Albania: A Nation of Ethnic and Social Conflict

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Albania played a significant role in modern global events including the war on terror, the war in Kosovo, as well as with its influence as the only predominantly Muslim nation in Europe other than Kosovo. Problems in the nation’s history and modern struggles over ethnicity have derailed Albania’s move toward democracy at times, but, so far, Albania has shown itself willing to work around these problems in an effort to move forwards its application to join the EU as one of the newest democratic states.

The Republic of Albania, home to approximately 3,639,453 people and consisting of 28,748 sq. km. of land, is a relatively small nation in Southeastern Europe. The nation borders the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Greece, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo in the north. The capital is Tirana, and other major cities include Durres, Shkoder, and Vlore. The terrain is mostly mountains and hills, although there are plains along the coast, and the nation possesses a great deal of farmable land and natural resources including petroleum and chrome. Numerous ethnic groups subdivide the population -- Albanian (95%-98%), Greek (3%), and the rest includes Vlachs, Romas, Serbs, Macedonians, and Bulgarians.

Understanding the issues that Albania faces today requires knowledge of the nation’s history dating back to the fourteenth century. The religious and ethnic issues began when the Ottomans brought Islam into Albania and pushed the Christian Albanians to flee to nearby countries including the Balkans and Greece. The ethnic struggles between Albania, Greece, and

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the Balkan states grew worse during the wars over Albanian territory after the Ottomans lost their control on the region. In fact, one of the greatest issues facing Albania in the last few decades was the Kosovo incident, which started years before the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans. Once this history is clear, then a better grasp of current events is possible.

The Ottomans ruled Albania from 1385-1912, when Albania declared its independence in the Vlore Proclamation on November 28, 1912. It was during the Ottoman rule that many of the Albanian people became Muslim, although the Muslims are focused on the central area of the nation, while the north and south remain more Christianized. The Turkish dominion started a mass migration of Albanians outwards to Greece, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro—an event that contributes to the ethnicity and international relation issues between Albania and these nations today. In fact, almost 750,000 people currently live in the areas formerly known as the Yugoslav Republic, and nearly one-third of the Albanian population as a whole live outside the nation’s borders.

After the Russo-Turkish War, the Ottoman Empire lost most of its hold on Albania. Then, in the late 1800s, Albania began to fear that it would become swallowed up in the Balkan states (Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Greece), a fear that led to the Balkan Wars in 1912. Albania declared its independence on November 1912. During the Balkan Wars, Serbia, Greece, Greece, Greece,
and Montenegro all attempted to “encroach” on Albanian territory.\(^6\) Serbia wanted an Adriatic port, something Austria-Hungary and Italy opposed. Russia supported Serbian and Montenegrin claims. The Great Powers finally put a stop to the Balkan demands and established Albania as an independent country with its current borders on Dec 20, 1912.\(^7\)

After World War I, Albania became a republic, but fell into chaos because of the ensuing transformation from Ottoman monarchical rule. In October 1914, Greece invaded and occupied southern Albania, and in April 1916, officially declared the area to be Greek territory.\(^8\) Then, in June 1915, Serbia and Montenegro occupied the central and northern regions. Other nations joined in the takeover including Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria, and from 1914-1918 the Albanian lands passed from nation to nation. Finally, with Italian assistance, Albanian Muslim leader Ahmed Zogu became president and Albania pushed the invaders out although Italy maintained a great deal of control through its ties to Zogu.

