the road to Europe, the only one for us." And that, finally, should dissolve some of today's political differences. "Once we are close to Europe, we'll have to put behind all those nasty things we carry around, like wars and ethnic tension. That is the only real chance for us, and people here are ready for that," Nallbani said. *(Reported in July 2007)* ■

Saving Beaches For Others - And Itself

By Claudia Ciobanu

Tirana - Albania has launched a new programme to save its beaches for tourists - and from tourists. Given its need for income from tourism, Albania cannot turn away from development of infrastructure for visitors. Which means that "Albania is not in a position to make great sacrifices for the environment," Arian Gace, national coordinator for the Global Environment Facility (GEF) small grants programme told IPS. But there is still much to preserve.

Home to 3.2 million people, Albania is among the poorest countries in Europe. Most of its national industry collapsed with the fall of state socialism in the early 1990s. Much hope for revival now rests on tourism. Foreign visitors are still to discover the pristine beaches in the south or the inhabited fortresses in Berat and Gjirokastra. "This country has astonishing nature, which is entirely unknown to people who come here," says Gent Mati from the tourism agency Outdoors Albania. Mati mentions primarily the "great sea coast, sandy, rocky and very different."

Strategy and action plan

The coast stretches 470 km along the Adriatic to the west and the Ionian Sea further south. The popularity of the Dalmatian region in Croatia and of the Italian and Greek Mediterranean coasts suggests that the economy of Albania could benefit enormously from exploitation of its seashore. But mass tourism has a flip side; it damages the environment and disrupts the rhythm of local communities. And that has led Albanian authorities to promote eco-tourism, and not just mass tourism.

The government launched a 'strategy and action plan for the development of the Albanian tourism sector based on cultural and environmental tourism' last year. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is supporting this programme with more than 3.5 million dol-

lars. Preserving natural habitat will not be an easy task. "Albania cannot afford the luxury to keep the entire coast undeveloped and in a natural state," Gace said. Mass tourism will be unavoidable in some areas, he said. But some income from mass tourism could pay for preservation of other regions for eco-tourism, he said.

Regions for eco-tourism

A good deal of the northern coast has been damaged already, and Gace is looking to programmes to preserve the south. Efforts are being made already to preserve the coast, he said. Wastewater processing facilities are being set up in most cities on the southern coast. But eventually the coast can be protected only if more areas are granted protection status, Gace said. According to a study published by the Council of Europe, protected areas in Albania cover a surface of 166.611 hectares, 5.8 percent of the country's area. Some parts of the coast are far too damaged to be presented as attractions. "Swimming in the sea at Durrës is like entering a lake next to an oil distillery," said Giorgos Adoniu, a Greek tourist travelling along the Albanian coast. "The water was greenish, and the bottom of the sea covered in slime."

Protection of remote shores

Situated less than an hour's drive from capital Tirana, Durrës is the second largest city in Albania. It also has the second largest concentration of industry. The beaches around Durrës are the most popular holiday destination for Tirana residents. People have learnt to ignore the poor quality of the water. "Pollution from sewage that comes straight into the sea from nearby houses and hotels is alarming for the future of tourism here," says Xhemal Mato, executive director of the Ecomovement Centre.



Still unspoiled: the beautiful shingle beach in Dhermi (Klaus Friedl 2007)

But conditions improve radically as one travels south. Vlora and Saranda are surrounded by beautiful, unspoiled beaches. But construction is now booming here too. Many of the new hotels and restaurants are unauthorised, as in many parts of Albania. This is where Gace suggests authorities could intervene to tax builders, and use that revenue for protection of remote shores. The drive on a narrow mountain road along the southern coast offers breathtaking views. The only signs of human presence are the traditional villa-

ges and, in a rather different way, some of the half million bunkers Communist leader Enver Hoxha built during the Cold War years.

