

Greek Minority in Albania: Exclusion or Inclusion?

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Abstract The collapse of the communist bloc meant, the direction of former communist countries toward systems with democratic structure. The processes of radical transformations in the economy and politics, made the societies of these countries face with major challenges and problems. With the restoration of freedom and human rights, almost all Eastern bloc societies were confronting problems carrying in itself the issue of minorities, considered as destabilizing factors in the case of poor management. Given this, the paper aims to review some of the key trends and policies toward national minorities in Albania, as part of the Balkans, focusing particularly on the Greek minority that constitute the minority with the largest population. The focus of attention to the Albanian legislation will give us a clearer picture of the rights and freedoms that are guaranteed to minorities in Albania, and the spaces that were created for inclusion in the government level and to influence the various decision-making processes. Research of this issue covers the period 1990-2006.

Keywords: greek minority, albanian constitution, human rights, participation.

Introduction

With the collapse of totalitarian regimes, the former communist countries began to devote due importance policies related to the minorities. In this way, multiethnic Balkan states, had to create a society with political rights, where human rights were respected. In addition to providing individual rights, democratization also requires collective recognition of the rights to all kinds of minorities. In this context it should be stressed that the realization of a successful transition to post-communist era, should be supported in creating opportunities for competition on equal terms for minorities in the new economic processes, the creation of legislation on individual rights and collective rights of minorities and protection of their rights against discrimination. Despite these common goals, it is clear that the policies, that the former communist counties, have followed for minorities, are determined by several factors among which, the size of the minority.

Let us see more specifically pursued policies towards minorities and especially the Greek minority in Albania.

Legal framework and the situation of the Greek minority

Compared with other Balkan countries, Albania is an ethnically homogeneous country with a population of 98 percent ethnic Albanians. Historical tradition in Albania has followed the way of recognizing as national minorities those minorities which have their own motherlands with which they have common characteristics such, the spiritual constitution, the language, culture customs and traditions, religious belief etc. Such minorities are considered the Greek, Macedonian and Montenegrin national minorities¹. Unlike the other Balkan countries, Albania has relatively small number of minorities, among whom the Greeks mostly concentrated in the southern part of the country, constitute the largest number.

As the only country with a muslim majority in a mainly christian Europe, Albania since the early years after the collapse of communism has been a model of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between its religious communities, Muslim, Orthodox Christians and Catholics.

¹ Report on National Minorities in Albania. Council of Europe. 2001.

The Albanian government has repeatedly demonstrated its tendency to respect the rights and freedoms meaning the role and position of minorities in the political, social, cultural and economic aspect of the country.

If we refer to the Albanian Constitution, in its Article 3 states among other things, that "coexistence and understanding of Albanians with minorities are the basis of this state, which has duty to respect and protect. "

Article 18 states that (1), "all are equal before the law", and also that (2), "Nobody can be discriminated against for reasons such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, language, political and religious beliefs. "

Article 20, moreover, claims that (1), "Persons belonging to national minorities exercise in full equality before the law the rights and freedoms" and that (2), "They have the right to freely express, without prohibition or compulsion, their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity. They have the right to preserve and develop these identities, study in their native language, as well as unite in organizations and associations to protect their interests and identity. Among other legal acts may be mentioned Law no. 7152, dated June 21, 1995 "On the 8-year education in mother tongue of people belonging to national minorities", emphasizing in this way the right of minorities to be educated in their native language. Moreover, Election Code, Article 3, provides that "every albanian citizen, without distinction of race, ethnicity, gender, language, political conviction, religion or economic condition, has the right to vote and be elected in accordance with rules provided in this Code.