A significant event stemming from both the decades before the Ottoman invasion and from the Serbian invasion of Albania during WWI was the Kosovo conflict. The Serbians consider Kosovo to be the home of their ancestors, and have made it into their “Holy Land.”\(^9\) Kosovo houses many of the Serbian holy sites, and the Ottoman defeat of the Serbian forces, “the key event in the Serbs’ national mythology,” occurred in Kosovo.\(^10\) On the other hand, Albania also claims the land based on ancestral ties, and the two nations have fought over the region for years. Serbia conquered the Kosovo region in 1387, slaughtering thousands of Islamic

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\(^7\) Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 317; Zickel and Iwaskiw, 17; L. S. Stavrianos, 709.
\(^8\) Stavrianos, 710.
\(^9\) Zickel and Iwaskiw, 22
\(^10\) Ibid.
and Catholic Albanians in the process. After WWI, Serbia attempted to gain more Albanian land, but was restricted to the Kosovar borders. They retained control of Kosovo until 1941 when Germany gave the land to occupied Albania because the majority of the population living in Kosovo was Albanians. Germany claimed it had given Albania back its “just ethnic borders.” All of these factors played a role in the constant struggle between Albania and Serbia from control of Kosovo, although it would not come to a head until after Albania won its complete independence from Italy and the surrounding nations during World War II.

In 1939, the Italians abandoned the allegiance and invaded Albania making Victor Emmanuel III king. Italy occupied Albania from 1939 to 1943, whereupon Germany invaded and occupied it until 1944. The Italians declared a new Albanian constitution June 1939, which labeled Albania an autonomous constitutional monarchy. During the war, the Communist National Liberation Front (LNC) stood as the leading resistance movement, and, with the assistance of the Yugoslavian resistance groups, they were able to capture a great deal of supplies from retreating Italian forces in September 1943. This allowed the Albanian Communist Party (with close ties to the LNC) to gain power quickly, since they were the only political group of any significance remaining in Albania after Italy disbanded the other political parties during the occupation.

Communist party leader Enver Hoxha took power in Albania, and allied the nation to China, although he eventually broke ties even with them making Albania extremely isolated

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11 Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 318.
12 Stavrianos, 795.
13 Ibid.
14 Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 318; Stavrianos, 725-730.
16 Stavrianos, 795.
during his reign.\textsuperscript{18} Albania became a totalitarian and atheistic nation, and essentially locked its borders against foreigners.\textsuperscript{19} In 1967, the government closed Mosques and Churches and prohibited religious observances. Politics became single-partied; the economy plummeted; and the government imposed harsh penalties for the smallest infractions and forbade immigration. Albania “really became a vast concentration camp.”\textsuperscript{20} Under the Communist regime, Albania experienced less of the ethnic conflict due to the control of Communist ideology, which focused on “social identity over primordial identities.”\textsuperscript{21} However, the peace came at the price of a series of “purges, shortages, repression of civil and political rights, a total ban on religious observance, and increased isolation.”\textsuperscript{22} During this period, the communists “vilified” the United States, although most Albanians remained favorable to the United States due to American support after Albania declared its independence in 1919. Hoxha died in 1985 and, after this and the 1991 collapse of communism, Albania began to pull out from the communist ideologies towards a more open economy and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{23}

Initially a closed, totalitarian state, Albania is moving towards a modern open-market economy and a more democratic government. In 1991, the government abandoned the “Marxist-inspired constitution,” and implemented an interim constitution.\textsuperscript{24} Parliament adopted a new constitution on Nov. 28, 1998, which established executive, legislative, and judicial branches

\textsuperscript{18} Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 318-319; Crampton, 39.
\textsuperscript{19} Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 318-319.
\textsuperscript{22} Crampton, 163.
under the control of the President and Prime Minister. Numerous political parties dominate the government’s politics including the Democratic Part of Albania (the Prime minister and President are both leaders within the DPA), the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), Republican Party (RP), Socialist Party of Albania (SPA), Social Democratic Party (PDS), and the Democratic Alliance Party (DAP). Since the institution of the new constitution, these parties have been vying for control over Albania politics.

From 1997-2002, Albania suffered through a series of Socialist governments, but finally non-partisan Alfred Moisiu became president in 2002, bringing with him a period of “political stability, democratic and economic reforms, rule of law initiatives, and the development of Albania’s relations with its neighbors and the U.S.” In 2005, the Democratic Party returned to power under the leadership of Sali Berisha. The government is attempting to limit crime and the economy is slowly growing. Most recently, Bamir Topi became president in 2007.

