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Albania 2030 / economic development based on tourism

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Albania possesses highly valuable potentials for the development of tourism, which ensures long-term economic development and social-environmental prosperity. Albania is presently considered one of 10 fastest growing economies, based on its own GDP, and it is recommended as one of the world's top 10 touristic destinations. The country has a 450 km long costal line, 300 of which are located along the Adriatic Sea, and 150 along the Ionian Sea. These areas include 24 areas of high-quality touristic potential locations, mostly on virgin and undeveloped territories. In the meantime, more than half of the country's surface is mountainous, above 600m from the sea level, and on these areas we find 15 other areas full of touristic potentials. Based on these facts, the main conclusion presents a clear need for the implementation of a national system of access and a pragmatic network of roads, which must be sensitive towards environmental values and the uniqueness of the landscape. They should be based on a ring-radial transportation and circulation system.

Despite the considerable potentials of the "sun & sand" type of tourism, Albania also has other interesting options inside its territory, including: i) two regions surrounding the country's main lakes (Shkodër and Ohër-Prespa), a network of small lakes (Dumre, Lurë, etc.), and many artificial reservoirs built since and during communism. The country also counts 15 national parks, 25 emerald-ecologic sensitive areas, and lots of forests everywhere;

ii) There exists rich archeological heritage of Illyrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, and Ottoman character, including: Butrinti (UNESCO), Apollonia, Bylis, Durrësi sites, etc. But there are also many monasteries, churches, mosques, castles and fortifications belonging to the medieval age, including two museum cities: Berat and Gjirokastra (UNESCO), and many others of special architectural character;

iii) Albanian culture has a rich variety of religions, folklore, traditions and costumes; a diversity of craft works and culinary variety; people are hospitable and friendly with foreigners, and they also speak several foreign languages, in most cases. The climate is very good, mostly sunny, with a long summer.

So the potentials are incredible, but what has been missing is the increased awareness of the population; capacity building for the local public and private actors; and lack of national spatial visioning and policies. The conclusion pertaining to the spatial dimension holds that Albania must diversify and extend its own touristic menu, beyond coastal areas and summer seasons, by promoting combined products of destinations and itineraries in inland regions which could be cultivated through instruments of spatial planning. Meaning that, despite the territorial planning of strategic touristic regions, like: the Riviera, the Alps, Ohër-Prespa, and the Metropolitan region; the country must also plan at least six identified touristic itineraries with a cultural-landscape-historic character,



Fig1 / panoramic view of the Riviera source / PhD international workshop students

such as: the "Via Egnatia" itinerary, the "Scanderbeg" itinerary, the "Ali Pasha" itinerary, the "Bektashi culture" itinerary, the "Myzeqeja" itinerary, "The Nation's Road" itinerary, etc. This stimulates local economic development and the return of local people to the peripheral-abandoned areas.

In terms of spatial dimensions, today, Albania is confronting the challenge of limited physical capacities for the accommodation of the growing demand on tourism. According to INSTAT Albania: i) The number of total visitors that enter our country by different means of transport (land, air, sea) has increased 10 times, from 300 thousand in 1995, to 3.3 million in 2013; ii) The number of visitors in hotels has grown from 140 thousand in 1995, to 220 thousand in 2013; while the number of foreigners has tripled out of 40 thousand to 120 thousand visitors; iii) The number of visitors' overnight-stays in hotels have doubled from 200 thousand in 1995 to 400 thousand in 2013. Out of them, the number of overnight stays for foreign visitors has increased 2.5 times for the same period. Others are local Albanian visitors; iv) Such a growing demand is accompanied by the increase of accommodation capacities from 60 hotels and 2,000 beds in 1995, to 300 hotels and 10,000 beds in 2013; which means a 5-time increase of capacities in two decades.

