

# **Albanians and their Identity**

**By Xhavit Shala**

Civilizations have historically served as the basis on which political, economic and military alliances are built upon.<sup>1</sup> They are set apart by the history, language, culture, traditions and to a large degree, by religion.<sup>2</sup> The integration of Albanians into the political and security structures alongside other western countries is an age-long dream of the Albanians. In spite of the proclamation that the EU brings together countries on the basis of the values of democracy and market economy, it has been widely commented that it has included only countries that belong to the western civilization, which has Christianity as its foundation. The EU is currently faced with a difficult test because of Muslim populated countries like Turkey or partially populated like Albania not only aspire integration but are also undertaking active steps to become part of the “Christian club”. The political and intellectual circles in Europe and beyond have been engaged in a hot debate that has increased even more after the introduction of the thesis of slowing down the integration of Turkey and the western Balkan countries into the EU.

This debate has been reflected into the national discourse as well after the tacit acceptance that seems to reign that religious affiliations play an important role in the EU accession process. The debate regarding the pertinence of our civilization and the role of religion in it has caught the attention of the intellectual and political circles. The Kadare-Qose public controversy has further contributed to this debate, with the only downside that it has often slipped to a personal level leading to unwarranted waste of energies.

Despite any one's preference, the long period of ottoman rule has left its traces in the social culture of our country. The effects of the ottoman and subsequent communist rule can be easily distinguished in many elements of our political and social behavior. While the ottomans made efforts to redefine the Albanian culture they were never able to succeed due to the deep roots of the western civilization among the Albanians. After the independence, the cultural identity of the Albanians did not remain static but continued to develop becoming a very dynamic one.

Albanians are now in a process of redefining their identity and moving towards the western civilization from which they were forcefully separated centuries ago. But for a country to be able to redefine the identity of its civilization, the director of the Institute for Strategic Studies, Samuel P. Huntington says, a country must meet three requirements: First, its political and economic elites must support this movement.

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Secondly, the public must be ready to tacitly accept this redefinition, and, thirdly, the elites and dominating groups must embrace the move to redefine one's belonging vis-à-vis the civilization.<sup>3</sup>

The political and economic elites since the proclamation of independence have generally demonstrated a western-european orientation.<sup>4</sup> The Albanian statesmen were determined to build a state according to the western model and during the rule of King Zog great efforts were made to achieve this. New criminal and civil legislation was approved based on the French model. The marriage of King Zog with the catholic Princess Geraldine Apony demonstrated an alliance with the west. After WW2, Albania remained isolated in the Communist camp. After the fall of communism, all political parties were formed on the basis of a western oriented platform.

The second requirement on the re-determination of the western civic identity has been openly accepted by our people who have been ready to openly embrace this identity. Our earlier western roots are to be credited for this shift. The Albanian people may be the only people in the region who openly supports integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and are faced with no dilemma in this regard, the former UK Ambassador to Albania, David Landsman<sup>5</sup> said a few years ago. The desire of the Albanian people to be part of the western civilization finds its root and is well demonstrated in the wholehearted support they gave to their prince, Scanderbeg, in the fight against ottoman occupation.

The Albanian people and their predecessors there have produced distinguished individuals who have provided a great contribution to the strengthening of the western Christian civilization. The emperors of Illyrian origin in the Roman Empire have played an important role in the triumph of Christianity. Among them, Constantine the Great is known as the first emperor who declared Christianity as the official religion of the empire. Following the ottoman occupation, Albanian personalities who served in the ranks of the ottoman government provided a continued impetus toward the reforming and western orientation of the Ottoman Empire. Mehmet Ali Pasha, the king of Egypt, otherwise known as the "armed follower of the western civilization in the Arab countries",<sup>6</sup> his son, Ibrahim, who preached and upheld a policy of religious tolerance and even Qemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, to mention just a few.

During the communist regime, in spite of the propaganda that was waged to create the "new man," the masses were not affected by the anti-western spirit. The western dream would reveal itself in the desire to wear western style clothes, to secretly watch foreign TV stations and the tendency to travel to the western countries.

The third important factor in re-determining the affiliation of Albanians with the western civilizations is not in the hands of the Albanians only. The readiness of western European elites to receive the Albanians can not be determined by us. Ours is the obligation to

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel P. Huntington - "the Clash of Civilizations".

<sup>4</sup> Xhavit Shala - «Albanians at the Crossroads».

<sup>5</sup> David Landsman - «The six Albanian myths about the EU» - Remarks delivered at the Albanian Forum of International Studies- «Albania», 12.07.2003.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Muhamed Mufaku - «Albanians in the Arab world», page 111.

work to meet the criteria and conditions required, to produce more security and not to export criminality. The last word on the matter would then belong to the western European politicians and citizens.

We close with the thought that the five hundred years of ottoman occupation temporarily divided the Albanians from the western civilization but it did not succeed in making them part of the eastern civilisation. The civic identity of the Albanians is a dynamic one and is being redefined in its path toward the west. The political and economic elites in the country fully support this re-determination. The support provided to Albania by the United States and Europe after the fall of communism, the soon to be signed Stabilization and Association Agreement and the promise of NATO integration in 2008 demonstrate the fact that the determining groups in the western civilization are ready to embrace the re-determination of the cultural affiliation of Albanians.

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