

## **Albanian: North-South Chasm Widens**

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As investment and tourism trickles into southern towns, the rural mountainous north feels abandoned.

Hile Gjon Peraj, 43, raises eight children in Fierza in virtual darkness, as her little house in the Tropoja region of northern Albania has no power utilities.

A relative killed Hile's husband, Gjon, a few years ago in a conflict over property.

Hile struggles to raise her children - whose ages range from two months to 18 years - on a monthly social security payment of 30 US dollars, a few head of cattle and fruit and vegetables grown in the outside yard. A salaried job is out of the question. "The state farm I used to work for no longer exists," she said.

Metres from her house, 78-year-old Mani is equally hard up. His children emigrated long ago to Italy and he and his wife live on the money they send back. Only nature has been good to them, he says, ruefully, "It gives us something to eat in the summer and wood to burn in winter."

In Albania's mountainous north, many families live in almost medieval poverty, their condition a testament to decades of neglect, under-investment and, now, mass migration to the towns to cities.

"The youth have left the north," said Halil, a former teacher from the small town of Puka. "There is nothing left for them here. There is no work and no entertainment."

Rural migration to the cities is not confined to the north of Albania. According to Tirana's Institute of Statistics, Albanian demographics have changed radically in the last few years, as the rural population surges into urban areas, seeking work and higher education.

The best educated have moved in greatest numbers. More than 70 per cent of all high-school graduates have headed for the capital, Tirana, according to findings of the statistics institute. Others leave the countryside to try their luck abroad.

The north has suffered most from this change, partly because of a lack of new public and private investment, in what was always a remote region.

According to Tirana economics expert Genc Ruli, investment in small business in the north is 30 per cent less than in central and southern parts.

The infrastructure is also in worse shape. The only important new investment on the horizon is a planned highway running from the port of Durrës to Pristina in Kosovo through Milot, Puke and Kukës.

Detailed information on the north's social problems is hard to come by in a country where reliable data is scarce. But a ministry of labour and social affairs official told IWPR he believed the average rural inhabitant in the north earned about 80 dollars a month, compared to 130 in the centre and south, where tourism is better developed, and where many have boosted earnings through working in neighbouring Greece.

According to studies conducted by the UNDP, only 45 per cent of the active labour force is working at all in the region of Shkodra, the north's largest city. There, emigration is still the main route to an income.

Edmond Dragoti, a psychologist in Tirana, says people leave the north not only because of the geographical remoteness but because successive governments have failed to come up with policies that promote its integration into the rest of the country.

Traditional blood feuds are both a symbol and a factor behind the region's continuing backwardness.

Many of those whose families are engaged in blood feuds are locked into their homes, while their children are isolated and cannot attend school. According to the National League of Conciliation, an NGO dealing with these disputes, more than 500 families in Shkodra are effectively confined to their homes, fearing revenge killings.

The strength of this backward-looking phenomenon is partly attributed to the old clan-based system of popular justice, known as the Canon, or code of Leke Dukagjini.

But poorly functioning institutions and worsening economic conditions are also behind the resilience of Leke's canon in the north. "The blood feuds are increasing because of poverty and growing unemployment," Lulzim Nekcaj, an analyst from Shkodra, told IWPR.

Adem Shehu, a Tirana historian, says the north was always a region apart. "Historically, there has been a big difference between the north and the south of the country," he said, adding that the latter always retained its economic and cultural lead, as it became the base of great landowning families, many of whom developed strong economic and social ties to the West.

When many southerners emigrated to France and the US in the early 20th century, these ties grew stronger. In the north, only Shkodra developed similar ties to the West, Shelu said.

Fadil Kaja, a writer based in Shkodra, says the north always had immense natural and human potential, but the ruling southern elite did not draw on it. Although most of the country's minerals and other natural resources lie in the north, they were not developed.

The north has had its positive moments in history, however, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, during the reign of King Zog, whose family came from Mat, in the north. During his reign, a conscious effort was made to improve the north's infrastructure, by constructing bridges and a regional airport. Northerners were given more access to government and especially army posts.

But the communist revolution after the Second World War saw these efforts reversed. Enver Hoxha, Albania's long-time, post-war communist leader, was from the south and favoured southerners with most government positions.

According to the Tirana-based Institute For The Integration of Former Political Prisoners, most of those jailed for political reasons were from the north, where anti-communist resistance was fierce in the mountains.

The communist era did see the construction of several giant hydro-electric power stations while other big state industries brought jobs to the north. But after communism collapsed, most of the latter went bankrupt, leaving thousands of people unemployed.

The transition to a market economy has merely accelerated the exodus of people from the north to Tirana and central Albania.

Besnik Aliaj, director of Development And The Habitat, an NGO based in Tirana involved in legalising illegally-built houses built in the capital by northern migrants, says this huge movement has often not benefited the migrants much, as they end up living in unsafe houses that lack most necessary services.

Azgan Haklaj, a member of parliament from the northern Tropoja district, says migration is the only way people can improve their lives. "Coming to Tirana is an important positive development for them," said Haklaj, pointing to greater job opportunities.

Miri Hoti, chancellor of Shkodra university, however, warns of the danger posed by the brain drain from the north, "Such a massive movement of people has two different sides to it. It brings relief, because there are less people left to look for the few jobs available, but it is also taking away the cream of the city.

"Government and civil society need to think of incentives to keep intellectuals and good professionals here."

Several international organisations, such as the World Bank and other western development agencies, have begun to focus on the north, to counter some of the region's problems.

Diplomats from Britain, Norway and several other western countries have recently paid visits to see it first hand. One of the biggest development projects in the area is being funded by UNDP, aimed at disarming the local population and clearing mines from the border zone with Kosovo. "It is one of the most important projects for us," said Prel Ndoca, the head of the commune of Has. "We are getting rid of weapons and also receiving funds for constructing schools and roads for the community."

But while some progress is being made in the north, most observers believe the region will only have a chance of prosperity when the country acquires stronger links with Europe, which is something the whole of Albania is looking forward to.

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