The conclusion here is that Albania faces another challenge, which needs urgent capacity development of accommodation

by at least 2-3 times growth in 2030. In figures, it means that the country must expand its capacity with at least 15-20 thousand new beds, aiming to support a demand of 7 million visitors per year by 2030; and complementing and/or competing with neighboring countries with historic consolidation of touristic demands. However, this must be done without causing new real estate "bubbles" and in conformity with unique environmental and landscape values. For this purpose, the main planning and development instruments will be: i) rehabilitation, revival, re-contextualization, and maximal reuse of the historic villages and traditional areas of the existing settlements and informal developments – instead of opening new development areas with high costs on territorial consumption; ii) encouraging high-quality investments for a limited number of areas of serious and good quality hotels and small-scale resorts, which can serve as magnets or have an acupuncture effect in terms of energizing local development and employment, as well as demand increase from the elite visitors. This plan can also stimulate the increase of foreign investments in such a specialized infrastructure and working culture.

As regarding the infrastructure of international access, Albania has to overcome another challenge in order to break down the inherited isolation of communication. The analysis of the access for the existing demand of 3 million visitors shows: i) Sea-travelling has doubled, thanks to the high volume



of the Albanian emigrants in EU “western” countries; as well as from the improvements of ports and ferry services during the last decade; ii) Air-travelling has increased six times, thanks to the construction of the new international airport in Tirana; the increase of service quality because of private concession, and because of the introduction of competition by the private sector and low-cost flights; iii) Land-travelling has increased 15 times, mainly because of the huge emigration in Greece; of the regional visitors from other Albanian-speaking territories (Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia) and the region in general; as well as the increasing influxes of visitors from “eastern” EU countries like: Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, etc.

A conclusion on the spatial character is that Albania must progressively focus on ensuring the chain of events and activities of economic-cultural-touristic character all over the territory; including the use of: religious festivals, bio- and local products, and agro-tourism activities; as well as a more strategic use of infrastructure within and in the neighboring countries: i) improving border infrastructure and road-access, in order to confront and ease the growing rhythm of entries, especially during summer season or on national-religious days. These changes facilitate the protection of the internal demands and of the Albanian emigrants; the demand of other Balkan countries, and especially that of other Albanian-speaking territories; ii) activating two regional airports in Kukës and Saranda, in order to directly reach the

main national touristic destinations like: Riviera, and the Alps; and connect them with the EU, Japanese and North American markets; iii) using regional-neighboring infrastructure in order to benefit from the “crossborder” tourism, including borders, roads, ports and airports, especially the airports of Podgorica, Prishtina, Ohrid, Ioannina, Corfu; and ports of Bari, Brindisi, Ancona, Trieste and Koper. This implementation must be followed by the activation of a national sea-line along the Albanian coast which will ensure the connection of different sea-side cities and towns by the sea; as well as an Adriatic-Ionian route along the Western Balkan coast, from Koper (Slovenia) to Patra (Greece), connecting all the countries together.

However, as there cannot be economic growth without sustainable development, the issues of environmental concern and sustainability are very important for any spatial analysis. From a geographic point of view, Albania is a country dominated by a hilly-mountainous terrain, thus there exist three main topographic characteristics based on the average altitudes: plains, hills and mountains. Such a topography could either be an advantage or a barrier for the development of the country. In terms of environmental concerns, the main identified national hotspot areas are mainly located on the western plain of the country. They are the result of the urbanization effect, lack of solid waste infrastructure and services in a consumerist growing society, and because of inherited problems of the past from the



*Fig2 / UNESCO site of Butrinti theater
source / PhD international workshop students*

industrial and human discharges, which have polluted many rivers and sea areas. Other environmental problems are related to the shortage of forest surfaces, erosion from the mountains, pollution because of mining and the existence of mining areas due to the military actions of the Second World War, as well as the history of isolation during communism and the conflict in Kosovo (1999).

