



Dhimitër Doka

Abstract

In the last 2500 years, different peoples and cultures have lived in the territory of Albania where they have left their cultural traces, starting with the Illyrians-Arbëri-Albanian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, Ottoman, and up to modern history. All these elements together have created cultural and natural landscapes which have left their special features during the history of the transformation in the territory of Albania.

These events are related to the fact that the territory of Albania has often been part of various great empires or kingdoms dominant in history, such as the Roman, Byzantine, Bulgarian, and Ottoman Empires. The territory got the name “Albania” only in the late Middle Ages.

All these historical developments have influenced the geopolitical role that the country has played in different historical periods. This role has been dependent on many historical events, economic developments, and its influence and power in the region and beyond. The question arises, How has Albania used its geographical position and specific natural and cultural conditions in favor of its geopolitical role?

Keywords

History of the territories · Administration of the territory
· Geopolitical problems

2.1 Early History of the Territories

After two Roman-Illyrian wars (229–167 BC), the present-day Albanian territories became part of the Roman Empire. After the administrative reform undertaken by Diocletian, these territories became part of the new province of Preval

with Scutari (Shkodra) as its capital, the New Epirus with its capital Dyrrachium (Durrës), and the Old Epirus with its capital Nikopolis (located in present-day Preveza, Greece) (Albanien 2003).

Following the division of the Roman Empire in 395, the present-day Albanian territories remained in the eastern half, known as the Byzantine Empire. During the first to fourth centuries, while the northern part of present-day Albanian territories were included in the process of Romanization, the southern parts, especially the coastal areas, came under the influence of the Hellenic Byzantines.

Under the Byzantine Empire, present-day Albanian territories were divided into administrative-military divisions called “themes” (*thémata*). There were two themes, Durrësi and Kosovo, which had a wide territorial extent and were divided into smaller units (Johan Georg von Hahn 1854).

The Slavic invasions in the sixth and seventh centuries to the south had consequences in Albanian territories, and these consequences increased by the beginning of the ninth century, when the expansion of the Bulgarian Empire toward these territories began. The interior part of the territory, with such important centers as Berati and Durrësi, fell under Bulgarian rule, which lasted for about two centuries.

Although all these events bear no direct connection with the later history of Albania, their traces are still present today. The clearest evidence of this period is the many Slavic names and denominations that exist, especially in the central and southern part of the country (Albanien 2003).

2.1.1 The Albanian Territories from the Beginning of the Twelfth Century Until the Declaration of Independence

Although the name “Albania” is mentioned early, at least since Ptolemy in the second century AD, it derives from the

Illyrian tribe of “Albanoi,” who lived in the present-day area between Kruja and Tirana. Due to many invasions by different empires, the history of present-day Albania and the Albanians begins with the fall of the Bulgarian Empire in the early twelfth century. Initially, the name for the country was “Arbëria” and “Arbër” for the people, while in the neighboring countries, the names “Arvanitas” (in Greece) and “Albanesi” (in Italy) were used (Peter Jordan 2003).

The most important process that took place in the Arbëri territories during that period was the division of the country into several principalities and the consolidation of these principalities headed by the most powerful and the wealthiest lords of the time, known by their feudal names. Three of the largest feudal families of that time were the Ballshaj in the north, the Topia in the central part, and the Muzaka in the south (see Fig. 2.1). These feudal families dominated the Albanian territories at the time.

The Venetians also left important traces in these territories, especially during the fourteenth century, when they dominated the coastal areas with important city centers such as Durrësi and Shkodra. The evidence of this period is still present today in these city centers such as the Venetian Wall in Durrësi or the ruins and edifices in the city of Shkodra (Albania 2003).

This was the situation in the Albanian territories prior to the overlong Ottoman occupation.

The Ottoman idea and intention to penetrate the west and the south was conceived in Skopje in 1391, and within a few years, they occupied important centers like Berati (in 1417), Ioannina (in 1430), and Arta (in 1449). Meanwhile, after the Battle of Kosovo (in 1389), the Ottoman occupation would extend to Kosovo and the other Albanian territories of the northern and central part. In 1430, the Albanian territories were divided between the Ottoman-ruled ones, mainly in the central and southern part, and the ones under the Venetians, mainly in the coastal area, while the highlands and the isolated parts of the country were still under the rule of the powerful Albanian families (Albania 2001).

