

Islam and Democracy at the Fringes of Europe: The Role of Useful Historical Legacies

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Abstract: This article analyzes how the Muslim majority has engaged with, and contributed to parallel processes of democratization and European integration in post-Communist Albania. The assessment of Muslims' choices focuses on the Central organization, the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), which is recognized by the state as the only authority in charge of all the administrative and spiritual issues pertinent to the community of Sunni believers, and serves as the main hub of respective religious activities in the country. The analysis of democratization, and Muslims' respective choices, are divided into two different periods, namely democratic transition (1990-1998

* The author is grateful for financial support to Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), ReligioWest Project, and European Research Council (ERC grant agreement no 269860). The author would also like to thank the following individuals for comments and advice on various drafts of this article: Miriam Kunkler, Alfred Stephan, Karen Barkey, Olivier Roy, Philippe Schmitter, Shinasi Rama and Olsi Jazexhi.

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and democratic consolidation (1998-2013), each facing democratizing actors, including Muslim groups, with different challenges and issues. We argue that the existence of a useful pool of arguments from the past, the so-called Albanian tradition, has enabled Muslims to contravene controversial foreign influences and recast Islam in line with the democratic and European ideals of the Albanian post-communist polity. The useful historical legacies and arguments explain Muslims' similar positioning towards democracy throughout different stages marked by different institutional restrictions and state policies.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic movements seeking to create an Islamic state and using violent means have long captured the attention of world media and the burgeoning research on political Islam. A wide range of Muslims who prefer democracy and commit to play by the rules instead, have been downplayed by the preponderant focus of the field, which fetishes radicals spreading terror abroad and authoritarianism at home. Muslim communities in the Balkans, who after the fall of Communism have embraced democracy and European integration as the end goals of regime change, are particularly missing in scholarly research on political Islam. If we heard about them, it was usually in the context of ethno-national conflicts during the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Poulton and Taji-Farouki 1997) and the intrusion of foreign missionaries who came in to diffuse their own message of Islam (Deliso 2007). Yet, almost no research so far has been conducted on how, and indeed why, Muslims in the Balkans have engaged with the ongoing processes of post-Communist democratization, which in the regional context have been increasingly framed by the narrative of return to Europe and the concrete process of accession to the European Union (EU).

This article analyzes how the Muslim community has engaged with, and has contributed to, parallel processes of democratization and European accession in post-Communist

Albania. The country is a crucial case for the purpose of analyzing Muslims' choices for democracy because of several reasons. First, it is the only Muslim-majority country that emerged in Europe after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire,¹ and has since, perhaps more than any other country in the Balkans, been under continuous pressure to confirm its European credentials (Clayer 2009a). Second, it is one of the few Muslim-majority polities, which has univocally embraced democracy as the end goal of regime change and has embarked upon a steady process of democratic transformation since the fall of Communism in the early 1990s (Elbasani 2013). Last but not least, with the collapse of Communist regime the country has become subject to different, and sometimes controversial, incoming foreign ideas and agendas on the role of Islam in the post-communist polity (Lakshman-Lepain 2002). This particular experience of democratization thus enables us to investigate how the Muslim majority has positioned itself on crucial challenges of post-Communist democratization; why it has selected some foreign influences and neutralized others among the options willing to come to its "rescue"; and what explains Muslims' recasting of religion in line with the broad democratic and European aspirations of the Albanian polity.

The analysis of democratization, and Muslims' respective choices, are divided into two different periods, namely democratic transition (1990-1998) and democratic consolidation (1998-2013), each presenting democratizing actors, including Muslim groups, with different challenges and issues. Whereas the first stage of democratization consisted of choosing and building democracy as the antithesis of Communist dictatorship, the subsequent stages entailed the consolidation of the feeble institutional framework and evolved in a manner closely connected to the processes of EU integration. The assessment of Muslims' choices on crucial issues facing the Albanian polity focuses on the central organization, the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), which is recognized by the state as the only authority on all administrative and spiritual issues pertinent to the community of Sunni believers, and which serves as the main hub of religious activities.

The argument proceeds in four sections. The first section summarizes alternative explanations of Muslims' commitment to democracy. The second section provides

background information on the regeneration of AMC structures, including the new institutional framework, organizational capacities and prevailing religious interpretations after the collapse of Communist dictatorship. The third section provides a summary of the experience of Albanian democratization, its crucial stages, actors and challenges. The final section then investigates how Muslims have positioned themselves on crucial challenges arising at different stages of democratic transition, particularly the popular movement against the Communist dictatorship during the early 1990s; the deep crisis of the state in 1997; and EU accession as the overarching aim of the Albanian transition at least since 2000s. The article also discusses the role of alternative explanations – rational-strategic calculations, theological/ideological concerns and local traditions – as well as the way those combine at different political conjectures, in explaining Muslims’ engagement with democracy.

The analysis suggests that institutional restrictions on religious activity have contributed to co-opting the Muslim community into the political goals of the state as defined at different stages of transition. However, it is the existence of a useful pool of arguments from the past, particularly reformist solutions reached during the creation of the Albanian post-Ottoman modern nation-state, the so-called Albanian tradition, that enabled Muslims to contravene foreign influences and recast Islam in line with the new democratic and European ideals of the Albanian polity throughout different stages marked by different institutional restrictions and state policies. The empirical analysis provided here sheds light on the unexplored relationship between Islam and politics of democratization in the case of Albania. Additionally, it contributes to the broader fields of religion and politics, the history of religion, and Islamic studies, particularly *vis-à-vis* long-debated questions such as “religion and democracy”, “Islam and human rights”, “Islam and pluralism” and “Islam and modernity” elsewhere in the Muslim world.

ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS ON MUSLIMS’ CHOICE FOR DEMOCRACY

Current research on the moderation of Muslims’ political claims and their preferences for democracy, revolve around two major alternative approaches, one focusing on the

rationality of religious behaviour and the other on the *ideological confines* of religious behaviour. In the first approach, Muslims are considered as strategic power seekers who calculate their political choices according to the structure of opportunities and constraints embedded in the broad institutional framework and changes thereto (Bellin 2008). Indeed, changes of institutional setting, and in particular, democratic openings that permit formerly excluded groups to compete for market shares “induce” Muslim organizations to reshuffle their positions and adapt to the gives and takes of democratic rules (Kalywas 2000).

In the second alternative Muslims’ primary commitments are to their doctrine, and their behaviour hinges on the role of democratic ideas in core religious teachings and interpretations thereof (Philpott 2007). Learning opportunities – be it via life experiences, exposure to new ideas or collaboration with others – enable religious leaders to recast religious doctrine according to conditions of time and place and possibly take on board democratic principles and aspirations (Wickham 2004). The recasting of religious ideas in line with moderate/democratic rules might involve strategic choices, i.e. learning to avoid red-line theological issues, which have previously placed religious organizations and leaders into trouble with state authorities and/or which have little appeal amongst large sections of the population. Both rational and ideological drivers of religious behaviour might involve some common rational-strategic shift of behaviour, but learning differs from swift adaptation to institutional changes to the extent it connotes a more gradual and lengthier process of habituation to new institutional models and rules (Schwedler 2011).

Still, just as Muslims’ strategic choice for democracy in response to swift institutional changes makes them susceptible, and somehow shallow, actors of democratization, leaders’ recasting of religious doctrines are similarly vulnerable to ideological thresholds précised in sharia law or diverse theological debates and authoritative structures. Religious groups, leaders and authorities must, therefore, possess valid *intellectual sources* to legitimize new political interpretations in order to be able to convince the rank and file of the believers (Tezcur 2010). Strategic- or ideational-driven change in itself

may count for little, and could in fact be easily dismissed as lip service, if it is not followed by clearly discernible group behaviour that goes beyond leaders' advocacy of democratic rules. Legacies of the past provide a pool of familiar arguments – institutional and ideological solutions – which Muslim leaders may use successfully in the process of adaptation and recasting of Islam. As Belin puts it, past legacies “provide varying institutional and ideological sources that Muslims may engage, and define the parameters of debate, ambition and strategies for political action” (2008, p. 335). The bargains struck between state and religious structures during the founding moment of the modern nation states establish particularly enduring deals, which persist over time and influence subsequent political choices (Kuru 2007).

THE POST-COMMUNIST RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE: INSTITUTIONS, IDEAS AND LEGACIES

The post-Communist democratization and the related liberalization of state regulations of religious activity have inspired a certain resurgence of the Muslim majority in Albania. However, the recovery of Muslim organizations, regulatory frameworks and relevant ideas after decades-long interruption under the atheist Communist regime, has been neither easy nor smooth. The pre-Communist past has provided useful legacies for the emerging Islamic groups to tap into, but the post-Communist transition has provided a challenging, though more permissive, political milieu for religious actors to recuperate their organizational infrastructure and ideas.

The Secular Model: Religious Rights, State Neutrality and Institutional Supervision

The post-Communist Albanian polity has gradually developed the necessary legal framework that guarantees religious freedoms in the context of the separation of the state from religion, and the equality and independence of all religious denominations present in the country. The first post-Communist constitutional amendments of 1991 declared Albania a secular state that “observes religious freedoms and creates the necessary conditions for their exercise” (The Albanian Parliament 1991, article 7). The next constitutional amendments adopted in 1993 included a more generous endorsement: “the right of thinking, conscience and faith are inviolable. Everyone is free to change religion

and beliefs and express them individually or collectively in public or public life via education, practice or performance of rituals.” (The Albanian Parliament 1993, article 18). The new Constitution adopted later in 1998 elaborated in greater detail the new format of secularism, in fact renewing the pre-Communist “consensus” concerning the French model of *laïcité*, first established during the creation of the post-Ottoman Albanian independent state in the period 1912-1939 (Lakshman-Lepain 2002, 41). Accordingly, the Albanian state has no official religion, but instead respects the equality and institutional independence of all religious communities (The Albanian Parliament 1998, article 10). The lack of an official religion denotes, at least in principle, the exclusion of religion from the public sphere, including the prohibition of religious education in public schools, the ban of religious symbols in public institutions, and the exclusion of any religious influence from the legal system and practice. In line with the model of *laïcité*, the Albanian state has also opted to maintain close control over the revival of religious organizations and their activity, particularly those of the Islamic creed. A separate state institution, the *Committee of Cults*, enables dialogue between the state and religious groups, but also checks and documents all religious activities in the country. The Committee is chaired by a state official who presides over a committee of representatives from the four so-called traditional communities –Sunni Muslims, Christian Orthodox, Christian Catholic and Bektashis. Indeed, the Albanian model of secularism, much like in the past, privileges the role of the state in overseeing and managing religious affairs (Della Rocca 1994, 129; Popovic 2006, 42).

