



# Albania – Observations on a Changing Nation

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Today's nation of Albania is the result of a long tortuous journey through history, during which it was mostly not treated well. Thought to be descended from the Illyrian Albanoi tribe, Albanians have been subjugated by Philip of Macedonia, Tiberius of Rome, the Ottoman Turks, and Mussolini's Italian Army. Geographically, Albania has encompassed much of the area we know as the Balkans; it has also been partitioned and disappeared as an entity from the maps of Europe. To German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck at the 1878 Congress of Berlin Albania was no more than a "geographical expression." It was not until 1913, with the end of the Second Balkan War and the conclusion of the Treaty of Bucharest, that the boundaries of today's Albania took form.

Just as the very existence of the country went from extreme to extreme, so did the quality of its leadership. Two historical personages—George Kastrioti Skanderbeg (Skanderbeg) and Enver Hoxha—shaped the modern Albanian psyche. Skanderbeg, an Albanian nobleman taken hostage as a child and trained as an Ottoman Janissary, represents all that is great in Albanian history. After attaining military prowess and fame, Skanderbeg took the opportunity to switch sides. In the mid-15th century he freed Albania and led successful campaigns against the Ottoman armies for two decades. The opposite side of the coin was Enver Hoxha, the founding First Secretary of the Albanian Communist Party. Hoxha was a confirmed Stalinist who ruled for over forty years. Under his dictatorship Albania became the poorest and most backward country in Europe. After his death in 1985 his influence lingered until the collapse of Albanian communism in 1991. In contrast to other former communist countries, there appears to be no nostalgia for the Hoxha era.



Skanderbeg Statue in Tirana

## Moving Towards the West

Since 1991 Albania has progressed by fits and starts towards democracy and integration into the European Community (EC). On the military side, the goal is inclusion into an enlarged NATO. As might be assumed, this is a steep climb for a country with Albania's past. It is in support of this effort that the Commander, U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) focuses the Military-to-Military (M2M) Program of the Theater Security Cooperation Plan (TSCP). In support of this USEUCOM M2M program a three-man U.S. Army War College (USAWC) team deployed to Tirana during February 4-8, 2008 to conduct a Joint Operations Planning, Roles, and Functions Seminar for members of the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF).



USAWC team members Colonel Carpenter, Professor Griffard and Colonel Applegate with Ms Sabina Mitrovassili, ODC Tirana, at the Military Cultural Center

Conducted in the Military Cultural Center in Tirana and supported by the U.S. Office of Defense Cooperation, Tirana, the seminar audience consisted of 60 field grade officers and senior non-commissioned officers (NCOs) from the Albanian Joint Force Command (JFC) and joint component headquarters. Since many of the participants were graduates of U.S. and NATO country military education or training

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programs, the seminar discussions focused on joint operations, multi-national command and control, and contingency planning. These subjects proved timely due to the AAF deployments in support of NATO and U.S. missions.

Throughout the event, in seminar and informal discussions, both officers and NCOs expressed their goal of transforming the AAF into a modern military force along the NATO model. Success in this endeavor requires continued U.S. and NATO-nation educational and training support. It also necessitates the continued evolution of the political and government sectors from Hoxha era cronyism and corruption to the transparency of contemporary European democracies.

## **Measuring Progress**

Measuring progress requires two reference points – a set time in the past and the set time in the present. The February 2008 event met the criteria for the latter, while Colonel Bob Applegate, a member of the USAWC team and the U.S. Defense Attaché to Albania from November 1997 through May 1999, provided the former. His observations on developments in the military and political arenas over the past nine years provide a measure of Albania's modernization progress.

## **Initial Impressions**

In the late 1990's Albania was better described more as a theme park than as a country. Its major attractions included a post-Stalinist mentality; government implosion and military disintegration in response to the collapse of a nation-wide pyramid "investing" scheme; crumbling third-world-quality infrastructure; ungoverned and ungovernable districts; unemployment that approached fifty percent; and an economy that ran primarily on Diaspora remittances and criminal activity. Albania was a state of mind, not a nation-state. Assignment there was a daily adventure, not only from a personal security standpoint, but also regarding the basics of life, e.g., water, electricity, and groceries.

