

The EU integration process as an ideological and practical straitjacket (the case of Albania)

By Arlind Qori, May 2013

According to the latest opinion polls¹, 86.5% of the Albanians would vote in favor of the EU integration, the largest percentage in the EU integration aspiring countries. Friedrich Engels once put it that the poor, being dispossessed on earth from any kind of property, built in their imagination a realm of prosperity and equality in heaven. The major socio-economical decisions of the Albanian governments in the last 20 years were “advised” from institutions like the IMF, and the EU. Despite the impoverishing socio-economical consequences² of the neoliberal agendas of these institutions, the overwhelming majority of the Albanian people support the EU agenda. The concept of ideology as a straitjacket shaping the political consciousness of the society would explain the superficial paradox of the above-mentioned conclusion.

Ideology is defined in a number of alternative ways, such as those which give it the unreflective status of integrating individuals to the value-system that enables a society to function, those Enlightenment-based which

¹ Albanian Institute for International Studies (October 2012), quoted by <http://www.balkanweb.com/shqiperi/2685/shqiperi-rritet-mbeshtetja-per-anetaresimin-ne-be-105588.html>

² According to official figures from the Bank of Albania, the unemployment rate is going to reach 24.8% in the end of 2012. <http://shekulli.com.al/web/p.php?id=5659&kat=87>. Non-official sources rate it around 40-50% <http://www.shqiperia.com/lajme/lajm/nr/4666/50-perqind-e-popullates-pergjithesisht-e-papune>. On the other hand, other socio-economical factors are going from bad to worse. There is no income-based minimum living standard; wage-laborer’s conditions, especially in the mines and the in the textile-clothing industries, are degrading, their working conditions are deteriorating, wages are going down etc; the health care institutions do not provide health treatment for those without health insurances, and the hospital’s conditions are also going from bad to worse (of course except private hospitals which are too expensive for the majority of the population). This is reflected ideologically in the desolating approach towards for example the Greek crisis. Apart from usual xenophobic remarks, most of the people still don’t understand why the Greeks are making such a fuss for something common Albanians experience year after year.

classify it as just a false consciousness based on prejudice which can also serve priestly interests, those which focus on the legitimation of hierarchic power relations in society, especially the socio-economical ones etc. The current perspective of ideology will be based on the latter's conception, twisting it so that we can understand ideology critically, not just as a common lie, but as a "lie" which has performative effects, permeates not only the way people think, but also the way they consciously and unconsciously act. To begin with some kind of definition, ideology is used when... "when a dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification'... frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions."³ This proto-definition has its origins in Marx and Engels' conception of ideology as a *camera obscura* which "truthfully" represents the upside-down character of the socio-economical relations. Leaving aside the twists of Lukácsian false consciousness, and focusing on the performative and legitimating functions of ideology, we may use the Althusserian definition of ideology as that which "...represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."⁴ This is what enables Žižek⁵ to use ideology as a fantasy which struggles not only to hegemonize the field of discursivity, as in the neo-Gramscian approach of Laclau and Mouffe, but to create retroactively the missing unity of the traumatic Real, which in Žižekian Lacanese is the name of the Marxist class struggle. Anyway, dealing critically with the Albanian ideology, which tries to suture the onto-political gap in the nodal point of the idea of Europe and its concrete materialization, the EU, the commonest aspects of ideological legitimation will come forward.

Before analyzing the legitimating political discourse, one has to review shortly the major economical reforms that the EU imposes on various Albanian governments as criteria for joining it. Following the Copenhagen

³ Eagleton, Terry. (1991). *Ideology: an introduction*, p. 5-6, London: Verso

⁴ Althusser, Louis. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*. English Transl. Ben Brewster, p. 162, New York: Monthly Review Press

⁵ "The fundamental level of ideology, however, is not that of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself." Žižek, Slavoj. (2009). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 30, London: Verso

criteria, the concrete EU-Albania agreements, Albania had to materialize neoliberal economical reforms such as the privatization of major public enterprises, fiscal austerity, a pro-business approach, which means that the sole economic model of development comes through encouraging only private enterprises, the flexibility of the labor market, meaning exclusively the creation of the contemporary *precariat*, the orientation of the educational reforms towards market-integration, so leaving aside the critical-reflective dimension of especially the higher education etc. And all these agreements between political partners that share the same ideological views are conditions not only to be part of the EU, but also to receive economic assistance from the EU.⁶ These socio-economical reforms are not the product of unexpected agreements between unknown partners, but the consequence of a radicalizing neoliberal agenda that all Albanian post-communist governments had. It started before the EU integration process, in the vest of privatizing almost all public productive enterprises through the ideological legitimation of shock therapy, overtly used in public discourse, until recently with the quasi-total privatization of most of the public economical resources going from a large percentage of