The secondary legal framework regulating the scope of religious freedoms has further developed the model of institutional opportunities and restrictions embedded in the constitutional system. Religious groups are considered “judicial persons”, a status which they must earn according to the 2001 Law on Non-Profit Organizations. The judicial status grants registered organization the rights to hold bank accounts and own property as well as tax exemptions. The process of registration also subjects religious organizations to the scrutiny of the Court of Tirana, which examines their statutes for conformity with state legislation. The traditional communities, each represented by hierarchical nationwide central organizations, enjoy a more special constitutional status, which allows them

to sign bilateral agreements with the state and benefit additional advantages such as funding from the state budget, representation in the Committee of Cults, supplementary tax exemptions, and prioritized restitution of properties seized during the Communist era. The AMC has negotiated and signed a bilateral agreement with the state since 2009. Besides, the law on Financial Assistance to Religious Communities, adopted in 2009, provides all traditional communities with state funds to subsidize the salaries of respective personnel and maintain places of worship (Jazexhi 2011b). Despite of the most recent funding, since their creation in the early 1990s religious communities have received very meagre funding from the state, while most of their properties nationalized during the Communist era have not been returned, both issues contributing to their feeble financial autonomy.

Another crucial dimension of the post-Communist format of secularism is the imprint of decades of Communist-style propaganda in the perceptions and practices of Muslim believers. Almost everywhere in the post-Communist world, forced Communist-style modernization and eviction of religion from the public arena, has led to a certain secularization of the society and a sharp decline in religious practice. Post-Communist citizens seem to embrace religion more as an aspect of ethnic and social identity rather than a belief in the doctrines of a particular organized spiritual community. This is reflected in the gap between the great number of Albanians who choose to identify with religion and the few who attend religious services and serve religious commandments: 98% of Albanians respond that they belong to one of the religious communities; but only 5.5% attend weekly religious services and 50% only celebrate religious ceremonies during poignant moments in life such as birth, marriage and death (University of Oslo 2013). Additionally, post-Communist Albanians appear strongly committed to institutional arrangements that confine religion strictly within the private sphere –away from state institutions, schools, the arts and the public sphere more generally (ibid). Such secular attitudes show that post-Communist citizens are in general little receptive to concepts of religion as a coherent corpus of beliefs and dogmas collectively managed by a body of legitimate holders of knowledge, and even less receptive to rigid orthodox prescriptions thereof. As Vickers and Pettifer put it, “after so many decades under a rigid,

stifling dictatorship..., the last thing most Albanians want is to be told what they are allowed and not allowed to do, let alone see Sharia law...introduced” (2000, 117).

Re-born Muslim Organizations: Centralized Hierarchies and Foreign Networks

The granting of religious freedoms, starting with the lifting of the ban on religious practice in November 1990, has permitted the revival of Muslim organizations and the necessary institutional infrastructure to serve their believers. The first organizations were created by religious authorities who had survived Communist purges, and were modeled after the pre-Communist precedents of nation-wide central organizations, claiming authority on all administrative and spiritual affairs pertinent to their respective community of believers. The Sunni majority founded their nation-wide association, the *Albanian Muslim Community* (AMC) once they were allowed to hold the first Friday prayer on 16 November 1990, and later developed its regular statutes and organigram during the first national congress held in the capital Tirana in February 1991 (Jazexhi 2011a).

Once created, the AMC presented itself as a successor to the institutions established during the foundation of the post-Ottoman independent state, when the modernizing state authorities asked all religious communities to restructure according to the necessities and principles of country’s new “European life”, to which Albania now belonged (Della Rocca 1994, 129; Clayer 2009b). The millet system, which previously divided the country into four communities – Sunni, Bektashi, Catholic Christian and Orthodox Christian – each governed by their own principles and spiritual hierarchies, was accordingly re-organized into nationally based, state-controlled central organizations, which cut most links with extra-territorial authorities and undertook to collaborate with the state to enforce its political vision of a modern European nation-state.

Yet, the vacuum left by the destruction of the former atheist regime (1945-1990) proved very difficult to refill. Communists’ attacks on the religious establishment, the progressive elimination of politically independent clergy, the gradual prohibition of religious institutions and practices, and later in 1976 the constitutional ban on religion,

had left religious hierarchies in a totally inept situation (Prifti 1978, 153). After decades of fierce atheist policies, few clergy and knowledge of theology had survived, books and teaching material were rare, money was scarce, the confiscated property was not returned, and even the ritual practices that nourish religious traditions were largely lost. Given the lack of internal sources of recovery –religious authorities, knowledge and ideas – the revival of religious organizations was almost entirely dependent upon foreign associations and funds willing to come to their rescue. Substantial foreign aid, which initially poured in through cash-rich Arab NGOs, was instrumental for the regeneration of Muslim organizations, the reconstruction of religious infrastructure and places of worship, the training of new clergy, the creation of new outlets of communication, and the proliferation of social activities, targeting mainly the youth and the poor (Clayer 2003, 13-14; Vickers and Pettifer 2000, 100-109).