Most of the Albanian territories after 1431 would function within the large Ottoman administrative unit called the “Albanian Sanjak,” which consisted of 10 *vilayets* (provinces). However, with the administrative reform of 1864–1868, the vilayet was established as the largest Ottoman local administrative unit, which was further divided into *sanjaks*, *kazas*, and *nahiyas* (see Fig. 2.2). Based on this administrative and organizational reform, the Albanian territories were divided into four vilayets: Shkodra, Kosovo (with Skopje as its main center), Bitola, and Ioannina (Herbert Louis 1925).

Each of these vilayets consisted of several sanjaks, kazas, and nahiyas. This organization, with minor changes, continued to function as such until the end of the Ottoman occupation and the creation of the independent Albanian state.

2.1.2 The Albanian Territories from the Declaration of Independence Until the Liberation of the Country

The Declaration of the Independence of Albania in 1912 created the possibility for the Albanian territories to be administered by Albanians themselves through their own independent state for the first time (Albania 2001). However, numerous uncertainties were left behind after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Lack of internal unity among Albanians themselves and different interests of the neighboring countries but also of the great powers made it impossible to bring all Albanian territories under Albanian administration and to determine the political boundaries. Under these conditions, the political map of the Albanian territories was determined at the London Conference in 1913, when the great powers determined the current political border of the Republic of Albania, leaving out of this map many Albanian territories which became part of the neighboring countries. This has made Albania one of the few countries in the world that is surrounded by Albanian territories and populations in its entire land border, such as Kosovo, Albanians in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Greece (Grothusen 1993). The 1913 border division was also one of the causes of various conflicts in the region, the latest being the War of Kosovo in 1999 that ended with the country’s secession from Serbia and the formation of the independent Republic of Kosovo.

During the First World War (1914–1918), the territory of Albania was under separate administration among the Austro-Hungarians, Italians, and French. The period of King Zog enabled the governance of the entire territory, and the administration of the country was divided into prefectures, subprefectures, municipalities, and communes. Therefore, whole country was divided into 10 prefectures, 30 subprefectures, 160 communes, and 2551 villages (Doka 2015). This administrative structure, with minor addition or subtraction of small administrative units, was maintained until the beginning of Second World War.

During the Second World War (1939–1944), the country was occupied initially by Italy. During this time, the same administrative organization was maintained, introducing the element of municipality for some cities. Thus, in 1940, the administrative-territorial organization of Albania consisted of 10 prefectures, 30 subprefectures, 22 municipalities, 145 communes, and 2551 villages (Doka 2015).

2.1.3 Administration of the Territory During the Communist Period and Until Today

During the period of communist rule (1945–1990), the country was isolated, and the administration of the territory went