The economy has slowly improved although Albania is still one of the poorest nations in Europe. In 1997, the economy nearly collapsed, and Albania’s infrastructure was badly damaged, an issue that instigated an intensive international mediation by a UN Multinational Protection Force. However, the percentage of people living below the poverty line went from 25.4% in 2002 to 12.4% in 2008 offering a positive sign of the improving economic standards in the country. Albania was the last central or eastern European nation to attempt democratic and

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28 Ibid.
free market reforms. In addition, the country was still recovering from Hoxha’s disastrous economic policies. Energy shortages damage economic capabilities of businesses, as does the lack of modern tools and unclear property rights, thus most of their economy revolves around farming.

The same religious, ethnic, and inter-societal problems that haunted Albania’s past before its independence still hinder the present government’s efforts for reform. Religion is not particularly a significant an issue within the nation itself. In Albania, social and ethnic issues are far more important. The very social fabric of Albania’s people groups develops a unique set of issues that most other European nations did not have to address. The greatest conflicts have been over ethnic divisions within Albania, which have led to numerous domestic and international issues.

In 1990, Albania once again allowed private religious practice and re-opened the mosques and churches. Albanian is the only nation in Europe with a predominantly Muslim people. There are three leading religious groups in Albania—Muslims (70%), Albanian Eastern Orthodox (20%) and Roman Catholics (10%), but there has been little conflict between these religious groups until recently. The Muslims include followers of the Sunni and Bektashi

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31 Recently, Italy’s Enel has set up a joint venture with Albania’s Confederation of Albania’s Industries, which will develop Albania’s first coal-fired power plant. It is hoped that this venture will help Albania’s energy problems. “Enel Albanian Joint Venture Introduces Coal In Albania’s Power Mix.” Business Monitor Online. Feb. 24, 2009. http://www.allbusiness.com/ (Accessed May 6, 2010).
sects, while the Christians are divided between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.\textsuperscript{35} Recently, the Albanian religious leaders began efforts toward establishing an “interreligious council (IRC),” and met in February 2009 to work towards that goal.\textsuperscript{36} Currently the Albanian constitution permits freedom of religions, and the government respects the right to private religious practice.\textsuperscript{37} There is no official religion, although certain groups (Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic) receive more official recognition and a higher level of social status. Unfortunately, religious conflicts have grown in the past few years, hindering the attempts to strengthen inter-religious unity.

During the communist era, the government essentially demolished religion, and, as the various faiths struggled to survive, there was little room for inter-religious conflicts. However, the religious conflicts started returning after the fall of communism when Western missionaries began entering Albania in the 90s and the Albanians reacted by establishing “a sort of religious exclusionism.”\textsuperscript{38} Slowly religion became more closely connected with “territory, ethnicity, and political relations,” and political-religious groups began to form. Religion affected politics mainly in two ways—through the involvement of religious leaders and institutions in domestic political debates and through supports politicians offer to the various religious groups.\textsuperscript{39} Although religious leaders are still working to ease tensions between the religious groups, the situation bears watching in the coming decade.

The gravest social problem in Albania is the tribal nature of the society. Albania is divided along religious grounds; this division includes separation between the traditions of

\textsuperscript{38} Barjarba, 4.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
various “classes, villages, tribes, but also the most powerful force in this part of the world—the family.” One involves the racial conflict between the Tosks (northerners) and Ghegs (southerners). Another is the fact that Albania consists of hundreds of tribes, all very proud of their conflicting traditions. The tribal issue is especially focused in the North, which has the Hoti, Gruda, Kastrati, Mati, and Mirditi tribes.

Albania consists of a strongly clan-based society, a situation causing problems all on its own. One consequence of this that is negatively affecting the nation today is the ever-present threat of blood feuds. Currently thousands of families suffer from these feuds, which are regulated by tribal laws known as the Kanun—a code created during the 15th century and reinstated after the fall of communism to serve as a method of handling disputes. The Kanun contains guidelines for the government including boundary recognition and the daily judgments of the traditional council of elders. The clan councils were re-established as well and now work with the state institutions. The number of deaths began rising in 2007 after the nation’s clan chiefs agreed that families “could outsource blood feuds to professional contract killers.”