If kept unspoiled, the small beaches of the south will remain ideal destinations for eco-tourism. In Ksamil, a small beach close to Saranda, one can rent a water bicycle for less than three euro to little islets, all uninhabited. Few foreign tourists come here. "It's not necessary to over-develop in order to attract tourists to such wonderful places," says Adoniu. *(Reported in July 2007)* ■

Time To Know The Unknown

Interview with Speaker of the Albanian Parliament Jozefina Topalli

Tirana - Albania is too often and too superficially described as "a European country little is known about." The issues the nation of 3.1 million is facing on its thorny road of development and towards democracy are also often met with little knowledge and loads of prejudice abroad. High on the political agenda of the nation now are economic development and access to the European Union, in order to finally provide better prospects to an eager population after decades of troubled history. Modern, educated and European-oriented young leaders of Albania speak freely on such ambitions, tasks and challenges, stressing that a lot of hard work has yet to be done. Among the most prominent is surely the Speaker of Albanian Parliament Jozefina Topalli, the first woman in this position. Topalli has headed the 140-seat parliament for two years now.

IPS: Albania has signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union (EU) as the first step towards EU membership. What does this mean?

Jozefina Topalli: Signing of the SAA Agreement between Albania and the EU a year ago was perceived by all Albanians as the most important event in the history of Albanian democracy, after long and continuous efforts to consolidate the rule of law and democracy. This opened a new chapter to Albania, that of integration into European structures. It is obvious that this agreement has as its final goal Albania's integration into EU. We are doing our utmost to perform major reforms in every aspect of life. Each article of this Agreement is an obligation to be met by us, turning them into benchmarks that take us to European standards.

IPS: What does Albania expect from this agreement?

Jozefina Topalli: We certainly expect a lot from this agreement, but this does not imply that everything would come out of the blue. We are not in the emergency stage. We are ready to work closely as partners and we are conscious of the fact that member states expect a lot from us.

IPS: What do the Albanians expect?

Jozefina Topalli: I believe that what Albanians expect now is a solid rule of law. We want to reward the trust placed in us by giving positive tangible results, as well as by offering an altered image to foreigners, an image which is often quite different from the perception that Albanians have of themselves and their country.

IPS: What has been done in that direction?

Jozefina Topalli: We are doing our utmost to offer a positive climate to foreign investors by facilitating

licensing procedures and by lowering fiscal taxes. Foreign investments are growing. We have had very important foreign investors who have already started work in Albania, but we are expecting more of them to come and invest in our wonderful seaside.

IPS: Which are the most supportive EU countries in the integration process?

Jozefina Topalli: The process of Albania's integration to the EU is undergoing a very important step -- that of ratification of SAA by European member states, that is, national parliaments. The pace of ratification is unique. In ten months, 10 European parliaments like those of Slovakia, Slovenia, the Chamber of Deputies and Senate of Belgium, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Hungary, Sweden, Spain and Ireland voted in favour of Albania's integration to EU by ratifying the SAA. Other national parliaments are going through the same procedures and will ratify it soon.

IPS: Are neighbours such as Italy or Greece particularly supporting the negotiation process?

Jozefina Topalli: I would like to stress here that substantial support was provided to us not only from our neighbours, but from other countries, which although geographically distant, were quite close to us in this process. SAA ratification constitutes a great support to us. This encourages us to move ahead on this road. I would like to mention here the assistance of Austria, Italy, Germany, France and many more.

IPS: How long could the negotiations process for EU membership last?

Jozefina Topalli: We sure hope that this process ends quickly. We know that situation within EU is not favourable at this moment, as with the inner debates related to approval of the Constitution. However, this is not discouraging to us. On the contrary, this gives us confidence to work harder in order to deserve integration into EU; to deserve the attention and confidence of EU member states and convince them that Albania is serious in its commitment to become a member. Declarations of many leaders of EU member states that Europe is not complete without the Balkan countries are realistic and very encouraging for our final goal.

IPS: What are the difficulties predicted on the road?

Jozefina Topalli: We already know that the enlargement process faces hardship. Integration is and must be a process based on merit, and we will do our best to implement and achieve European standards. Our historical identity and European origin provide us with the strength to walk the right course and fill the place we deserve within the European family.



Jozefina Topalli (Photo: www.senat.be 2007)

IPS: What are the challenges?

Jozefina Topalli: We have major challenges facing us, like reforms in the judiciary and election reform, zero tolerance fight against organised crime and terrorism, follow-up reforms in the economy etc. These are the priorities we are determined to achieve.

