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Albania

The times they are a changing: Rebuilding collective action in Albania

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Following a wave of protests in Zharrez, Albania, Griselda Qosja spoke with activists affiliated with two of the leading leftist organizations in Albania, Organizata Politike and Thurje.

From Aristotle to Hegel, the distinction between state and market has been the basis of understanding the role of civil society. In Albania, however, since the 1990s, unfortunately the role of civic activism has been often marginalized in public opinion, and perceived as an agent linked to the Open Society Foundation (OSF) [1] or backed by foreign embassies. Probably, an atavism of the communist regime, where the fight against foreign agitators was ever-present. Furthermore, for historical and geographical reasons, be it in our foreign policy or daily discourse, Albanians (as most of our neighbors) tend to adopt a mild paranoia of resistance against forms of external social and cultural domination.

Lulzim Basha, the leader of the Democratic Party (PD) has claimed more than once that the prime minister is the primary investment of George Soros in the Balkans [2] and that George Soros himself is an agent provocateur in the region. Unlike Hungary or Macedonia, these accusation have failed to produce a dramatic effect. The right in Albania has often associated civic activism and the current government with OSF [3]. As a result it has downplayed the significance of those protests which are not initiated or supported by the PD itself.

During the last two decades, the major problem with the opposition in Albania has been that it has typically come from the political parties. Mjaft (Enough), a movement-turned-NGO, was one of the first groups to protest without being formally party-affiliated (unfortunately, it also transitioned as its crucial members joined into political parties before the movement itself completely disappeared). Even in those cases when protests are spontaneous, often one of the two major parties blames the other for initiating them.

During the last two months, thousands of people have protested in the Albanian capital, Tirana. The protestors can be broken up into three main groups lead by (a) the PD (b) Nisma Thurje (Thurje Initiative) (a brand new movement, at the intersection of green and leftist politics) (c) OP (Organizata Politike or Political Organization, - the radical left). The government, led by the Socialist Party (PS), claims that the protests of Thurje are supported by PD. PD itself claims Thurje is supported by PS, in order to overshadow their protest. And Thurje itself avoids being associated with the OP, even when both groups protest on the same issues.

Despite the lack of solidarity within the opposition, the recent protests in Albania are showing a greater awareness of the necessity to rebuild collective action as the only way to hold back policies that reflect the personal interest of those in power. On a discursive level, this mobilization has already proven effective in redefining the role of the masses in the political realm. In 2004 the government wanted to build an incinerator near the capital city of Tirana. For this to happen a law that allowed the import of waste from Italy had to be passed. Mass protests, however, stopped this law from passing, first, when it was introduced by the DP-SMI coalition government in 2011 and, again, in September 2016 by Rama's government. In both cases civil society groups mobilized against the law, which is still pending.

Over the past decade every government has tried to serve the interest of certain private groups that oppose the interest of its citizens. As a result, it's of no surprise that civil society groups, through demonstrations and protest, have tried to keep the powers of government within legal bounds.

In order to better understand the current protests, I talked to leading members Organizata Politike (OP) and Besjan

Pesha, the founder of Thurje, who recently organized a small group of people from Zharrez, a small village situated on the biggest onshore oil field in Europe, to protest against a foreign company that is altering the landscape and destroying the inhabitants' houses in order to extract oil.

Organizata Politike - "We have always maintained the belief that parties representing social bases against the establishment should be the coagulative result of popular movements."

GQ:First, can I ask you about your political background and where you stand ideologically?

OP: Organizata Politike is an organization of the radical left that sprang up from the events of 21 January 2011, when four protestors were shot dead by the National Guard during a demonstration against a corruption scandal involving leading politicians. Since then we have supported various protests by chromite and oil miners, have organized protests against the increase in the price of public transportation, the occupation of public space and the neoliberal reform in higher education.

GQ:Thoreau saw the government as an agent of corruption and injustice and because of this, honest men must rebel and revolutionise. Does OP consider the actual government corrupt? Are the recent protests in Zharrez an example of this?