The diversity of incoming sources of assistance and their attached ideas, however, did not always easily fit into the inherited model of centralized administrative and spiritual management of Muslim believers. Current data from the Committee of Cults report a total of 245 religious groups and organizations, in addition to the four central organizations representing recognized traditional communities (Jazexhi 2011b). The mushrooming of religious organizations is paralleled by an equally impressive expansion of places of worship and religious activity, some of which are channeled through central organizations, but some are not. Many of the 570 registered mosques for example are built by foreign organizations, with some of them maintaining separate control on the activity of related mosques and operating outside of AMC management structures (Ibid.). The seven madrasas operating in the country, which are formally under the AMC, are de facto managed by different foreign organizations, with the Turkish Gulen Movement controlling five of them. It also runs a network of professional non-religious schools as well as the Islamic university, BEDER. The official journals of the AMC and Bektashi structures figure among the ten Muslim periodicals published in the country, although their number fluctuates in proportion to the external funds available. Similarly, most of the social religious activities – assistance to the poor, medical services, and a wide range

of youth programs – depend on foreign Islamic foundations, which mix economic activities and charity with open proselytization campaigns (Lakshman-Lepain 2002).

Interpretations of Islamic Doctrine: Albanian Tradition versus Imported Ideas

Islam came out of the Communist era also exhausted of religious ideas and in need of re-definition of its social, moral and political doctrine. Those who started attending mosques in the early 1990s shared the general conviction that the country lacked what could be called *ulemas* in the full sense of the word (Sinani 2010, 6). The most active pre-Communist religious authorities had died in the political prisons of the former atheist regime. Given the massive destruction of religious clergy and scholarship, the new found AMC structures lacked a consolidated pool of teachings and interpretations as well as a vision about the role of Islam in the post-Communist era (Lakshman-Lepain 2002, 44). The available doctrinal solutions, therefore, seemed to vacillate between two alternative options: the familiar tradition inherited from the pre-Communist past and carried on by the surviving members of the old religious establishment; and new religious precepts that arrived with incoming foreign organizations after the post-Communist openings.

The old leaders of the AMC considered it a sacred “duty” to carry on “the national traditions inherited from their ancestors” (Dizdari and Luli 2003, 5). The notion of Albanian tradition is usually articulated in contrast to the “foreign”, “intolerant”, and “radical” imports from Middle Eastern organizations and Albanian graduates of theology abroad (Sinani 2010, 8). The main ideological pillars of tradition, however, are rooted in the institutional solutions and ideas that characterised the founding of the Albanian independent state in the early 20th century (Clayer 2009a, 406-423). Back then, selected Islamic authorities, operating under pressure of the state, became active in accommodating Islamic principles to the overarching discourse of European modernization and progress, even when related reforms such as state-led secularization, the creation of centralized religious hierarchies, and the establishment of close state controls were in contrast with the established Islamic theology (Popovic 2006, 42). Those pre-Communist structures, or at least a good part of them, collaborated with the state in

advocating for a “true” and reformist Albanian Islam in tune with the principles of “European civilization” and “scientific progress” (Clayer 2009b).

Such modernist interpretations of Islam went side by side with a thorough reformatting of the religious structures, including the abrogation of the Sharia High Council; its replacement with new elected structures and rational organizational statutes; the reduction of the weight of theological sciences in favor of rational sciences at all levels of religious education, the complete secularization of public law and the gradual marginalization of *ulamas* from any public roles. Meanwhile, the Bektashi heterodox sect, which combined elements of Christianity, various Islamic sects, and folk culture, gained increasing institutional autonomy and was widely promoted as a home-grown, liberal, tolerant, and all-inclusive version of Islam by the intellectual fathers of the independent Albanian state (Della Rocca 1994, 37-41). State-led modernization, and the search for progressive ideas apt to country’s new “European life”, have thus shaped a local set of historical sources and arguments, which new AMC authorities could rely on when recasting Islam in the post-Communist era.

Imported versions of Islam, on the other hand, are commonly divided into a radicalized Salafist trend, diffused mostly through Arab NGOs; and more moderate versions of Turkish Islam, mostly represented by the Gulen movement, but also official links with *Diyanet*. The first group has arguably introduced new ideas and forms of behavior – strict observance of Muslim rituals, attention to social appearances, severe dress codes, solidarity with the transnational *umma* as a global community of believers, and complex debates on obscure points of Islamic theology – that were never a strong part of the Albanian tradition and appeared increasingly alien to post-atheist Albanians (Lakshman-Lepain 2002, 49). The second group is more in tune with the Albanian tradition, to the extent that it emphasizes moderate religious practices and rituals that incorporate secular values into Islamic doctrine and worship rituals (Raxhimi 2010). During the first stage of transition, Arab organizations had the upper hand in influencing the new direction of Islamic revival: they provided the lion’s share of assistance, built up the necessary infrastructure, and funded the theological education of a new generation of Albanian

scholars. Turkish influences have gradually gained favor, at least since 1998, when most Arab associations and missionaries came under attack by state institutions for alleged links to global terrorist networks. Currently, the Turkish Muslim Affairs Department, Diyanet, has its formal representatives in the country, is in charge of managing the *Haxh* of the Albanian believers, and retains an inclusive contract for the renovation of Ottoman era mosques. Meanwhile, Albanian graduates from Turkish Universities have gradually replaced their Arab-educated counterparts in key institutional positions of the AMC hierarchy, including the new elect Chief Mufti Skender Brucaj, and leaders of almost all the main directorates.