IPS: Along with an unreal image of the role of women in family and society, painted in favourable yet untrue colours in the old times, Albania has inherited problems related to patriarchal and clan organised society. How does the challenge of greater role of women fit into the activities of a parliamentary speaker or the career of politically active women in general?

Jozefina Topalli: I never consider the daily challenge as one narrowly related to woman emancipation and her better representation in a contest with men. A competition is an endeavour for personal representation and it should be treated like that.

IPS: You were not frightened by the fate of your family members who suffered so much under the old dictatorial, communist regime. As a representative of the Democratic Party of Sali Berisha, the former president and current Prime Minister, was it an easy encounter while facing men rivals in the majority electoral system of Albania?

Jozefina Topalli: Functioning through the majority election system is the true reason that the number of women in Albanian politics is lower than in other countries. It is not that this number is considerably bigger in France or Italy, countries with a long history of development and emancipation and historical feminist movements. The replacement of Albania's majority electoral system with a quota system might not be the best solution and the most preferred one, but there is no other solution for the start of women who want to embark on a political career.

IPS: What can or does make a woman a successful in politics in Albania?

Jozefina Topalli: Family tradition, education, political instinct, strong will and charisma are chief helping pillars for a woman to move up the career stages and become a part of political leadership. I would like to say that, at the beginning of my career, I learned to choose my battles as far as their importance is concerned, I learned to focus on the key issues, to face them head on, but more importantly, I learned to see positive elements even in negative issues. I can say with deep conviction that family discipline is one element I will not forget, which helped me quite a lot along the way. (Reported in June 2007) ■

Tourism Brings Environmental Challenge

By Vesna Peric Zimonjic

Tirana - It was not so long ago that Albania, a tiny nation of 3.1 million in the western Balkans remained off route for hundreds of thousands of tourists who rushed to the Adriatic coast for their summer vacations. But things have changed in this part of the world, and thousands of visitors now undertake what seems to be a very logical journey: they continue south from the beautiful Croatian and Montenegrin coasts to explore Albania. Albania, they discover, is a land of unexpected beauty, breathtaking mountains and a stunning 362 km coast. It is a country also with a discreet aroma of a recent and secretive past. Albania emerged from decades of self-isolation only 17 years ago.

"It is the taste of the unknown they usually have in mind when planning the visit," tourist guide Argon Ghuri told IPS, pointing at a group of 10 Japanese tourists he took to the main Skenderbej Square of Tirana. "The Japanese usually go to the Croatian and Montenegrin coast first and end up their 10-day visit to the region with Albania," he added.

900,000 visitors came last year

This is how some 10 percent of 900,000 visitors came into the country last year, according to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). But revenue from tourism still makes for only 3.8 percent of the country's gross domestic product. There is no separate ministry for what some see as Albania's fastest developing industry. Tourism, culture, youth and sports are under the umbrella of a single ministry. The UNDP is currently helping Albania with its Eco and Cultural Tourism Support Programme to promote the potential of Albania abroad.

"Some 55 percent of exactly 914,046 visitors last year were ethnic Albanians from the neighbourhood - Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro - who visited their families and friends or went to the coast," UNDP programme manager Lauren Bohatka told IPS. About two million ethnic Albanians live in Kosovo, and hundreds of thousands in neighbouring Macedonia and

Montenegro. There is a large Albanian population outside the region as well. Official estimates put the number in the United States, Switzerland, Germany, Greece and Italy at another two million.

In recent years Albanians migrated out in all directions, chasing every opportunity. Some fled illegally across the snowy mountain passes to Kosovo or Macedonia. Others took boats across the Adriatic to Italy. No one keeps statistics how many died trying to flee. People fled what is now simply described as a "troubled past". That includes the era of former autocratic communist ruler Enver Hoxha, who died in 1985. Decades of his rule since World War II saw the country swing from friendship with former Yugoslavia in the 1940s to closer relations with the former Soviet Union until the late 1960s. Then followed a sharp turn towards China, earlier dismissed as an adequate communist friend.