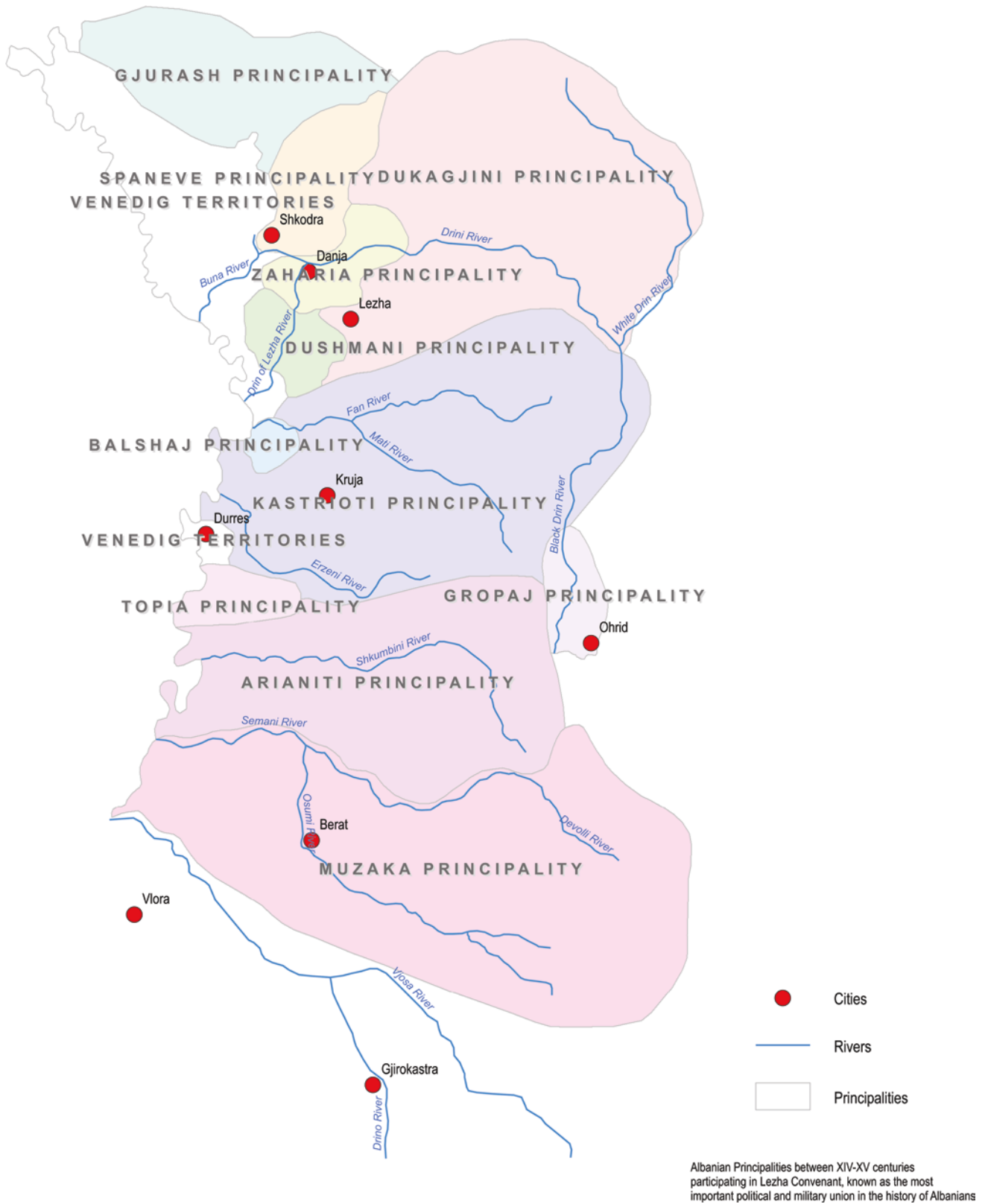


Fig. 2.1 Albanian principalities. (Source: Draft by Dhimitër Doka; Cartography: Ledjo Seferkollli)



Fig. 2.2 Vilayets. (Source: Draft by Dhimitër Doka; Cartography: Ledjo Seferkolli)

through numerous transformations. In 1946, the new administrative division of Albania was approved, and its territory was divided into 10 prefectures, 39 subprefectures, 116 communes, and several local units. However, in 1953, the district (*qarku*) was determined as the largest administrative unit,

which was divided into counties (*rrethe*) and further into local units.

In 1958, the districts ceased to exist, and the country was divided into 26 large administrative units called counties. In 1969, with the consolidation of the internal organization of

counties, Albania was reorganized into 26 counties, 104 local units, 56 cities, and 2860 villages. In 1979, the local units ceased to exist, but all other divisions were maintained until 1992, when the first new administrative division of Albania took place following the change of the political system (Doka 2015).

Under the new administrative division of 1992, the number of districts was increased to 36 and the prefectures, municipalities, and communes were reestablished as units of administrative organization. Following these changes, the territory of the country was reorganized in 12 prefectures, 36 districts, 44 municipalities, and 313 communes (Berxholi et al. 2003).