The issue of blood feuds is not restricted to Albanian borders; it has spread to the Albanian populations in Macedonia, Kosovo, and Serbia, where deaths have increased as well.

The problem of uncertain borders has plagued Albania since the Balkan Wars, and WWI

40 Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 320; Zickel and Iwaskiw, 12.
41 Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 317.
43 De Waal, 89.
44 Dan Bilefsky, “In Albanian Feuds, Isolation Engulfs Families,” New York Times, July 10, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com (Accessed May 6, 2010). The Hoxha regime kept the feuds at a minimum, but after he died, they became more numerous in the chaos following the collapse of his administration. In 2008, the National Reconciliation Committee, an Albanian organization devoted to working with families affected by the blood feuds claimed as many as 20,000 people are affected by the problem. The organization claims 9,500 people have died since 1991 when the feuds once again became an issue.
45 Ibid.
only made the situation worse. The Former Yugoslav Republic felt threatened because of Albanian claims on Yugoslavian territory.\textsuperscript{46} Albania has long wanted to reclaim the Kosovo area from the Serbs, a desire that caused innumerable struggles between Serbia and Albania. Greece’s borders with Albania were never firmly settled, and the mixture of Albanian and Greek inhabitants along the border area is one of the most serious ethnic issues facing Albania today.\textsuperscript{47}

The ethnic conflict within Albania has led to tension between Greece and Albania, with the focus being on three primary issues. The first is the rights of the Greek population in Albania, the second is the rights of the Albanians living in Greece, and the third is the property rights of the Cameria population who moved to Albania from Greece after WWII.\textsuperscript{48} Greece mainly influenced Albanian politics through Omonia, the “ethnic-political organization of the Greek community in Albania” and later the Human Rights Union Party (HRUP).\textsuperscript{49} The situation was particularly tenuous from 1992-1996 when the Albanian Democratic Party was in office, and the situation headed up in 1995 when Albanian officials arrested five Omonia activists and accused them of working with Greek secret service agents.\textsuperscript{50} Finally, in 1996, the two nations signed “The Treaty of Collaboration and Friendship.”

Once the Communist regime collapsed in 1990, ethnic and religious issues once again came to the front of the nation’s political issues.\textsuperscript{51} As mentioned earlier, approximately 95% of the population is ethnic Albanians, but the country also includes nearly 60,000 Greeks, 5,000

\textsuperscript{46} Von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, 319.
\textsuperscript{49} Barjarba, 5. In 1992, Albania outlawed the creation of ethnic political parties, but after international pressure, the government allowed the establishment of HRUP, supposedly the party representing all minority groups, as a compromise. Unfortunately for the Greeks, HRUP does not have as much power as Omonia had, the Socialist Party gained more support from the Greek community.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid. President Berisha did not visit Greece during his presidency.
Macedonians and Serbian-Montenegrins, and other various ethnic groups. Approximately 96% of the Greeks settled in southern Albanian, while the Macedonians are in the southeast, and Montenegrins are in the northwest. Currently, the Greeks believe that they construct far more of the population than the Albanian government acknowledges.

The Albania-Serbia struggle came to a head in 1999 during the Kosovo conflict. In 1989, Serbia began moving away from its socialist government and adopted a new constitution that abandoned the rights that the 1974 constitution had given to the various ethnic groups. The government began allowing multi-party elections and the elections were divided between the Socialist Party and the nationalist Serbian Renewal Movement (SRM). Serbian nationalism grew within Kosovo, and none of the Albanian political parties participated in the elections. Milosevic, president of Serbia, began efforts to establish complete Serbian control over the area, and, in 1990, Serb-Croat became the new official language. Milosevic also sent out requests for a mass Serbian migration into Kosovo. Things became dangerous when the federal government agreed that the police could be deployed against protestors within Kosovo. In March, the police were sent to stem riots starting after 400 Albanian children mysteriously grew ill. Then, on April 17, Milosevic declared that the Serbian Interior Ministry was in charge of security for Kosovo and released several Albanian prisoners. At first things seemed to be calming down, but this was only the beginning.