⁶ According to the Commission of the European Communities' Proposal for a Council Decision on the principles, priorities and conditions contained in the European Partnership with Albania and repealing Decision 2006/54/EC, Brussels, 06.11.2007. COM(2007) 656, still in vigor, the Albanian government, among other things, is urged to: 1. Complete the unbundling of the state electricity company KESH, and privatize its distribution arm. Stabilize KESH's financial position by raising collection rates and bringing prices to cost-recovery levels and increase electricity generation and interconnection capacity. 2. Continue implementing a stability-oriented fiscal policy which aims at fiscal consolidation and is conducive to low inflation and external sustainability. 3. Pursue a monetary policy conducive to the objective of achieving and maintaining price stability to reduce and anchor inflation expectations. 4. Intensify enforcement against piracy and counterfeiting. 5. Further implement the action plans to remove administrative barriers to business and investment and to address the informal economy and ensure proper, non-discretionary, non-discriminatory implementation of business-related legislation, rules and procedures. Reduce obsolete and inefficient regulations through regulatory guillotine procedures. 6. Reduce the tax wedge on wages and improve incentive structures and flexibility in the labor market to increase the participation and employment rates, while securing tax resources by broadening the tax base and improving compliance, at a measured and prudent pace to ensure sustainable public finances. 7. Improve the education system with the aim of increasing the supply of sought-after skills, fostering employment and long-term economic growth. 8. Speed up the privatization of publicly owned enterprises to strengthen corporate governance and reduce quasi-fiscal losses. 9. Develop procedures and administrative capacity to ensure effective protection of the EU's financial interests. 10. Assistance to the Western Balkan countries is conditional on progress on satisfying the Copenhagen criteria and on meeting the specific priorities of this European Partnership.

military barracks (which includes the selling of large amounts of ammunitions), the partial privatization of hydro-electrical dams, through the privatization of public service providers like the Albanian Telecom, the electro-energetic supply provider KESH, to end with the last projected blow to the commons, the near-future implementation of a higher-educational voucher-based financial reform, based on the Pinochetian model, which looks forward to finance for-profit private universities with public money. And considering especially the current right-wing government of Sali Berisha, all these are boasted publicly as miraculous socio-economical reforms that among others will shorten the way towards the EU integration. In this way, Albania is depicted as a neoliberal vanguard, whose ideological construct is in tune with the current austerity programs the EU is trying to impose on its member and aspiring countries. And the discrepancy between the EU policies enthusiasm and being not only one of the poorest countries in Europe, but also with emerging formal (bourgeois) democratic problems leaning towards new forms of personal authoritarianism, is bridged by ideology.

To come back to the concept of a critique of ideology, the Albanian case can be used as a quasi-total hegemonizing ideology not only because of the official political stances, but also and especially because of the unofficial political discourses which find a common ground not only in the EU integration process, but in its understanding as a hawkish capitalist approach towards the economy, and society at large. For example, there is no political debate between the parliamentary parties⁷ concerning the EU

⁷ The current governmental coalition is named "The Government of European Integration", and one of its main partners names itself "The Socialist Movement for integration", and looking to its governmental program one finds both the fantastic goal of EU membership and the neoliberal socio-economical reforms that would enable it: <http://www.km.gov.al/?fq=preprog/programi>. Or to take a more current example. The Albanian Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, talked enthusiastically (ideologically) about the Nobel prize according to the EU: "The EU foundation and its consolidation in these six decades has proved to be the determining factor of cooperation, common understanding, prosperity and peace in Europe" – Own translation from: <http://www.panorama.com.al/2012/10/13/bashkimi-evropian-fiton-cmimin-nobel-te-pages>. On the other hand, if one looks at the main opposition's party, The Socialist Party, it shares unequivocally the goal of the EU integration and most of its socio-economical priorities, despite some minor changes towards a more "humane" or social capitalism. Its political program shows a cultural-civilizational twist that relegitimizes not only the EU integration, but also the NATO integration: "Conscious of belonging to Europe in our

integration, which means that the apolitical debate is straitjacketed in technical terms about who can move faster towards the common goal. On the other hand, the quasi-totality of public opinion makers, intellectuals etc share the same hegemonic view, so that alternative points of view are marginalized at best, or ridiculed at worse.

But how can an ideological discourse hegemonize the field of discursivity, and also legitimize the actual socio-economical system? From Marx to Žižek ideology aims at forming a consensual public political consciousness, so that by silencing political alternatives, it can hegemonize comfortably the field of discursivity and urge people to act in accordance with it. Its basic features are the naturalization of the historical, the transformation of contingency in historical necessity and vice versa, the transformation of the relational to the identical, the silencing of socio-political antagonisms and contradictions, the raising of the partial to the status of impartial universality etc.