But Albania also has amazing potentials of landscaping and natural historic itineraries. This wealth could be important for the education of environmental and cultural sensitivity, as well as for the economic growth through tourism and the cultivation of national identity. For this reason six national and cross-border itineraries are identified: i) the Alps itinerary; ii) the Skanderbeg itinerary; iii) the "Via Egnatia" itinerary; iv) the Bektashi itinerary; v) the Ionian Riviera itinerary vi). and the "Ali Pasha" itinerary. But other smaller landscape potentials and historic national routes can be found on each region or specific areas too. In order to address such issues, a special strategy is recommended. Combining agricultural land, existing protected and emerald areas, with the new green extensions and corridors, aiming to create a national green strategy, which cures the existing ecological problems, improves the quality of life and helps branding a future Albania of high standards. This will be the answer to the existing situation.

At the moment there are 54 listed protected areas, which are categorized

into six main groups: i) Strict nature reserves; (ii) National parks; (iii) Nature monuments; iv) Managed nature reserve; v) Protected landscape; vi) Protected area of managed resources. There are also 25 ecological emerald areas which represent an effort to prepare Albania to gain access to EU projects through projects like "Natura 2000". The extension and consolidation of the "Green" and "Emerald" areas aims to at least triple the green space in Albania, while the existing protected areas have increased from 15% to 30% of the national territory, which also goes in line with the EU directives and advice. This consolidation process will also make up for the protection of these areas, firstly, and secondly for the protection of the agricultural land against further urbanization, outlining clear borders based on the example of green corridors, between these categories of land use.

In order to better and more thoroughly explain such a strategy of networks and corridors, two case studies were elaborated:

- The first case is the Albanian Alps Natural Corridor and the relation of the Park of three nations with the polycentric developments in between Shkodra-Podgorica and Kukës-Prizren. This is an example of how hydrographic potentials, national parks and protected areas of three countries can be part of one natural system and work together as a sustainable green network. This network also provides better conditions for free movement through the improvement of infrastructure, integrates economic corridors in the region without



harming the natural potentials and promotes the development of ecotourism and landscaping.

- The second case is that of the space between southern Albania and northwestern Greece, including the Riviera Corridor, where the natural and historic corridor of Ali Pasha between Tepelena, Gjirokastra and Ioannina could be a strong economic drive and touristic incentive for the region between the natural parks of Vikos, Hotova, Labëria and Butrinti-Llogara/Karaburun.

Therefore, POLIS/Metropolis and UNIFE/Sealine accepted "Albania 2030 Manifesto" as a starting document. The Albania 2030 Manifesto describes the development policies for the coming 15 years, based on the growth scenario of the four main economic pillars: tourism, agriculture, energy and mining. This projection is achieved by taking into consideration several spatial instruments, including:

- Controlling the growth of urban centers against sprawl and informality, by consolidating urbanized areas, metropolitan regions and complementary urban centers;
- Identifying industrial and economic priority areas to support employment and economic growth;
- Increasing the regional competitiveness of the country by strengthening the international hub, national and regional networks and regional gateways;
- Identification and completion of national and regional importance infrastructure of roads, seaports, airports and energy;
- Identification of 6 main regions, which are

specialized based on their social-economic resources;

- Identification and strengthening of polycentric and cross border regions, growth poles and free economic areas, aiming to establish a new economic model which is based on a better regional balance and corrects the effects of radical urbanization, disparities and segregation;
- A special focus on environmental issues and sustainable development by identifying projects of hot-spots rehabilitation, protection of forestry and green space, extension and consolidation of "green Albania";
- Recognition and cultivation of the big potentials of the country as regarding landscaping, historical and natural routes, eco-tourism, etc.;
- Achieving national development goals by considering with special importance the neighboring Albanian speaking territories as well as coordinating with the western Balkans and Adriatic sea region, not forgetting the process of EU integration;
- Improving the social-economic efficiency and effectiveness by providing integrated and equal access between the center and periphery based on a ring radial system. Thus, we would achieve an important objective, transforming Albania from an isolated economy, to a regional and European actor of economy.



*Fig3 / Porto Palermo beach
source / PhD international workshop students*



*Fig4 / Butrinti national park
source / PhD international workshop students*