Following the inherited familiar tradition, the AMC has institutionalized the *Hanefi Medhab* – the school of jurisdiction dominant in the Ottoman Empire, which emphasizes the role of human interpretation and socio-political circumstances of time and place in reading Islamic scriptures – as the only Islamic school valid in the Albanian territory. The state and the AMC have, moreover, reached a formal agreement to protect the traditional line “against any deformations, extremist tendencies, or other aggressive manifestations in the spaces occupied by their believers” (The Albanian Parliament 2009). The *Hanefi Medhab*, which allows for circumstantial interpretations, provides the community with a crucial legitimate tool to recast Islam in line with “the culture, tradition, and characteristics of the Albanian society” (AMC 2013).

POST-COMMUNIST DEMOCRATIZATION: PHASES AND CHALLENGES

Since the fall of Communism Albania has gone through different waves of democratization and de-democratization, featuring institutional progress, but also significant periods of stagnation coupled with recurrent crises of order and legitimacy. The advances and challenges of country’s difficult transition can be analytically separated into two major stages, namely democratic transition (1990-1998), and democratic consolidation (1998-to present), each presenting potential democratizing actors, including the revived Muslim majority, with different issues and problems to face in the course of the difficult and prolonged democratization.

The gradual collapse of the one party-state dictatorship in the early 1990s saw the complex “opening up” of one of the most rigid totalitarian constructs ever built in the Communist world (Prifti 1999). On the eve of transition, the country was widely seen as an outlier amongst other Communist countries, to the extent it lacked both agency- and structurally-related conditions that could facilitate regime change (Elbasani 2007). Communists’ harsh purges on their opponents had destroyed all of the individual and collective sources of dissidence, who could furnish alternative ideas, mount an organized resistance, and lead the country towards democratic transition (Vickers and Pettifer 2000, 31-34). The ruling Communists, meanwhile, were determined to preserve the main pillars of Hoxha’s totalitarian construct, copied faithfully from the Stalinist oppressive model of the 1930s. Given the lack of organized dissidence on the one hand, and Communists’ determination to hold on power on the other, the impulses of change could only come from unorganized and spontaneous popular movements dissatisfied with the regime. Mass protests gradually occupied the streets of big cities and forced the Communists to surrender their monopoly of political and economic power, and sanction pluralism in November 1990.

The Democratic Party (DP), the first political opposition created soon thereafter, resembled an umbrella organization, unifying multiple strata unhappy with the regime, and representing the massive and enthusiastic popular urge for regime change. DP’s promises of large-scale shock-therapy style of reforms to quickly install democracy and catch up with the rest of Europe ensured the party an enthusiastic victory in the first free elections of March 1992. Once in office, the DP-led government initiated comprehensive packages of reform. By the mid-1990s, however, analysts came to agree that the DP’s governance evolved closely related to the legacy of the authoritarian past (Duffy 2000, 83-84). Free market reforms similarly denigrated into a “hillbilly” model of capitalism, which provided productive terrain for the mushrooming of Ponzi investment schemes (Vaughan-Whitehead 1999). The massive loss of citizens’ savings in fraudulent Ponzi schemes brought them to the streets again, but this time to protest DP’s mismanagement of economic and political transition. In the second half of 1997, citizen protests, often led by members of the political opposition, attacked state institutions and army depots, while

the government and security forces abandoned the major cities, leaving the country on the verge of yet another socio-political collapse. After the 1997 crisis, Albanians had to start anew, but this time amidst deeply divided political parties, acrimonious politics, a vacuum of state authority, a polarized society, and reigning socio-political disorder, which called into question the very existence of the state.

Fresh elections organized with the help of the international community in summer 1997 brought to power the Socialist Party (SP), the successor of the former Communist organization now transformed according to the ideological models of European social left. The collapse of the institutional order in the preceding months, however, made the country heavily dependent on assistance from the international community – multilateral organizations and neighboring European countries – to ensure even minimum security services and food supplies for the population. After the crisis, Albania was commonly referred to as a “client” state, which needed foreign supervision in order to function as a normal European state (Della Rocca 2000, 138). As a high-level Albanian politician noted, “[after the 1997 crisis] not a single... problem has been solved without the intermediation, supervision or intervention of various structures of the international community” (Ruli 2003, 153). The incoming socialist governments (1997-2005) benefited from a de facto co-governing situation with the international community, including substantial foreign assistance and political supervision, to jump-start the interrupted processes of democratization. The consequent period, 1997-2000, saw the quick and wholesale transformation of the legal-institutional frameworks starting with the adoption of a new constitution in 1998 (Elbasani 2007). Since 2000, when the EU extended its promise of membership to all the Balkan countries left out of the previous wave of enlargement, country’s externally-driven democratization has increasingly shifted towards EU-led candidate country reforms.