Tourism as a chance and challenge

The 1990s and the introduction of the multi-party system saw not only major political changes, but the collapse of the state-controlled economy. One consequence was the violent end of privately introduced pyramid saving schemes in 1997. In 1999, more than 500,000 ethnic Albanians were pushed into the country from Kosovo, following a brutal campaign by Serbian security forces. Recovery from all this has been slow. But tourism is seen now as the most important tool for it. "We had so many beginnings in the past decades," Gent Mati who owns the Outdoors Albania travel business told IPS. "Tourism is our next best chance and challenge."

But Xhemal Mato, who heads the Association for Environmental Protection, is concerned about the environment, which began to suffer after 1991. The country lacked proper regulation in the 1990s, but was not short of entrepreneurs seeking quick profit. They abused the legal vacuum, and created chaos through unregulated construction. "Tourism is the only chance for Albania, in the economic and



Albanian Children (Klaus Friedl 2007)

development sense, as we barely produce anything," Mato said. "However, development is quicker than regulation; destruction of the environment is faster than the rise of awareness among the people." Mato rides a bicycle around Tirana, a city of 750,000 with more than 200,000 cars.

Albania has seen an explosion of construction, particularly in the coastal area closest to Tirana, where a new highway was built to Durrës, some 40 km to the west. This is one of the rare new roads in a country which needs dozens more along major inte-

rest points in order to attract more tourists. Vividly painted high rises, mostly built without permission in the past decade, have crowded Durrës. No one thought about the environment; laws came later.

Sewage was channelled into the sea, close to beaches. No one was familiar with waste management, landfills or dumpsites. Garbage is still sometimes simply burned. "What was done was done, but we have to improve it," Mato said. "Durrës is, unfortunately, a good lesson for a bad example in Albania." (Reported in June 2007) ■

Environment And Tourism Can Hold Hands

By Zoltán Dujisin

Berat - A pleasant hilly town of narrow, winding streets, Berat has survived the chaotic urban development of central Albania and hopes to grasp a unique opportunity in tourism. But it is also threatened by the unavoidable environmental and urban perils of a transition economy. Few European towns can offer picturesque ambience and rich cultural heritage without the sight of hordes of tourists, but Berat, one of the oldest cities in Albania, is a special place where the visitor too, feels special. While roaming the white streets of this 65,000 inhabitant town, the curiosity of the traveller towards the locals will be reciprocated, as most tourists have not yet heard of this secret jewel of the Balkans.

Only one sixth of visitors to Berat are foreigners, and those holding a foreign passport are usually ethnic Albanians from neighbouring countries. Human settlements have existed in Berat for 4,000 years and the city nowadays correctly symbolizes some of Albania's most characteristic features: a land for which many empires have spilled blood but also where religious cohabitation has endured more than anywhere else in the region. Illyrian tribes, Macedonian, Roman, Slav, Byzantine and Ottoman rule have all left their mark, but nothing amazes visitors more than the ancient mosques and orthodox churches that attest to a religious tolerance still prevailing in this mostly Muslim country.

New dimensions post-socialism

Designated a 'museum city' under communist rule in 1976, its old white houses and monuments have been spared from socialist urban planning, and the regime's atheism campaign did not claim Berat's beautiful religious buildings as it did elsewhere in the country. Now Fadil Nasufi, mayor of Berat, wants additional protection and awareness of the city's value in face of the threats posed by the wild urban development and environmental neglect that took new dimensions post-socialism. "We are in the very early stages of tourism development, but it will allow us to face the challenges and avoid mistakes," the mayor told IPS.

In cooperation with local and national institutions, Berat's town hall is pushing forward its candidacy to

the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) World Heritage List with the help of foreign experts. Most of Albania still lacks the basic tourism facilities and comfort that visitors expect, and Berat, while being well ahead of most Albanian towns, will have to step up efforts if it wants its infrastructure to meet the requirements of those travellers who seek UNESCO sights. The process has already been rewarding, as international cooperation has "helped the city's experts learn from preservation techniques elsewhere," Nasufi told IPS. But funds are still lacking.