In 2000, the prefecture was superseded by the district, as the largest unit of territorial organization, while the role of the prefecture was limited to monitoring the proper implementation of laws adopted by the central government. In 2000, the functions of the county were repealed, as a unit of administrative organization, defining the district as the largest unit, and its municipalities and communes.

In 2014, the government undertook the reform of the new administrative organization of the country. The result of this reform was the limitation of the number of first-level administrative units (municipalities and communes) from 373 to only 61 municipalities throughout the country, thus eliminating the communes (see Fig. 2.3). While the district would remain as an administrative unit, the second level and the largest administrative-territorial organization of the country.

Though this reform was necessary and welcomed, it was mostly of a mechanical nature, not considering the many natural, economic, and human criteria on which such organizations must be based.

This makes the implementation of such a reform difficult, and it leaves many questions unanswered, related to the further progress of the administrative and regional organization of the country, such as:

- Can there be a new administrative organization without initially conducting the regionalization of the country based on natural and human potentials and the development priorities that each region should have?
- How appropriate is this new administrative organization with the neighboring countries of the region to implement joint development projects, especially in cross-border areas?
- How is this new administrative organization harmonized with the criteria of the European Union so that the country meets an important condition for its EU integration?

All these questions, and many others, leave the topic of administrative-territorial organization of the country still open. This topic will continue to be significant and important

for the future socioeconomic and regional development of the country.

Based on this analysis of the changes in the functioning and organization of Albanian territories in various periods, we can conclude that the creation of the cultural landscape of Albania has been influenced by various factors, which have left their marks to this day. From the earliest periods until the onset of communism, the cultural landscape of Albania was dominated by vast natural spaces, few settlements, but also important Illyrian and Roman centers and ruins, as well as medieval castles and citadels. There are also architectural constructions of modern western civilization (like Italian, French, Austrian ones) including the period of fascism.

During the communist period, the changes in the landscape occurred not so much through settlements but through the transformation of nature for agricultural development (drying of swamps, opening of new arable lands, construction of terraces for agricultural cultivation, and the like) and industry (construction of many large-scale industrial facilities in the shape of the manufacturing factories).

Since 1990, the main agent that has played a major role in the transformation of the Albanian space has been the great boom of the construction industry, especially in the western and southern part of the country. Another factor that has played a part is the abandonment of many peripheral and mountainous areas. Such a situation has created numerous environmental problems, such as excessive pollution being one of the biggest issues requiring special attention in the country.

2.2 Geopolitical Problems

2.2.1 The Geopolitical Role of Geographical Position

Although evaluated for its favorable geographical position in the region, as a transit country between Southern Europe (Italy) and Southeastern European countries, and onto Asia Minor (Turkey and beyond), Albania has not always had the opportunity to properly make use of its geographical position to its geopolitical advantage. This has happened because Albanian territories have seen long periods of numerous invasions by different empires and powers. These invasions have deprived Albanians from the opportunity to make their own decisions on their geopolitical role in the region. Thus, the geopolitical influence of Albania's geographical position has mostly been conditioned by macro political factors and the political interests of other countries. This has been the cause for the changing influence and role, sometimes shifting to the West and sometimes to the East, depending on the time of dominance of the respective powers (Grothusen 1993).



Data source: Law No. 115/2014 "On the administrative and territorial division of local government units in the Republic of Albania" (in Albanian only)

Fig. 2.3 Administrative Organization of Albania

The use of Albania's geographical position as a bridge connecting the West has been apparent in several cases. The first case is related to the Roman Empire's interests and the needs for expansion to the East, especially during the first and second centuries AD, and the Albanian territory with its wide access to the Adriatic and Ionian Seas and its transit position played a significant geopolitical role as a gateway or connecting bridge between the two most important world centers of the time, Rome and Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), through the so-called Via Egnatia (Egnatia Road). This important role and influence were materialized in the rapid development and strengthening of the important civic and commercial centers, such as Dyrrachium (Durrës), Apollonia, Butrinti (Buthrotum), and other cities (Peter Jordan 2003). The Albanian territory played an equally influential role during the Venetian period in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, especially with its main coastal centers Durrësi, Shkodra, and Vlora.