After decades of a stifling Communist dictatorship Albanians have univocally embraced democracy and European integration as the end goals of regime change (Elbasani 2013). All the Albanian governments, political parties and relevant social actors share wide consensus on the ultimate goal of democratization closely related to the advancement of

the country in the institutional ladder of EU accession. The promise of EU membership, structured around an expansive set of conditions, which each candidate country must comply with before entering the club, has gradually turned into the grand-national strategy and the focal point around which the progress and failures of the Albanian transition are debated upon (Elbasani 2004). Yet, the country has advanced at a very slow pace towards its end goals of democratization *cum* EU integration. Until very recently, Albania featured amongst the laggards of EU accession, and the difficult democratizers frequently rated at the tail end of international indices of post-communist transitions (BTI 2014). Not surprisingly, the EU refused to grant the country official candidate status three times in a row in the period between 2009 and 2013. The EU refusals corroborated negative evaluations of general political reforms. The granting of candidate status to Albania in July 2014 came with yet another to-do-list of reforms where the country needs to show further progress, and which will entitle it to open accession negotiations with the EU in the future. The negotiation of accession terms, a critical stage, which has encouraged intensive democratic reforms in the previous candidates in the East, is expected to foster deep-seated transformation also in the case of Albania. The prospect of negotiations have thus placed the country on a firm route towards EU accession, and have further consolidated the framing of EU integration as country's major strategy of domestic change and transformation.

MUSLIMS' ENGAGEMENT WITH DEMOCRATIZATION

Organized Support for the Anti-Communist Political Alternative

During the initial democratic openings, oppressed Muslims, like all the other religious communities, shared dissidents' urge for the expansion of human rights and freedoms negated by the Communist dictatorship. Thus, they found a close partner in the emerging anti-Communist movements that gradually challenged the regime.

The liberalization packages, including the legalization of religious practice in December 1990, but also the increasing contacts with the rest of the world in the context of foreign policy openings few months earlier, gave new life to the organization of religious groups. Muslims new organization under AMC, in return, helped to mobilize further support for

the nascent anti-Communist opposition and mounted the organized challenge to the Communist regime. The first *Cuma* prayer that took place in the northeastern town of Shkoder in November 1990, much like the first Christmas Mass held few days before, turned into massive events publicizing the wide-spread anti-regime sentiment amongst the population (Jazexhi 2011a). The AMC's leaders, all of them former prisoners and dissidents of the outgoing regime, used every religious meeting to defame Communists as *Kafir*, a Quranic epithet for enemies of Islam. Sermons delivered during overcrowded Friday prayers and annual rituals became powerful public pronouncements against the outgoing regime, which was openly accused by the Sunni hierarchy for "shutting the door of the soul, conscience and memory of God" (Dizdari and Luli 2003, p. 3). For Sunni leaders, the collapse of Communism was God's wish "to help the damaged and shamefully defeat the damagers" (Ibid, p. 5). In a public show of support for the anti-Communist alternative, AMC leaders joined DP's rallies, spoke side-by-side with opposition leaders, and expressed their gratitude for their political struggle. They also called on their believers to vote for the DP candidates during the first free elections in 1992 (Ibid.) The DP, on the other hand, relied on Muslims' new hierarchy and believer networks to organize its activities: lay Muslims filled the party's local structures, volunteered for the party, and participated in great numbers in the rallies against the regime (Jazegji 2011a: 12). Finally, Sunni strongholds in Northern and Central Albania voted overwhelmingly for the DP alternative, and were crucial to the enthusiastic victory of the DP during the first free elections in 1992.

The institutionalization of religious freedoms, along with coming of DP-government in power, created a new open play field for the regeneration of Islam. DP's favorable approach towards Muslims and its privileged links with Sunni structures became official state policy when the government appointed an AMC representative to chair the newly created State Secretariat, the predecessor of the Committee of Cults, and the only institution in charge of supervising and controlling religious activities (Clayer 2003, 17). Senior DP officials' creation of an additional semi-formal Islamic organization, *Kultura Islame*, tied up the existing institutional links between the Democrats and the Sunni community (Lakshmain-Lepain 2002). The Democratic government also capitalized upon

the “Islamic majority” to gain political and economic capital on the international Islamic scene (Vickers and Pettifer 2000, 102). Soon after the 1992 elections, a delegation from the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) was invited to the country to arrange its membership in the bank, a deal which was negotiated together with generous funding for Islamic education and scholarships for Albanian students to study in Islamic countries. By the end of 1992, DP’s leader and new elected president of the country, Berisha, decreed the country’s membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The decision was followed by a unilateral abolition of visa requirements for all OIC citizens. The government also appealed to private Saudi investors for multi-million dollar credits to sponsor the collapsing economy.² Open policies towards Muslims allowed the intrusion of diverse radical external organizations who, besides cash brought also controversial ideas, individuals and networks into the country. To paraphrase a study of that period, “when the Communist law was swept aside, ... Albania was invaded once again: by business prospectors, ‘advisors’ of all kinds, observers and religious groups who came to recruit for their faiths” (Young 1997: 5). Competition for the “hearts and minds” of post-atheist Albanians was particularly fierce in the context of the country’s location in Europe and its mixed religious composition, which made the Muslim population a crucial target for global Islamists to diffuse their message inside of Europe. Indeed, the country soon came to face the danger of “Islamic fundamentalism”, as foreign networks used formal and informal political links to engage in illicit profit-making activities and expand operational bases related to terrorist networks elsewhere in Europe (Vickers and Pettifer 2000: 106-107).

The AMC, for its part, capitalized on increasing political opportunities and generous foreign assistance to regenerate the role of Islam in the country. As the Chief Mufti noted back in 1993, “the democratic victory of 1990 has created new chances to connect with the world, develop new thinking, renew attempts to strengthen faith and discover religious morality” (Dizdari and Luli 2003, p. 9). At the same time, however, the centralized AMC structures made extensive use of the reformist arguments inherited from the past to contravene radical foreign influences. The response of one the high-level AMC leaders, Faik Hoxha, to the Saudi Minister of Vakifs is symptomatic of AMC’s

approach and defence of the traditional line: “We do not need others to teach us faith because we have had ours for 500 years. We need your economic assistance for the regeneration of our *own* faith” (quoted in Sytari 2011, p. 46).

