

# Vorio Epirus, an illusion to be buried

By Xhavit Shala

The crises of the exhumations,<sup>1</sup> brought about by the illegal work in the old cemetery of Kosine<sup>2</sup> village in Permet,<sup>3</sup> was not a work undertaken by lonely deranged priest and of a Greek consul<sup>4</sup>. Rather than demonstrating an incident in the relations between Albania and Greece, it is a point in case of the crises that certain Greek political and religious circles are experiencing. On the eve of the resolution of the Kosovo status and the beginning of the internationalization of the Cham issue, these circles are rushing to find ways, forms and methods to bring about the realization of the shelved Vorio Epirus dream. Their state of nervousness only grows at the thought that the empowerment of the Albanian factor in the Balkans and Albania's Euro Atlantic integration could transform their Vorio Epirus dream into a dead illusion.

The Vorio Epirus project is a long-term strategy of a semi-official and official Greek circles that aims at achieving the annexation of southern Albania. It is part of the Greek strategy to expand their territories at the back of their neighbors, a strategy that is as old as the Greek state. The Greek Orthodox Church has kept the claim over Vorio-Epirus alive. Prior to and after the establishment of the Albanian state, this Church has continued to work to helenize the Albanian orthodox believers and achieve the annexation of Southern Albania to Greece.

Taking advantage of the fragility of the newly created Albanian state and following the pressures exerted on it at the League of Nations in 1921, the Greeks succeeded in internationalizing the so-called Vorio Epirus issues. The creation of the Kingdom of Albania and of the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church reduced considerably the influence of Greek chauvinist circles in southern Albania. The efforts undertaken by Noli and other Albanian patriots to reawaken the Albanian identity among the orthodox believers and the translation of the orthodox liturgy into Albanian had a major positive effect. The Greek Church, however, never stopped working against the interest of

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<sup>2</sup> The article was first published in the daily "Shqip" on June 9, 2006. It was subsequently placed in many Albanian internet webpages.

<sup>3</sup> - The works to dig up the graves at the Bizantine church of Saint Mary in Kosine first began on April 29, 2006 under the pretext that these were the graves of Greek soldiers who died during the WWII. Five village labourers were hired by the village priest Vasil Thomollari. In cotnvention to criminal and other legal provisions, the remains of 137 persons were disinterred. According to the forenseics report prepared for the Permet Prosecutor's office, that in 69 skeletons that were viewed there were no traces found to indicate that these people had died of firearms. In only five skeletons there are traces of demange caused by firearm of 20 to 30 years of age when they died, a fact that only proves that only these five may have been soldiers who died during the war.

<sup>4</sup> - In complete violation of his diplomatic counsul, the Greek consul to Gjirokastra, Kristos Mandela, openly defended the illegal activity of Vasil Themollari.

Albanians. The deportation from Albania of the Extract Jerotheu in 1929, per order of the Albanian orthodox Prime Minister, Koço Kote, on the grounds of having unduly interfered with the domestic affairs of the Albanian state, served as a demonstration of the fact that the Albanians were determined not to allow any violation of Albania's national security. At this time, due to the circumstances, the Hellene Vorio Epirus dream had to be shelved.

In 1940, the Italian fascist regime launched an attack on Greece from the Albanian territory. With the defeat of the Italian forces and penetration of Greek units into the Albanian territory, the Greek authorities considered that the time had come to put to work their plan. They have claimed ever since that the Greek soldiers died to liberate Vorio Epirus. The German occupation of Greece shelved the Vorio Epirus project.

The Greek efforts to achieve the realization of their goal continued even during the communist rule in Albania. With the exception of a few cases where military and diplomatic provocation were used, the Greek activity during this period was usually a covert operation that made use of intelligence networks and a large number of Vorio Epiriot groups that were stationed alongside the Greek border with Albania. The Greek Orthodox Church and the orthodox priest, Sebastianos, remained particularly active throughout the communist period. Sebastianos left instructions that when dead he wanted to be buried standing on his feet at a plot near the border with Albania, as an indication that his soul would not find rest until the issue of Vorio Epirus would be resolved.