Corruption has reached an unprecedented level in Albanian politics and institutions, and this is easily perceived by the vast majority of the people. That notwithstanding, over the years since the fall of the regime there have been very few signs of protests springing independently from any political party affiliations. This is commonly attributed to dysfunctional trade unions and a complacent 'civil society'.

What is happening in Zharrez is a peculiar case of intertwined vested interests. Bankers Petroleum, a multinational corporation, has been ruthlessly exploiting the oil reserves in the Patos-Marinze area (where Zharrez is located) for years now, based on contracts signed and renewed by both political parties of the left-right centre. The corporation has been using fracking techniques that are followed by earth tremors causing severe damage to the houses of the inhabitants. An investigation launched by the Prosecutor's Office on the case was promptly dropped on request of the American Ambassador in Tirana, Donald Lu. This fact was made public later by the General Prosecutor, Adriatik Llalla, after a dispute between Lu and Llalla regarding reforms in the justice system.

GQ:Why did the OP join the struggle of Zharrez's residents? What was the politics of this decision?

We have been in contact with the residents of Zharrez since their first initiatives in reaction to the situation, initially by blocking the main highway, later by entering a hunger-strike and finally deciding to march all the way to Tirana to ask for an immediate halt to the fracking procedures. The residents asked for our support and proclaimed their non-party affiliation in their struggle. Our political statement has always been to support the various social groups that find themselves vulnerable under the wave of privatization and hence, exploited and marginalized for the benefit of private interests.

GQ:How erratic and factional is the left in Albania? Are there other leftist groups? And if yes does the OP stands on comradely terms with them?

It has always struck our comrades from abroad our claim that in Albania there are no other organized leftist groups,

including variations of communists, anarchists or even greens. Here we are excluding the various Hoxha-ist parties that exist only nominally. Operating in an ideological desert where we were immediately branded with the mark of Albania's Stalinist past has been quite challenging. This has prompted us, however, to become more inclusive and welcoming for young people of various political beliefs that identify the current political establishment as totally defunct and unreformable.

GQ: Is the OP trying to play the role of an agitating agent to accelerate the social revolt and bring students and the working and rural masses out of their passivity?

OP was conceived as an initiative to react to the general lethargy that characterizes Albanian social groups. The Albanian public has been fed the tale that our politicians are held in check by the pressure exerted by European and American representatives in our country. We, on the other hand, believe that unless there is pressure by organized and mobilized social groups from within Albanian society, no substantial change will ever occur. This is why we have strongly supported any initiative by workers, the unemployed and any other marginalized groups fighting for their rights in the public sphere. This is why, as part of the student movement, Per Universitetin, we tried to mobilize student resistance against the privatization of the public university that the neoliberal reform, introduced by the PS, sought to achieve. We are following political developments and we are trying to articulate a position which goes beyond the usual political show portrayed in the mainstream media.

GQ: With the intensification of the protest waves in the region and the advent of the leftist alternatives coming back in countries like Greece, Spain and lately the Netherlands, do you think that OP will present in the future an electoral alternative? Or is it advocating a more radical strategy?

For the moment, we feel that our role is to try to organize resistance through mobilization of the social masses. Albania is a country too small for big ideas. There was hope among us, as throughout Europe, that Syriza in Greece would mark a change in the course of European politics. Had this been achieved to a certain extent, it would have significant effects on the mentality of people in Albania. Syriza's capitulation to the third memorandum, however, changed that perspective. Another window appears to be opening now, first with the impact of Sanders in the US elections and now Corbyn in the UK, but it remains to be seen. Unless a palpable example comes from abroad, it seems unlikely that politics in Albania will take a significant turn. We as OP have always maintained the belief that, just like Podemos in Spain, parties representing social bases against the establishment should be the coagulative result of popular movements. For the moment, we seem to be far from this vision in Albania. Therefore, plenty of work remains ahead of us.

Thurje - "We don't believe that Albania will be made by some holy "prophet" coming among us with all the solutions. We don't believe in politicians as individuals. We do believe in communities, when they join forces and work together."

GQ: What is Thurje? Where does it stand ideologically?