The theme of religious tolerance and moderation, carried from the pre-Communist reformist tradition, continued to be a persistent thread within the regenerated post-Communist religious discourses. Particularly arguments of “national unity”, “patriotism”, and “religious tolerance”, which were envisaged and de facto worked, to glue the multi-confessional Albanian polity together during the creation of the independent state, resurfaced as critical tenets of AMC’s revived interpretations of Islam in the post-Communist era. As Endresen observed on the basis of interviews with a wide range of religious leaders in the country, “all clerics were eager to underline their community’s promotion of tolerance and explained it either in terms of theological underpinnings or with reference to Albanian traditions” (2010, 112). Inherited arguments on national unity and tolerance were especially helpful during the armed protests that ravaged the state, following the socio-political turmoil in 1997. At the time, the AMC joined forces with the Christian communities to remind believers on country’s “tradition” of religious tolerance and national unity as a way to assuage the rising social conflict. If there were any clashes involving religion, the official representatives of the main communities were careful to publically condemn the incidents and march together in demonstration of religious tolerance and unity (Demetja, 2010). The prevailing discourse on Albanians’ historical peaceful cohabitation and tolerance has, thus, provided Muslim leaders with valid sources and arguments to neutralize confrontational ideas and restrain the faithful.

Muslims’ Commitment to the New Turn of Democratization and EU Integration

The return of Socialist governments (1997-2005), with a new set of institutional restrictions on religious organizations, shifted the favorable tide of state policies towards the newborn Islamic networks and booming activities. Coinciding with the discovery of illegal-terrorist activities, the incoming Socialist governments made sure to scrutinize all Islamic charities and impose strict state controls on Muslim organizations that had taken root during the initial stages of democratization. The external drive of democratization,

which by 2000s was increasingly oriented towards the process of EU accession, on the other hand, forced Muslims themselves to re-assess their positions on new challenges of democratic consolidation and priorities of European integration.

This was particularly the case given that in the Albanian post-communist context, the overarching goal of EU membership is commonly framed as a dilemma between Europe and Islam. In the main stream discourse, Islam is commonly portrayed as an outsider to Europe and an obstacle to the realization of country's European future (Sulstarova 2006b, 265). Albanian post-Communist elites have been particularly receptive to Huntington's ideas on the civilizational divide between East and West, with the East embodying the authoritarian, obscure and backward face of the civilization, and Europe representing democracy, liberty, prosperity and development. Such narratives of Europe that prevail among intellectual circles have undermined the social and political power of Islam as the religion of majority. The celebrated Albanian novelist, Ismail Kadare, for example speaks on behalf of many intellectual Western-oriented "avant-gardes" when proposing that "the Albanian path to Europe should be taken without the baggage of Islam, which is not worth it, and only delays the arrival" (Quoted in Sulstarova 2006a). The debate is taken over by a wide range of semi-literary works, which sketch Islam with dark, anti-European overtones, an "estranger" to the European civilization in which Albania wants to partake (Sulstarova 2006b). Quite frequently, mainstream political debates have validated intellectuals' offensive attitudes towards Islam. Alfred Moisiu, then president of the country, would explain to a university audience that, "Albanians are often cited as ... a country of Muslim majority. [But] this is a very superficial reading of the reality. ... Islam in Albania is neither a residential religion, nor a faith spread originally.... As a rule, it is a shallow religion." (2005). Furthermore, Islamic-related symbols are commonly used as a political tool to denigrate opponents and present them as "anti-European" forces. As a result, Albanian Muslims find themselves "in the situation of numerical majority but intellectual, social and political minority situation" indeed, a kind of "surviving majority" (Clayer 2003, 19).

The shifting tide of mainstream socio-political discourses has triggered bifurcated responses amongst Muslims in their effort to adopt to the consensual goals of the Albanian polity – democratization along European integration. On the one hand, Muslims have discovered that the EU integration process, and the democratic conditions it comes with, can provide a window of opportunity for them to pursue and perform their religion, including in the public sphere. The AMC, but also other Muslim associations and groups of believers have frequently mobilised the language of the EU’s liberal values – freedom of speech, opinion, conscience, property, and minority protection – to expand the range of institutional opportunities and articulate new claims in the domestic political arena. Similar to other cases in the Balkans, Muslims perceive EU liberal policies guaranteeing equal rights of citizenship as a additional international layer of protection (Ghodsee 2010, 177).

On the other hand, Albanian dominant narratives on EU integration, intermingled with issues of Europe’s Christian heritage, problems of migration, and the uncertainty of Turkey’s accession discussed at the EU level, increase pressure on Balkan Muslims to position themselves along the reformist “indigenous” side of “European” Islam. Although the term “European Muslim” reflects a long history of Muslims’ engagement with models and ideas emanating from the European pattern of modernization and civilizational progress, in the post-Communist era it is twisted to revoke Muslims’ commitment to European integration. The AMC has taken the lead in packaging a “European” local version of Islam, which builds on the reformist tradition of the past. Religious education organized under the auspices of the AMC, for example, is used as a tool to transmit the reformist local and pro-European tradition to new generations of Muslims. Merging their religious mission with political goals, the leadership of the community pledges that the Albanian-specific Islamic values will help the country to “find human and brotherly stability, respect everyone’s rights and freedom [and] qualify for membership into the United Europe” (Koci quoted in Dizdari and Luli 2003). In line with the consensual goals of the Albanian polity, AMC leaders pray for “the rise of Albania among the [European] nations ruled by liberty, justice and service to people” (Shekulli, 2005).