During the First World War, Italy occupied Vlora (in 1915–1920) with the aim of using its favorable geographical position as a beachhead and springboard to other parts of the region. Italy had the same objective in terms of its penetration toward the Albanian territories and the rest of the region even during the 1930s and the Second World War (Albanien 2003).

Another case of geopolitical use of Albania's geographical position presented itself during the War of Kosovo in 1999, when the country's territory was used as a NATO military base to conduct military operations against Serbia for the liberation of Kosovo.

Since 1991, following the opening of the country after the communist self-isolation, the role and influence of the West is mostly manifested through the influx of Italian investments, which amount to almost half of all foreign investments in Albania. At the same time, the strengthening of Rinas airport and the Albanian ports (especially Durrësi) and the construction of road corridors to the east and north have significantly increased the flow of goods and the movement of people toward Italy and the other Southwestern European countries in the last 30 years (Albanien 2003).

However, the Albanian territory with its geographical position has often been separated from the western geopolitical influence, shifting toward the East. An early case of this Eastern orientation was first observed at the time of the division of the Roman Empire in 395 and the creation of the Byzantine Empire (Peter Jordan 2003). After this division, Albanian territories were also divided, and the north of the country remained under the Roman influence whereas the southern part under the Byzantine influence. In the meantime, the role and importance of Via Egnatia (Egnatia Road), besides serving as the border between the two parts, was significantly increased. In addition to its traditional use from the

west to east, the east to west direction was also strengthened. The power-shifting tendency, along with the strengthening of the various cultural and religious elements, brought about the orientation of Albanian territories more and more toward the East. The Eastern orientation of Albanian territories was further deepened during the period of the Bulgarian Empire between the ninth and twelfth centuries, and even more so during the Ottoman occupation (1466–1912). This overlong period had two main effects on the country: its separation from Western influence and its peripheral position within the Ottoman Empire. The introduction of many oriental elements to the life and activity of Albanians was the concomitant of the period of the Ottoman rule (Hatschikjan and Troebst 1999).

The change of the geopolitical role of Albania in different periods is given in the following scheme (see Fig. 2.4).

2.2.2 The Role of Natural Factors

The first role is related to Albania's wide access to the Adriatic and Ionian Seas. However, this wide access is closed by the high mountains in the east, thus limiting this advantage "only to Albania itself." The movement to the east is only possible through some river valleys and mountain passes, "forcing" the neighboring countries (like Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia) to make use of the Albanian territory for their sea access (Peter Jordan 2003).

The Adriatic lowland plain of Albania is the largest in the entire Western Balkans, with a length of about 50 km. This feature makes it ideal for use, not only by Albania but the whole region. It particularly favors the connection from the north, Montenegro, and the Dinaric coast toward the south with the main centers of Albania (Tirana, Durrësi, Vlora, etc.) and further down to Greece.

To the south, the Karaburun peninsula and the island of Sazani separate Albania by only 41 nautical miles from the coast of Italy and the Apennine Peninsula. Also, this border is a very important geopolitical line where three countries are divided and united: Albania, Italy, and Greece. It is from here that the Ionian Sea opens toward Corfu and further south. Therefore, political, military, and economic interests have historically been linked often to this area. This is also the reason that the maritime border between Albania and Greece has remained undefined until today and constitutes a major debate between the two countries (Doka 2015).