The problem grew again in July 1990 during the constitutional referendum. The Kosovo Albanians boycotted the poll in anger over the loss of the 1974 rights and 114 delegates of the

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53 Barjarba, 3. Officials debate the figures for non-ethnic Albanians, with ethnic group leaders claiming the number is at least twice the number the Albanian officials offer.
54 Ibid., 4.
55 Crampton, 240.
Kosovo assembly declared Kosovo a Yugoslavian republic. The Serbian assembly voted to dissolve the Kosovo assembly, dismiss the government, and transfer all of the government’s responsibilities to Belgrade. Albanian protestors continued to march and a September strike by the Independent Trade Union Organization of Kosovo brought Kosovo to a standstill. The organization protested the firing of 15,000 Albanians who had refused to sign “pledges of loyalty or to work under police supervision.” Amongst these 15,000 Albanians were four-fifths of the police and civil servants. The Albanians argued that they constituted 90% of the Kosovo population and should not be treated like a minority, and the Serbians refused to leave their minority under Albanian control. Finally, on September 7, Albanian, Turkish, and Muslim members of the Kosovo assembly announced the creation of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo.

After the conflict in 1989, Kosovo remained relatively peaceful for a number of years. However, the Dayton Agreement created new problems—mainly in that it gave nothing to the Albanians and only strengthened Yugoslavia’s claim on Kosovo. In October 1997, Albanian student protested and the police were deployed. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) grew out of the Kosovar Albanian communities established in various nations throughout Europe. The Afghanis armed the KLA, and made their first appearance in Kosovo in November 1997. By 1998, the KLA, Serbian repression, and the protests of Kosovar Albanians led to the destabilization of Kosovo.

Internationally, interest in the situation grew as television broadcast the problems surrounding refugee immigration. NATO, the UN Security Council, and various other

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56 Ibid.
57 Crampton, 241.
58 Ibid., 271. The main reason for the struggle over rights in Kosovo was the act that the Serbians claimed that anything given to the Albanians in Kosovo should be given to the Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
diplomatic organizations attempted to mediate, but the situation continued to worsen. In May
1998, NATO announced that it intended to establish troops along the Albanian-Kosovo border,
and British Prime Minister Tony Blair threatened air strikes in Yugoslavia did not deal with the
problem. Tensions eased in September after Milosevic seemed to begin working on the
situation, but by January 1999 the problem had grow even worse after 45 bodies were found in a
Kosovar Albanian village. March 19, 1999 the diplomatic talks were abandoned and NATO
agreed to use force if necessary against Yugoslavia. On March 24, 1999, NATO bombed
Yugoslav air defenses and continued that attacks until June. June 19, 1999, UNSCR outlined the
settlement for Kosovo, which declared a NATO force would be maintained there to keep the
peace, the KLA would be disarmed, and the EU would be in charge of reconstruction. 100,000
Serbs fled Kosovo and tensions remained high between those remaining and the Albanians.59

Albania strongly supported the action. Albania claims the bombing saved the lives of
thousands of Kosovo Albanians 60 During the 1999 conflict, Albania provided refuge to
thousands of Kosovar refugees.61 Due to the Kosovo conflict, Albania focused its mine
clearance project on northeast Albania, and there are hopes that Albania will be mine-free by the
end of 2010.62 Since then, Albania has arrested numerous Albanian extremists for “inciting
interethnic hatred in Macedonia and Kosovo.63 The Albanian government maintained interest
in Kosovo’s continued stability and continues to fight for the protection of Albanian rights in

59 Ibid., 270-277.
60 “Albania Country Brief,” Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Nov. 20, 2010,
61 U. S. Department of State, “Albania,” Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, June 30, 2009,
62 “Albania Country Brief,” Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Nov. 20, 2010,
63 U. S. Department of State, “Albania,” Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, June 30, 2009,
Kosovo and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, although its relations have improved with both Kosovo and FYROM since the conflict.\textsuperscript{64} In November 2008, Kosovo declared its independence and Albania became even more involved in the interests of the new nations future.\textsuperscript{65}

The importance of foreign relations grew since the end of World War II, and Albania has begun recognizing this fact since its liberation from Communism. During the Communist regime, Albania remained isolated and developed connections only with China, although these were later abandoned as well. However, only Hoxha’s regime collapsed, Albania has begun redeveloping ties with both the United States and the European Union.