Albania, at least the greater Tirana area observed in February 2008, exhibits extraordinary progress. A striking indication of this progress is apparent upon arrival at the airport—there is an absence of concrete bunkers along the runway. From 1945-1991, ostensibly for defense against both NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the communist regime constructed an estimated 700,000 bunkers throughout the country. Today, except as model ashtrays in souvenir shops, they are rare. For a visitor returning after a nine year hiatus the change in debarkation and reception is remarkable. Today's state of the art Mother Teresa International Terminal where passengers arrive by bus from planeside is a far cry from the Rinas airport of the 1990s where one walked to a terminal that resembled a Hollywood backdrop for a 19th century movie set. At Rinas, you cleared immigration and customs by surrendering one's passport to a gentleman in a black leather jacket, watching him disappear into the dilapidated terminal, then waiting for at least fifteen minutes for him to return. Today, just as you would expect in any EC country, uniformed immigration officials efficiently process passports at a standard entry kiosk. Luggage, which used to be delivered by donkey cart, is now retrieved from a carousel. Rather than having to wade through throngs of noisy arrival-passenger relatives, beggars, pick-pockets and other shady characters enroute to an embassy security vehicle, today you walk out of the terminal past a rank of taxis to an awaiting shuttle arranged by the Sheraton. There is no adventure, only normalcy.

## **Infrastructure**

Traveling from Rinas to Tirana passengers underwent a James Bond experience—shaken, but not stirred. The 45 minute journey took one over what was affectionately called "The Bridge with Holes," past a small house built from hammered-out car doors, and finally onto a thoroughfare known as "Crater of the Moon Road." Piles of garbage waiting to be burned lined the roads guarded by packs of dogs. Dust was everywhere, unless it was mud season. Wandering pedestrians, often stopping to greet each other in the middle of the road, further complicated the traffic flow made up of donkey and horse carts, "classic" Mercedes mostly stolen from Europe, and smoke belching old communist-era trucks. There were no rules, only horns and chutzpah. In remarkable contrast, today's trip from Mother Teresa International Airport takes a pleasant twenty-five minutes, mostly over new highway that carries traffic to the center of Tirana at an average of 80km per hour. Traffic lights now operate at major intersections and drivers actually obey them. These lights replaced policemen standing on circus barrels who usually spent more time shaking down motorists than directing traffic. Tirana now has street signs! Along the way new businesses and apartment houses reflect investor confidence while dumpsters appear in lieu of the garbage piles. Coca-Cola no longer sees a requirement for rooftop sandbag firing positions to fend off looters and the ranks of international corporations now include Siemens, Vodafone, and Mercedes-Benz. At the Sheraton, as a welcome example of foreign investment, when you flip a switch or turn on a faucet the desired effect actually occurs.



**Tirana 2008**

## Building a Professional Military

The difference between the AAF of 1999 and that of 2007 is truly night and day. As Defense Attaché, Colonel Applegate visited virtually every military unit in the country numerous times. However, during the February 2008 seminar he spoke with more NCOs than he did throughout the entirety of his previous assignment. Albania now has a real NCO Corps. The seminar group NCOs generally comprehended English, although some were a bit hesitant to speak it. Many were graduates of International Military Training and Education (IMET) courses in the U.S. and/or the Marshall Center in Germany. Presenting a sharp appearance and professional demeanor, they understand their role and can operate independently. The cultural challenge is convincing their officers to let go.

Likewise, the officers barely resemble their counterparts of 1997-1999, where a reasonably competent officer was the exception. During that period most of the officer corps consisted of members of the old guard, some of whom were corrupt. They knew NATO buzz words like “transparency” and would give you the north-south head nod, but they really didn’t get it, nor wanted to. Today’s AAF officers are impressive. Similar to the NCOs, they exhibit superior military bearing and language skills, honed for many during assignments in Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. They understood many of the strategic and leadership concepts addressed at the U.S. Army War College.



**Albanian JFC and NCO Seminar  
Participants**

## **Observations**

Due to the diversity of the many contacts made, this USEUCOM-sponsored seminar offered the team a singular opportunity to assess Albania’s current situation and its outlook for the future. Contributors included both Albanians and Americans; former Albanian government leaders and ministers; businessmen; retired and active duty AAF officers; and the U.S. Embassy Tirana Deputy Chief of Mission, Political-Military Officer, and the Chief, Office of Defense Cooperation. The following observations represent a distillation of their ideas and perceptions.