Besides its access to the sea, Albania also offers many natural resources, which, if used properly, increase its economic and geopolitical role in the region and beyond. Albania is a country rich in numerous mineral resources, such as chromium. The country is a very important exporter of chromium in the world, and the product has already crossed the

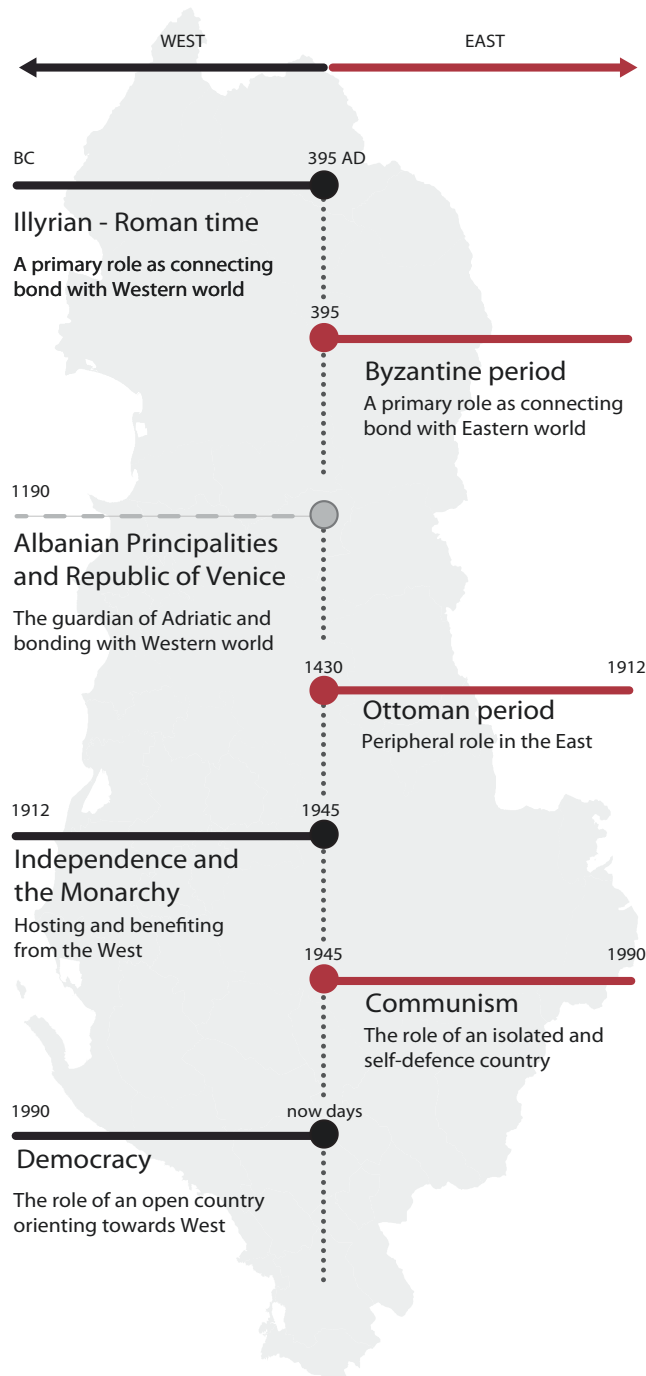


Fig. 2.4 The geopolitical role of Albania in different periods. (Source: Draft by Dhimitër Doka; Cartography: Ledjo Seferkolli)

borders of Europe, being exported in recent years mostly to China and India. Albania also exports its oil, bitumen, marble, and other products. Thanks to the favorable conditions of climate, land and water, Albania can produce and export more agricultural produce, as it is well known for it, but also export more for electricity, enhance tourism, and so on.

2.2.3 The Role of Cultural Factors

The role of the cultural factors is related to Albania's peripheral position and its territorial contact with two major world cultures, initially between the Roman and Byzantine Empires following the division of the Roman Empire in 395, and later, after the great division of 1054, between the Catholic and Orthodox religions. The effects of this division were manifested in several directions. While the north of Albania remained mostly under the influence of Roman culture and the Catholic religion, the south was dominated by the new Byzantine culture and the Orthodox religion. The border between them was the Shkumbini river valley, or the axis of the Egnatia Road. The influence can also be witnessed even today in the distribution of religious shrines, in the traditions and customs, the linguistic dialects, and so on (Peter Jordan 2003).

The penetration of Slavic tribes, starting from the sixth and the seventh centuries, would also affect the territory of present-day Albania with their cultural and linguistic elements. Although their culture failed to entrench itself and become dominant in these territories, its traces are still present today (Albania 2001).