UNESCO does not automatically provide the money, but municipal officials seem confident it will indirectly bring much needed financing, and not only by attracting wealthy visitors. "The municipality expects this will increase awareness of the city's value within regional and national authorities and even foreign donors," Nasufi says. "It will work as a green light for us; it will put us in the world map." But the mayor is aware nothing will happen if citizens sit on their backs and wait for a miracle. Calling for increased citizen awareness, Nasufi warns "we will have to work by ourselves too."

Working on waste management

International cooperation has brought the town much more than just dreams of tourism: some of the environmental challenges go well beyond it, though they cannot be completely disconnected from it. The municipality is involved in various projects with international organisations and the European Union to solve the town's waste management problems, its biggest environmental threat which, if tackled, could increase the town's tourist potential. Most of Albania still relies on incineration as the main waste treatment technology, and Berat is working on a land field for waste management to be located in the town's outskirts which will hopefully ensure thorough elimination.

Air pollution is not the sole danger. Another victim is one of Berat's natural assets: the river Osum, which runs through the city. For decades, two factories and the sewage system have dumped their waste into the river. The collapse of state



The Berat Castle (Klaus Friedl 2007)

socialism caused the closure of the factories, something which locals did not necessarily welcome, but the city now only has to deal with the sewage system which still partly uses the river.

If properly treated, "the river could be a great asset for the landscape and for tourism," Vladimir Cela, responsible for International Relations and Tourism at Berat's municipality told IPS. "We could create a lake through it in which people can swim and rent boats." The towns dream, Cela says, is to build a

waste treatment plant away from the city following an example learnt in Italy. "The waste could be placed in a chamber and the gas from the decomposition of biological waste would be collected to produce electric energy, which is badly needed in Albania."

But in Albania something always seems to stand on the way of dreams: "We need financing for this," says Cela. A population in need of tourism, electricity and a clean environment would certainly appreciate it. *(Reported in June 2007)* ■

Landing Might Be An Idea

By Sanjay Suri

Tirana - 'What, you haven't been to Albania?' Let's face it, not a question many of us are ever likely to have been asked. It gets asked about Italy, about Greece, those two tourism magnets to the west and east of Albania. But Albania is a country you'd usually just fly over on the way from somewhere to somewhere else in this part of the world. The red line on the flight map at the back of your front seat will cut through Albania, not wind up in capital Tirana.

In this Albania is hardly alone. It's another of those countries that's on the world map but not on the tourism map - you 'do' Greece, 'do' Italy, but you don't 'do' Albania. Unless of course you're the sort of traveller who does what is not supposed to be done, and goes where others don't. Or, one who likes to go where you don't quite know what to expect. Albania is Europe and not European. It's not quite East, and not absolutely West. Not developed, but much of it is a little more than developing. It's 70 percent Muslim, but not Islamic the way Saudi Arabia and Pakistan can be. It has infrastructure in ways, not in others.

Personal contact to locals

All this can sound good to the offbeat traveller, because infrastructure can be sometimes only a comfortable barrier between the visitor and the place visited. In Albania the visitor is up close with people as they live normally, not just with tourism staff trained to be courteous in the standard way. You're a lot more likely to get people than just service. "Personal contact between local people and tourists here is a very special experience," Armand Ferra, general manager of the travel company Albania Holidays told IPS. "That sort of thing can make or break a holiday. If that interaction is negative, then everything else becomes secondary. And if that interaction is good, you can overlook some of the smaller difficulties."

He must be right, people are some of the happiest experience of Albania. "Albanians are some of the most hospitable people, this is the reaction we get

from the clients we bring," said Ferra. Sadly, most tourists do not travel out just to meet friendly strangers. A pity, because Albania is quite blessed with the genius of ignorance just where everyone needs it most. It hasn't noticed the clash of civilisations. It has a population of Muslims and Christians, but it's never been a Lebanon. What others clash over, Albania doesn't notice. At moments you might almost be tempted to visit the country for Albanians, if not for Albania. Quirky tourists can find this packaging of people warmth in an unknown place appealing - and year by year there are more and more, and not all quirky either. Because it's well within the normal to find the very limitations of infrastructure attractive. To look out to a different scene from within standardised infrastructure can be like looking out of the window, rather than visiting; only a step or so ahead of looking at a picture.