After the fall of communism, Albania began seeking closer ties with the West, including America, something the United States readily welcomed.\textsuperscript{66} The United States has since created a military partnership with Albania and signed several treaties with the nation including the 2003 Prevention of Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Albania was the first nation to finish the destruction of chemical weapons under the Chemical Weapons Convention. April 1, 2009, Albania became a member of NATO.\textsuperscript{67} There has been some tension over Albania’s ties to Islamic terrorist groups including Osama Bin-Laden.\textsuperscript{68} Albania has acknowledged that Bin-Laden established training camps in Albania, and the Albanian Arab Islamic Bank is known to

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have financed terrorists in the Balkans.\textsuperscript{69} In the late 1990s, the U.S. embassy in Albania closed due to terrorist threats, and, in 1998, Albania and the United States “foiled a planned attack on the U.S. embassy in Tirana, raided an Al Qaeda forgery ring, and arrested several Al Qaeda figures.”\textsuperscript{70} It is one of only four nations contributing to the “combat phase” of Operation Enduring Freedom.\textsuperscript{71} After the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, Albania assisted U.S. efforts by “freezing terrorist assets, shutting down NGOs with possible links to terrorist financing, expelling extremists, and providing hundreds of military troops for the U.S.-led actions in Afghanistan and Iraq.”\textsuperscript{72} Some people claim Albanian terrorist groups are still linked to Al-Qaeda, but the Albanian government denies the accusations and the U.S. and European government experts claim Albanian terrorists are not a significant threat.\textsuperscript{73} Currently, the Albanian government appears to be attempting to limit the terrorist actions within the country and is continuing to work with the United States on the issue.

Albania’s foreign relations with the European Union have also grown closer as Albania seeks to become part of the EU while attempting to “promote closer bilateral ties with its neighbors and with the U.S.”\textsuperscript{74} The EU has long sought to establish connections with the Western Balkans including Albania, but previous attempts failed.\textsuperscript{75} However, since 1999, the prospect seems more likely, and the EU is attempting to work with Albania in the hope that ties

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. There is some evidence of Bin-Laden’s financial backing in the Bank’s capital, “with the sum of 11 million USD.”
\textsuperscript{75} Bogdani and Loughlin, 87
with Albania will lead to further ties with the other Balkan states. As one author noted, “the Balkans is an integral part of Europe and the unification of Europe will not be complete until it includes its south-eastern part.” In June 2006, Albania signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU—the first move toward Albania becoming a member—and April 28, 2009, Albania filed its application for EU candidacy. In 2000, Albania renewed diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia, and it has established diplomatic relations with Montenegro and Italy.

Albania and the Balkan states have a long history of warfare and conflict, although things seem to be calming down currently. Albania is one of the last nations to attempt democratic reforms, but it has only done so recently and is still struggling to suppress these problems that arose with the collapse of communism. The ancient Ottoman domination, and the resulting conflict between Albania and the surrounding states caused most of the lingering problems facing Albania today—problems that must be resolved before the EU can accept Albania’s application. Although Albania gained its independence after WWII, ethnic and social issues continue to plague its attempts at reform, and, although religious conflicts have remained essentially small, the problems are growing. Albania’s current foreign policy towards the United States is open, but, if the religious and social conflicts continue to grow, the relations may begin to deteriorate. If Albania truly hopes to join the EU as a free and peaceful nation, it must resolve its current problems before they become another explosive situation like Kosovo.

76 Ibid., 88.
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