The next great confrontation of cultures would occur at the beginning of the fifteenth century when Albanian territories were occupied by the Ottoman Empire for a very long time. The effects of this period were multifaceted and exert powerful influences even today.

All this confrontation of different cultures in the territory of a small country like Albania would be associated with different influences, among others in its geopolitical position and role. Among them, we can identify:

The existence of Different Languages and Dialects Although Albanian is a very early and special language with its roots in the Illyrian period, the confrontation of different cultures also meant the presence of other languages. Until 1908, Albanian had not managed to become the official language and enjoy its independent status; therefore, there was a mixture of languages in the country like Latin, Slavic, Greek, and Arabic. Under these conditions, it would take a lot of efforts and sacrifice for the Albanians to preserve their language and make Albanian their official language (Peter Jordan 2003).

The Diverse Religious Structure Although in the beginning Albanians were entirely Christian (Catholic and Orthodox) in religion, during the long Ottoman occupation with its mixture of other cultures, mass Islamization of the population would take place. At the end of the Second World

War, the religious structure of Albania was represented with 70% of people belonging to the Islamic faith, 20% Orthodox, and 10% Catholic (Albanien 2003). These figures have created to the outside world an image of Albania as a Muslim country, even though religion has not been an important factor for Albanians; therefore, that image is not in keeping with the reality. However, this has had its own impact from a geopolitical point of view.

The presence of Different Minorities Besides the dominant Albanian population, there are also different minorities in Albania, such as Greeks, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Roma, Aromanians, etc. A very large proportion of the Albanian population was left outside the current political borders of Albania due to various geopolitical factors. Thus, out of about 6 million Albanians living in the region, only about 58% of them live in Albania, 30% in the former Yugoslavia (primarily in Kosovo, but also in southern Serbia and Montenegro), 10% in North Macedonia, and 2% in Greece (not including the Albanian emigrants after 1990) (Peter Jordan 2003). This ethnic division and structure have historically been one of the main geopolitical problems of the region (*Peter Jordan: Albanien: Geographie – Historische Anthropologie – Geschichte – Kultur. S.82. Wien 2003*)

The Economic Backwardness That Has Historically Accompanied the Country The confrontation of different powers and cultures and Albania's position in the peripheral part of different developments have caused the country to often face frequent conflicts, which have hindered the poten-

tial economic development. Therefore, agriculture and livestock have been mostly regarded as the only economic option for most Albanians. The communist regime that aimed at the country's industrialization did not achieve its goal. It was only after the opening of the country in 1990, especially in the last two decades, that there has been a change in the economic structure, a shift toward the tertiary sector with such dominant activities as trade, transport, tourism, and the like. This has provided "oxygen" and given an impetus to the economy, which is gradually being integrated into the world economy.

References

- Albanien (2003) *Geographie – Historische Anthropologie – Geschichte – Kultur – Postkommunistische Transformation*. In: Österreichisches Ost- und Südosteuropa Institut, Wien
- Albania (2001) *The State of the Nation 2001*, ed. International Crisis Group (ICG), Tirana/Brussels
- Bërxfholi A, Doka Dh, Asche H (2003) *Geographic Atlas of the Albanian Population*
- Doka Dh (2015) *Gjeografia e Shqipërisë (Popullsia dhe Ekonomia)*. Tekst Universitar
- Hatschikjan M, Troebst S (1999) *Südosteuropa (Gesellschaft, Politik, Wirtschaft, Kultur)*. München
- Herbert Louis (1925) *Albanien – eine Landeskunde*. Vornehmlich auf Grund eigener Reisen, Berlin
- Johan Georg von Hahn (1854) *Albanische Studien*. Jena und Wien
- Klaus-Detlev Grothusen (Hrg) (1993) *Albanian*. Südosteuropa-Handbuch, Band VII. München
- Peter Jordan (2003) *Albanien – Geographie – Historische Anthropologie – Geschichte – Kultur – Postkommunistische Transformation*. In: Österreichisches Ost- und Südosteuropa Institut, Wien, Faqe 77–95.