Underdeveloped infrastructure

But it is difficult to romanticise poor infrastructure beyond a point. It isn't cute to get an upset stomach from drinking water that's not clean. And all Albania's rivers and lakes still do not always provide drinking water anyone can trust. Nor does the appeal of the remote work if you can't actually get anywhere. The country is only just beginning to put up signs to destinations that might interest tourists. And only better infrastructure can bring numbers, and Albania needs more than the odd adventurer, even if those numbers are growing steadily enough. It needs more than the domestic tourist who travels to friends and family, or even the regional tourist, who doesn't always spend a lot. It needs to exchange sights and a sense of itself for dollars and euros.

Every blend is not inviting. Like that of underdeveloped infrastructure and poor regulation that has led to chaotic building not backed by services to match. Development in just the way Albania could have done without having messed up the coast at



Mountain pass Qafa Murrë (Klaus Friedl 2007)

Durres, about an hour's drive from capital Tirana. Not a pretty sight, because out of the window the visitor can see also the development itself. But this is only a part of Durres. The country does have attractive sights to offer, by way of culture, history and nature itself. "Think just of the accessibility of the monuments," says Gent Mati from Outdoor Albania, a company that promotes "adventure and culture". "Tourists are astonished that it's so easy to visit mosques, or go to the churches. It's something people find very interesting, the harmonic leap from west to east, a blend of this and that."

The country, he says, "has incredible history, we have all ancient cultures mixing with one another - from ancient Greek and Roman sites to the Ottoman

invasion and later, everything is here." That's by way of culture. "But we have also astonishing nature, we have beautiful rivers, incredible lakes and a range of mountains which is all quite something to find in a small territory." Not all easy to access. And not all developed and framed in infrastructure. That, then, is the start of adventure - for some, and up to a point. Add adventure-culture to the undefined blends that Albania offers. Throw in a touch of Greece and Italy as well. Albanians wouldn't like that to be the reason for anyone to drop in; it dreams of becoming something more than a half-way place en route that would only remind the visitor of its neighbours. It wants the tourist to come to Albania - whatever, and everything, that might mean. *(Reported in June 2007)* ■

Albania On The Road From The World

Interview with Dr. Ylli Pango, Albanian minister for tourism

By Sanjay Suri

Tirana - When psychiatrist turned political leader Ylli Pango took over as minister for tourism, besides holding other portfolios, Albania was always going to open welcoming gates to visitors from the world. And it has, with an almost fourfold jump in tourism over the last four years. While he does so much for tourists, he is really doing so much more for Albania itself. He has made it his mission, more than just ministerial assignment, to clean up the country for visitors and for itself. And in the process clean up also the image of Albania. So that now Albania is coming rapidly to be seen not as a country Albanians leave, but one that others will want to come to. IPS regional editor for Europe and Mediterranean Sanjay Suri sat down with Dr Pango to find out more about his plans.

IPS: Enough tourists coming to Albania, or not enough?

Ylli Pango: We are getting more and more. In 2003 we had just 250,000 tourists, this year we will have about a million, maybe more.

IPS: And where are they coming from?

Ylli Pango: About 50 percent are coming from neighbouring countries. From Kosovo, from Macedonia but also from other countries -- from Poland, France, Germany, Italy, this year tourists are coming from Greece. And we have American agencies combining tourism to Croatia with visits to Albania. There is now a plan for cooperation between Macedonia, Croatia and Albania to exchange tourists.

IPS: Your neighbours Greece and Italy have traditionally got large numbers of tourists. Are you considering selling yourself more aggressively to get some of those tourists coming your way?

Ylli Pango: I take it as an advantage that we are neighbours of Italy and Greece, these are two ancient civilisations, and a lot of culture you see in Albania originally belongs to those two civilisations. Of course we cannot compare with Greece and Italy in terms of monuments of culture, but compared to Macedonia and Montenegro and Croatia we are at an advantage. Most people around the world know very little about the civilisation of Albania. When they come here they are surprised, not only because of the tourism of nature, of the sun and sand, but by our cultural monuments.

IPS: What are you doing to prepare for this increased number of tourists?