AMC's line of interpretation has been increasingly contested by decentralized Muslim groups that participate into the broader international scene and autonomous civil society spaces. Graduates from Islamic universities abroad have returned to the country to reclaim religious authority and challenge what they perceive as the "spiritual poverty" and "administrative weakness" of the AMC (Vickers 2008, 8). Devout Muslims have also increasingly resorted to Internet and foreign publications and news as an alternative source of getting religious knowledge and information. New groups that coalesce around individual Imams and the diverse ideas they embrace, compete with the AMC over the principles and practice of "correct" Islamic doctrine. Some of those groups rallying around alternative interpretations of Islam have been especially active in mobilizing against critics of Islam in politics and society, denouncing a certain state bias against Islamic faith (MFA 2009), Islamophobia in the daily press (MFA 2008b), as well as the propagation of Islam as anti-European (MFA 2008a). They complain in particular that the state asks Islamic believers not only to detach themselves from radicalized trends, but also "to completely separate themselves from the holy places and traditional teachings of Islam" (Sinani 2005, 2). Despite of their doctrinal differences and varying relations to sources of political power, both the centralized and decentralized, moderate and conservative, old and young factions of Muslims speak with one voice when associating Islam with European and democratic values. Organized Muslim groups, including those advocating a more "theological" interpretation of Islamic doctrine, which official structures typically label as "radicals", stress that "Muslims of Albania remain loyal and devoted citizens to the principles of democracy and human rights in which our United Europe believes today" while adding that "the Muslims of Albania have a great need for the democracy and the human rights that our common continent has constructed in years" (MFA 2008b, 5).

CONCLUSIONS

This article analyzed how the regenerated Albanian Muslims have engaged with, and positioned themselves on, crucial issues of democratization since the fall of Communism. It also assessed and weighed the role of different constellations of factors – the newly envisaged institutional framework; revived organizational capacities; and competing

interpretations of religious doctrine – in shaping Muslims’ position *vis-à-vis* the political choices on parallel processes of democratization and European integration. As such, it contributes to the existing research in two important ways. First, it sheds light on Muslims’ intricate relationship with the post-Communist democratization experience in the case of Albania, which suffered one of the harshest communist atheist policies, and until the recent independence of Kosovo and administrative divisions in post-war Bosnia, was the only Muslim-majority country in Europe. Second, it provides theoretical insights on the dynamic interaction between rational calculations, ideological interpretations and past legacies that shape Muslims’ positioning towards democracy.

Evidence from the case study shows that the regenerated Muslim community has engaged with, and indeed contributed in diverse ways to, the evolving post-Communist democratization processes. During the initial stages of democratization, Muslims openly allied with the anti-Communist forces, which challenged the oppressive Communist dictatorship and advocated for the extension of democratic rights, including religious freedoms. The close political symbiosis between newly-created Muslim structures and the incoming anti-Communist majority later on benefited the unrestricted regeneration of Islam as well as the boom in the number of external organizations, which brought in diverse and sometimes radicalized interpretations of Islam in the country. The consolidation process within the overarching framework of European integration, and a certain Islamophobia among the intellectual and political circles, has bifurcated Muslims’ response to politics –with official structures allying with state policies and protecting the traditional line, while grass-root believers asking for more independence from the state and engaging with new ideas – though this has not withered their common commitment to democratic rules and the processes of European accession to which the Albanian post-communist polity has consensually opted to adhere.

The changing, bifurcating, but also certain constant, features of Muslims’ choices across different stages of democratization reflect various constellation of institutional and ideological factors. The institutional set of opportunities and restrictions have contributed to co-opt the official structures into the political goals of the state, and changes therein.

The religious hierarchy has taken active part in “adopting” Islam to the political necessities of time and place. In the initial stages, newly organized central structures have capitalized upon favorable open state policies to rebuilt the religious infrastructure and strengthen the role of Islam. The adoption of new restrictive institutional measures, and increasing state controls, after the change of power in 1997 has enforced AMC’s interpretation of a local ‘European’ religious doctrine, which develops in parallel with the political goals of the Albanian polity. Diversified Muslim groups have increasingly challenged the AMC structures, and especially their dependence on state authorities and political power, but they have also joined to associate Albanian Islam with European and democratic values. The existence of a pool of arguments from the past, particularly reformist solutions negotiated during the creation of the Albanian independent state in the early 20th century, have proven useful for both official and non-official structures in order to recast Islam in line with democratic and European goals of the post-communist Albanian polity.

NOTES

¹ According to the most recent 2011 census, 57.12% of the respondents declare themselves to be Muslims, 10.11% Catholics, 6.8% Orthodox, 2.11% Bektashi and 0.11% Evangelists. Among the respondents 14% refused to answer and 2.5% declared themselves as atheists.

² In 1992, president Berisha wrote a letter to then premier Alexander Meksi, suggesting that the country’s inherited poverty could be eradicated only with the help of external support and recommended that the government needed to encourage aid from Islamic countries.

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