In order to protect and respect the strictly human rights and in particular minority rights Albania has joined important international initiatives among which can mention:

- Copenhagen document of the conference on European Security and Co-operation of 1990 UN declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religions and Linguistic Minorities of 1992
- Frameeork Convention of the Council Of Europe for the Protection of National Minorities of 1995²

Constitution of the Republic of Albania in Article 122 paragraph 1 and 2, determines the priority of international agreements that are ratified by law, making the mandatory implementation of all the norms issued by them. In this context it should be stressed that the constitution guarantees all the rights of minorities to exercise their freedoms, although the situation of ethno-linguistic minorities (Roma, Aromanians), leaves much to be desired, as in connection with their representation in parliament as well as on issues relating to the potential to be educated or to develop economically.

Also it is worth pointing out the fact that Albania has ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. This means that all ethnic minority groups, including ethno-linguistic minorities, which are known in Albania, have the right to establish and fund independently their cultural institutions.. So to possess the right to open up television, radio, magazines or newspapers. As reflected in the Constitution of Albania, its main pillars relating to the rights of minorities to express freely, to organize and to be represented in the parliament.

If we take a look at the situation of minorities and ethno-linguistic groups will see that immediately after the collapse of communism, ethnic minority organizations began to create . Greek minority formed the organization "Omonia" (which in Greek means "unity), was established Organization of Macedonians" Prespa ", the Association of Montenegrins" Common Life and Harmony"³, Vlachs "National Association of Vlach", Armenians formed organization "Armenians in Albania" (Pettifer 2001). Although the Albanian legislation guarantees the participation of minorities in the electoral process, practically only Greek minority has

² Report on minority question in Albania, in relation to the European Convention, Albania Helsinki Committee, September 1999

³ Political Parties and Minority Participation – Skopje : Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2008.

managed to obtain a representation at parliamentary level or at the Council of Ministers. Their party "Omonia" won on the first pluralist elections of 1991, five seats in the Albanian parliament.

In the second parliamentary elections of 1992, in which were excluded parties with ethnic nature and therefore "Omonia" had to rename itself in "Party of Human Rights". The Greek minority won in a changed electoral system with 2.9 percent of the votes, 2 out of 140 seats in the parliament. (Vajdenfeld 1999).

The transition of political power from Omonia to PHR made political participation of Greeks insufficient, as it should have ensured political representation not only for the Greek minority, but for all minorities. As a result, PHR lost ground in its traditional area of southern Albania, which is populated mainly by Greek ethnic minorities (Barjarba 2004). Regarding the Greek representation at government level, in 2001, it had a position of Minister of Health, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, and Deputy Minister of Justice.

- Following the elections of July 3, 2005, Party of Human Rights Union lost two places. After these elections, a member of the Greek minority was appointed as Minister of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities in the new government structure. Besides the Greek minority, no other ethnic minorities were represented in the Parliament of the Republic of Albania or in the level of Council of Ministers⁷. (Wolff 2008)

The right to education is another important element that provides the Albanian legislation. Almost every village in the southern area inhabited by ethnic Greeks, has public elementary and secondary schools that teach in the Greek language

- Also to assist the minorities, has been established "National Minorities Committee", a consultative body that is composed, by a technical staff and representative of the five minority groups (Greek, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Aromanian, and Romani). In the case of Albania, however, ethnic divisions, despite their historical importance, are more virtual than real. Among the general population, ethnicity almost did not play any role, although in recent years politicians and religious leaders have made ethnicity a political issue in view of their power. If in the West the term "ethnic" is given a politico-cultural connotation, in Albania, where the government have not been able to manage the "growing wave of cultural pluralism", the term "ethnic" has more political connotations⁸. (Barjaba 2004)

Finally note that democratization is a long process. However, there is no doubt that the idea of democracy and the notion of human rights has created a sustainable basis in Albania. In less than ten years after collapse of communism, in Albania it was voted the first democratic constitution providing guarantees for citizens, including minorities. But despite all these developments, particularly the Greek minority has repeatedly expressed concerns that might be considered somewhat legitimate, but it is important to maintain some balance, so that the demands raised by them for additional rights, not to exceed the legal standards.

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