- Although making significant strides in the economic and infrastructure sectors, Albania must work toward achieving other basic pillars of democracy. The judicial system remains generally broken and fixing it is one of the current focal points of U.S. effort in the country. Government corruption, although somewhat reduced, is still too common. As one Albanian participant put it, “Our government has lied to the people for seventeen years and continues to do so.” Nepotism linked to the clan structure remains the customary means of doing business. Likewise, many other mundane things taken for granted in the West, such as property taxes and utility meters are only now getting a bit of traction.
- One of the characteristics of post-communist Albania, the uncertainty of property ownership due to prior confiscation by the regime, inhibited foreign investment. Once the regime fell, squatting became prevalent and corruption in the courts generally precluded equitable resolution of property disputes. Observing that current foreign investment, although still somewhat modest, is probably tenfold the 1999 pace, it appears that at least some measure of property law has been rectified.
- Kosovo’s independence was viewed as a forgone conclusion to be announced at anytime (In fact Kosovo announced their independence on February 18, 2008). Although opinions varied slightly on probable Serbian reaction, no one anticipated any type of Serbian military response (to date this prediction has held). Similarly, all those we spoke to discounted any suggestion of a “Greater Albania,” just as they did during Operation Allied Force. Outside Tirana, especially where northern Albania borders neighboring Kosovo, this attitude may be different.
- The post-1991 Albanian military numbered more than 40,000 personnel. A top-heavy structure, especially at the colonel level, this conscript force more greatly resembled an employment agency than a military organization. The AAF is embarked on a gradual force reduction program—they are down to 16,000 this year, and enroute to an end strength of 12,500 by 2010—facilitated mostly through early retirement of senior officers, natural attrition and reduced numbers of conscripts. However, the target of an all-volunteer AAF by 2010 may be delayed due to costs.
- Severely limited by scarce resources, the AAF discontinued the use of almost all communist-era equipment, converting from a Soviet-style heavy organization to today’s light infantry force. Previously the owners of more than 1000 Norinco T-59 tanks (the Chinese version of the Soviet T-55), which they could not man or maintain, they scrapped all but a few museum pieces. The AAF reorganization allows for smoother integration with NATO and U.S. forces during security and stabilization operations.
- The Air Force, now a brigade under Joint Force Command rather than a separate service, no longer flies MiGs or MI-4s.

Their capability consists of rebuilt UH-1 (Huey) helicopters received from the Italians. However, these aircraft provide limited capability given the country's mountainous terrain in the north (2000-2600 meters). What they really need are UH-60 Blackhawks. UH-60s provide the best and most cost effective platform for moving their light infantry around, and could also be offered to NATO as Albania's niche capability. Based upon our observations of the Albanian military, their personnel could handle the acquisition, maintenance and operation of Blackhawks given a U.S. total package approach.



Veterans gather at the Military Cultural Center

- The Navy focuses exclusively on coastal patrol. Like the Air Force it is no longer a separate service, but a JFC brigade. Albania's substantial long-term patrol boat contract with the Dutch augments the five coastal patrol boats provided by the U.S. in 1999. The first boat, under construction in The Netherlands, is due for delivery later this year. Next year's boat construction, to include required maintenance facilities, will move to Albania's Pasha Limon Naval Base south of Vlorë. This is a significant achievement for the Albanian Navy.
- Albania is now a Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customer of the U.S. They have nationally funded Letters of Offer and Acceptance in excess of \$7 million. Given the limited availability of resources in the past, the dedication of national funds, albeit conservatively, to military transformation reflects the Albanian government's growing commitment to the West.

## Final Thoughts

In 1999 NATO published the Alliance's Approach to Security in the 21st Century. This revised strategic concept confirmed the Alliance's purpose to safeguard the freedom and security of its members by political and military means. In addition to providing for the common defense of its members, NATO took responsibility for the promotion of peace and stability of the wider Euro-Atlantic area. A major step forward in achieving this goal was the membership invitation extended to Albania and Croatia on April 2, 2008. By bringing Albania under the NATO umbrella a message is sent not only to the Albanian government, but to its neighbors, that there are rewards for support of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Following on the heels of the 2004 accession of Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia, this action brings stability within the Balkan region closer to reality.

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