Ylli Pango: We are putting up more units of accommodation, to have more developed infrastructure,

and secondly to do better in terms of promotion. Just for doing this in terms of promotion this year, we have made big progress because tourist signs are now being put up in all the southern parts of Albania, signs which show where monuments of culture and tourist spots are. Now we have started a website. In my visits this year to Lisbon, to tourism summits, people say you have a lot to show, but where are you, you have to show yourself up, so that is why we are now working faster.

IPS: In what way is the low number of visitors compared to Western Europe itself an opportunity.

Ylli Pango: The motto has been discover Albania. The country was isolated for 45 years, not well known by Western and other tourists. But there are two signs of the coin, one that it is undiscovered, the other that it is isolated, and we need therefore better infrastructure and capacities. On one side it is a benefit, on the other, it needs to advance.

IPS: What are you doing by way of marketing and publicity to sell Albania.

Ylli Pango: We have an agency to promote tourism, to prepare publicity spots, prepare pamphlets, to take part in tourism fairs around the world. Secondly, we will take up some big projects, one just launched by the Spanish government and the UNDP, focused on promotion of culture in Albania in the service of tourism, and improvement of the image of culture and tourist Albania. This is a one million euro project, and there are lots of others. One is supported by the European Union, for restoration of the cultural heritage of Albania. Many of our cities are old and historical, many have a castle, and a mediaeval downtown, and to revitalise all these centres is one of our main projects.

IPS: Is there sufficient access to all parts of Albania?

Ylli Pango: Most of the main access to the most interesting tourist spots is going to be finished next year. Access up to the north up to the border with Montenegro is done, the southern access is done. Other projects will be finished by 2008.

IPS: Is some of the infrastructure coming up illegal?

Ylli Pango: That is mainly in the centre of Albania, in the zone of Durres, the only tourist area which was destroyed, but there is still a long coastline that is intact, untouched, and it will be prepared by a World Bank project for starting licensing for tourist villages, resorts and so on. The big project will be finished within a few months, and right after this we will not only



Dr. Ylli Pango (Photo: IPS | UNDP Albania)

restore monuments in the south, and improve electricity and water supply, but even destroy in some places anything built up without permission. But in the southern parts there are only a few such villages. Some villages came up without permission, and these will be destroyed, in just the last few days we have destroyed some of them.

IPS: Is there a contradiction emerging between development and preservation of the environment?

Ylli Pango: In the southern part, I'd say that the most part of the coastline is mainly clear and pure in terms of nature. So the development damaged just this part close to Durres and to Tirana where people were supposed to build villages according to permission given by the government since 1993, but instead of villages they put up buildings of six, seven, eight floors, which is not proper for the coast.

IPS: Do you have plans for ecological preservation?

Ylli Pango: We have about 600 so-called monuments of nature. These are under the protection of the ministry of environment, and the tourism ministry works with it in terms of rural tourism, and preservation of those parks, to put them all in the service of tourism.

IPS: Adventure tourism is quite well developed, isn't it.

Ylli Pango: Tourism of adventure and tourism of special interest is very, very developed in Albania, but only a few people know about it, because it has been started by adventurous individuals. There is no media to show what is developed, but it is very well developed. In places like canyons, mountain zones, rivers for canoeing.

IPS: There is an image around that Albania is not a very safe place, that there is a great deal of organised crime.

Ylli Pango: This was so at one time, about ten years ago. For about eight or nine years it is safe, security measures have been taken. This year too we have taken very serious measures. So in terms of safety there are no problems in Albania. In the past this happened during the transition from dictatorship to democracy, there are always problems at such times, but now the country is advancing fast, without any problems of safety and security. That is why we are working on this project of the image of Albania, not only in terms of the beauties of nature but in terms of safety and security. The image has much changed in relation to the past, and we have to show it to the world, because what remained in the mind of some people coming years ago was this bad image. But now most tourists who come here say what a surprise, we used to think it was a dangerous country, but it is so different.

IPS: Is Albania also cheaper to visit than some other countries around?