Thurje is a grassroots movement funded by a group of young professionals. We believe that there is only one way to make Albania move forward and that is by organizing the society. A more proactive, reactive and organized society that is concerned about and participative in the decision making processes or other aspects of social life, would mean a better place to live as a result of better policies, better politicians, stronger rule of law, stronger communities. We don't believe that Albania will be made by some holy "prophet" coming among us with all the solutions. We don't believe in politicians as individuals. We do believe in communities, when they join forces and work together. Imagine

if we do this every day, in every aspect. Who could dare to cheat us? Who could dare to steal from us? Who could dare to lie to us?

This is our dream, our mission and our vision for Albania. And we intend to make it happen, as long as it might take. Personally, this is a lifetime mission. I would be doing the same even after 50 years, if I would be among the living.

GQ: On the 17th of March for two hours you were interrogated at the Police Station 1 in Tirana for organizing "unlawful protests that seek to destabilize Albania". What were you protesting against?

One of the monopolies that is pick-pocketing Albanians every day, is the fuel monopoly. Owned and controlled by a few oligarchs the price never goes down and the quality gets worse every year. As you might know, Albania owns the biggest onshore oilfield in Europe. One thinks, in this country at least fuel should be cheap and the quality good. Well here is the paradox, while we export most of the oil outside, we use the remaining to mix with the imported fuel. So we end up having a very expensive mixture of crude oil and fuel in our cars, which pollutes the air significantly. [\[4\]](#)

So, on 16 March we decided to do something about it and went into the streets to protest. The crowd stood in front of the Prime Minister's office in silence for one hour and peacefully went home. Before that week we delivered a proposal for the solution of the problem to the Parliament and Prime Minister. A change of law. So the protest was to support our proposal, despite the fact that the police won't allow us to protest as they say it might bring destabilization to the country. We actually know that the only persons 'destabilized' by the protests are the few controlling the fuel business. These are who police call "the country".

Not many days ago we won a very important battle against the oil industry. We "destabilized" them by organizing a small group of people from Zharrez, a small village next to Patos Marinza (the biggest onshore oil field in Europe) and led them to a victory against the company that is extracting oil and the government that was backing them. We held a march of 130 km for 4 days and another 4 day resistance in front of the Ministry of Energy. The mainstream media silenced us, government ignored us, but we went viral on social media. So in the end the village got full compensation for the damages cause by fracking, full compensation for environmental damages and fracking was stopped by law.

GQ: On your social accounts you called the arrest grotesque. Was it an excess of bureaucracy that announces the beginning of an oppressive system?

It was a pure abuse of power. They called me into the police station and first they threatened to arrest me. When I showed my hands and willingness to get arrested, they changed their mind. Then they said they would prosecute me. I again showed enthusiasm. They asked some questions and I answered them, but when I asked for a copy they refused to give me one. So I am afraid I won't have my prosecution either. It was all a set up to threaten me not to go on the street again, not to talk about certain issues. Now I don't want to think that this is the beginning of an oppressive system, as if it is it would be a very ridiculous one. Rather, I believe that fragments of the government in Albania are more controlled by business oligarchs, mafia people than by the people that we voted in at the last election. This is worse than oppression I guess.

GQ: In Mjajt, the movement you co-funded, several members slowly transitioned into the very political parties they once opposed. Does Thurje risk the same scenario?

I can speak for myself. I don't have an interest in political parties any longer. But Thurje is growing and more people join. Maybe some of them in the future will join political parties, maybe not. It's up to every individual to make decisions of what to do in their life. Thurje will not join, will not be used, will not be transformed into a political party. I

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do believe that Albania needs a new party, but also an organized society. Until then, we have a lot to do.

[1] Open Society Foundations was established by the investor and philanthropist George Soros. OSFA (Open Society Foundation Albania) was founded in the 1994 and since then has played a significant role in civil society by founding most of the Albanian NGOs.

[2] [Breitbart](#).

[3] OSF stands for liberal, right wing values. In the Albanian context the right criticizes the left for its affinity to such an institution.

[4] See [here](#).