With the fall of communism and the opening up of Albania, Greek nationalist segments reawakened their dream and thought that their time had now truly come. The Greek Church in cooperation with segments of Greek politics has continued to work to carry out a plan of hellenization of the Albanian orthodox population. The years under communism had made Albanians forget Noli's saying that "Albanians had suffered misfortune not because of their religious difference but because of their religious leaders." The Greek Church took over the efforts to rebuild the Albanian Orthodox Church. Taking advantage of the legal vacuum and contrary to the Statue of the Albanian Church, the Greek Church proposed and appointed a Greek citizen to head the Albanian Church. During the first years after the fall of communism, alongside the overt actions to hellenize the orthodox Albanians, Greek Vorio Epiriot organization carried out an armed assault in the district of Gjirokastra that resulted in the killing of Albanian military personnel. The perpetrators of the terrorist attack, among whom a few persons of Albanian citizenship, were later identified, arrested and then shamelessly released by Greek judicial authorities. Certain Greek political segments have played an active role in the destabilization of southern Albania following the pyramid crises of 1997. Following the collapse of the Albanian state, they thought that the hour of Vorio Epirus had finally arrived. It was the immediate intervention of the United States, the European Union and Turkey on behalf of Albanian integrity that put a stop to the Greek adventure and the Greek dream of Vorio Epirus. To our days, the old dream continues to awaken the Greek obsessions.

On April 6, 2006, two weeks prior to "the crises of exhumations", the Greek journalist of the monthly "Hellenic News of America" attached to the Department of State, Lambros,

officially asked the State Department's spokesman, Sean McCormack, "on whether the State Department would reconsider its position regarding the autonomy for the Greek minority in the Northern Epirus". According to Lambros, the cause of Vorio Epirus has the support of Greek official circles. "The former Greek Prime Ministers in the 90s tied the issue of the status of Kosovo with that of Northern Epirus," Lambros said.<sup>5</sup>

The Greek Archbishop Kristodhulos is also waiting for an opportune time to hoist the Greek flag in Northern Epirus. During the live broadcast in February of a mass in the Athens's cathedral speaking about the need to make monthly pension payments of 300 Euro to minority members in Albania, the archbishop called on the Greek government to keep alive the Northern Epirus in Albania "otherwise no one in Albania will speak of Vorio Epirus, if they will not be there to keep high the Greek flag".<sup>6</sup>

The weakening of the Serb role in the Balkans, the eventual creation of the state of Kosovo, the strong American support for the Albanian factor, the progress of our country on the Euro-Atlantic integration path, and the rights enjoyed by Greek minority and the good relations with the official Greek politics continues to frustrate the Greek nationalist circles. This state of nervousness makes them undertake immature steps such as the exhumations that publicly reveal their agenda.

The exhumation crises and the efforts to build mausoleums alongside the imaginary vorio epiriot borderline clearly demonstrate the fact that the Greek Church and certain segments of Greek politics have not given up their northern Epirus intentions. These actions show that the activity of such circles continues to present a serious threat to our national security. The involvement of official personnel of the Albanian Orthodox Church in illegal acts of exhumations and the hiding of identified caskets and their blatant disregard for Albanian law enforcement agencies have seriously put into question the autocephalousness of this Church. The crises also clearly demonstrated the irresponsibility of the local government structures that has given free hand to the operation of Greek chauvinist circles.

The exhumation cries should serve as an awaking bell for the Albanian law enforcement agencies, the political forces and national security structures. The crises demonstrated the need of a strategy in place to prevent and neutralize the operation of vorio epiriot circles. These steps are necessary to ensure that the Greek Vorio Epirus dream is forever put on a casket. However, we should also never forget that these circles would still try to exhume even buried caskets.

**Tirana, June 9, 2006**

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<sup>5</sup> - Sean McCormack Daily- Press Briefing, ,Washington, DC, April 6, 2006

<sup>6</sup> - Report from Athens of Marko Caka, published in the daily "Panorama" February 22, 2006.