Ylli Pango: There are hotels which are cheap, restaurants which are cheap, but there are others which are very expensive. There are some hotels not of very good quality but in very interesting zones, and uncontrolled in terms of quality and prices, and they charge quite high prices. Under the new law on tourism, passed a month ago, now they are being placed under control for this tourist season. We have a department now for the service of tourism. It is mainly focused on controlling prices, quality, licensing, so now the situation will change. *(Reported in June 2007)* ■

Long And Winding Road Straightening Out

By Altin Raxhimi

Tirana - For a corner of the world where until 17 years ago a foreign visitor was either the exotic Marxist-Leninist relishing the successes of a communist system or the adventurer looking for a good story to tell back home, Albania has made quite a jump. About a fifth of the people that visited this country of three million as tourists last year were foreigners. Most came from within the region, but the country is now attracting a high numbers of visitors from more distant European countries. "Albania still remains the last unknown place in Europe," Ylli Pango, a psychiatrist who became minister for tourism last month told IPS. "And that is currently an asset."

The country drew 900,000 tourists last year. A tenth were from the adjacent Albanian-inhabited Kosovo and Macedonia, and about as many either came on the transit bus along the Dalmatian coast down to Greece, or came adventure hiking in the mountains in the north of the country. The rest were locals mostly on beach holidays. The number of visitors is expected to grow to more than a million this year. The first busloads and charters have arrived for the spring season. "This is a change from that trickle of foreign groups (during communist days) that were monitored and spied upon at every step, to a stage when anyone can visit the country," said Pango.

Ills of self-imposed isolation

Albania is forcing itself into speedy modernisation the way most post-communist countries did. It has liberalised the economy, and changed politics into a functioning multi-party system. The road had been bumpy, like most of its history. Under the dictatorship of Stalinist leader Enver Hoxha from the Second World War to 1990, Albania invited many ills of self-imposed isolation. An autarky that sought self-reliance and no flow of capital worsened the already bad roads. These were usually narrow lanes wound around

hills for fear of offering enemy planes a landing strip. These are being straightened now to shorten distances and improve driving conditions. Old Albania lived with a widespread housing problem. A fifth of the population migrated to the west since the country opened up, another fifth moved internally to cities.

During the mid-1990s, investment by hundreds of thousands of Albanians into dubious savings schemes plunged the country into anarchy. In 1999 Albania was hit further by the war over Kosovo, the southern province of Serbia dominated by ethnic Albanians. Hundreds of thousands of refugees from Kosovo took shelter in Albania. But the economy has been growing on average five percent a year since the end of the Kosovo war. Widespread construction is evident in major cities like capital Tirana and the coastal cities Durres and Vlore. It is a country in the making - where people often make their own rules as well. Just about 30 of the country's 600 hotels are registered and given accepted classification.

Albania has much to offer

New buildings have mushroomed along a swathe of sandy beaches on the Adriatic coast, with little indication of planned development. Many have built summerhouses here. The coast by the largest port Durres and the nearby village Golem has seen reckless development over the past ten years. This is a scene of continuing construction and piling garbage. "We hope to save the rest of the country from this model, this Golemisation," Jamarber Maltezi, who coordinates a chiefly World Bank-funded plan to develop the southern coast told IPS. "You don't see communities benefit from building resorts that have a life for only three months in the summer, or from weekend houses, or just summer apartments." In the winter Durres and Golem become ghostly.

Other resorts lack infrastructure. Some major



UNESCO World Heritage Site in Butrint ((Klaus Friedl 2007)

roads are still not finished. Yet, Albania has much to offer. The many powers that rose and fell along the Mediterranean have left their traces. History lives in Greek towns all over the country, Roman remains and Venetian forts in Durres, and Ottoman bazaars in the central town Kruje. Its northern Alps, an extension of the dramatic western Balkans mountain ranges, are some of the less accessible parts of Europe, and this attracts trekkers. The Ionian coast is among the most scenic along the Mediterranean. Old white stone villages dot the drive

along rocky cliffs plunging down to the sea. A 30-million-dollar World Bank project will undertake to develop roads and sewage systems this year. It would clear the garbage from Durres, and help manage the best recognised tourist attraction of the country - the ruins of Butrint in the south where the Trojan hero Aeneas and his soldiers halted on way to Rome.

"There is no specific recipe how to develop tourism here," said Mallezi. "We just want not to repeat the ills of the recent past." *(Reported in April 2007)* ■

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