Before analyzing concretely these features in the Albanian ideology, an important digression is needed. The EU is part of a larger Idea of Europe which functions as a cultural-civilizational nodal point of ideology. Sometimes, in the Albanian political discourse, Europe itself is part of a larger unit, the West, which in a metaphysical dichotomist conception of identity founds itself on the unbridgeable cleavage between itself and its Other, namely the Eastern barbarism, Ottomanism, Islamism, Communism⁸ etc. In this way, the Albanian identity is constructed as an eternal belonging to the Western (European) moral superior civilization, and its actual or historical distance from Europe could be explained only conspiratively as a devilish work of the Islamic-Communist plot⁹. As the

hearts and in our culture, we appreciate the Albanian integration in NATO...” – Own translation, taken from: <http://ps.al/psprogrami.pdf>

⁸ Of course political marginalization, or still worse implicit coercion, is the by-product of the-only-way ideology confronting its devilish opponents. The Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha, dubbing incorrectly and demagogically the opposing Socialist Party (some kind of late Third Way social-democracy) as being Marxists, said: “Marx can never walk again in the roads and cities of Albania.” – Own translation taken from <http://www.km.gov.al/?fq=brenda&m=news&lid=15474>

⁹ In the context of the Albanian Government celebration of the centenary of the Albanian Declaration of Independence, it is useful to refer to the Žižekian critique of ideology again: “Therein consists one of the fundamental mechanisms of ideological legitimization: to legitimize the existing order by presenting it as a realization of a dream-- *not of our dream, but of the Other's, the dead ancestor's dream*, the dream of previous generations.” Žižek. Slavoj. (1993). *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, p.

most important Albanian writer and public intellectual Ismail Kadare puts it in a book which aims at demonstrating the hardcore European identity of the Albanians: "In December 1990 (*the days of the first anti-communist protests – author's note*)...the slogan 'We want Albania to be like Europe' was the first to echo like a hymn and a new program...Some days later, the statue of the most anti-European man this country has known (*Enver Hoxha, the Communist leader of Albania until 1985 – author's note*) was taken down and dragged through the streets."¹⁰ In this way, belonging to a superior cultural (even racial in some implicit sense) leads naturally to considering the EU as the only political road map, meaning also that its neoliberal reforms are not contingent or indeterminate alternatives, but a necessity to be followed at any cost.

Consequently, like the apologists of capitalism, the EU is conceived not as an eternal state, but in a historicist manner, like the end-of-history accomplishment of a natural drive towards freedom (viewed in competitive form), formal equalities, prosperity etc. Ideology either shows itself to be an eternal natural state of the situation (like the state of nature-social contract of the contractualists), or historicizes itself mildly to end up in the unavoidable bright and only future of the fulfillment of history (capitalism, European Union etc). So what is contingent is conceptualized in terms of necessity. Vice versa, in Žižekian terms, ideology turns what is necessary in some kind of historical contingency. If we refer to class struggle as the Real of the society (as the unfillable hole in reality which disturbs any harmonization such as the silencing of political struggle), ideology tries to fill this hole not only by striving towards an hierarchical (capitalist) harmonic stratification of the society, but also by defining class struggle, or the radical emancipatory fight for equality, as a contingent and completely overcome aspect of the not-so-recent history. In the Albanian political discourse this is presented as the contingent accident of history (Communism), guilty of dividing society by putting the poor against the rich, but which nonetheless is ultimately corrected in the last two decades' common struggle towards the European Union, capitalism and a well-stratified hierarchical society, where everybody stays where s/he belongs.

117, Durham: Duke University Press. Accordingly, the Albanian ideology justifies its socio-economical policies in terms of the dreams of the Other, in this case in the Europeanist dreams of the Founding Fathers, political and intellectual elite of *Rilindja Kombëtare* (Albanian National Revival), whose wisdom and hopes still haunt ideologically the common Albanians.

¹⁰ Kadare, Ismail. (2006). *Identiteti evropian i shqiptarëve*, p. 8, Tiranë: Onufri (Own translation).

Anyway, as it is the case with ideologies, they interrelate the utopian with the commonsensical pragmatism. If the heyday of its convincing power the EU (and its neoliberal agenda) were represented as the utopia at-hand, in times of crisis like the current one, it takes the shape of the only option left on the table, outside of which starts the hellish barbaric Stalinism of the Left. In the first years of the nineties the West, Europe, capitalism, the EU etc, took the form of a utopian popular strive towards heaven on earth¹¹ not only in terms of economic well-being, but also in the vest of authentic personal freedom, genuine equality (paradoxically one of the main accusations against the ruling Communists dealt with their being transformed in a privileged cast, so unconsciously for not being communists enough). Anyway as authors from Ernst Bloch to Karl Mannheim have put it, utopia can have a destabilizing effect on the ruling ideology. Of course it served to throw away what was left from the real existing Socialism, but in the day after it could still enrage people, especially their authentic hopes for freedom, equality, prosperity etc. Faced with the structural impossibility to spread well-being to everybody, capitalism can still acquire if not active consensus, at least a fatalist desolation which legitimizes the socio-economical system not for being the best, but for its being the least worst. It means that any alternative to capitalism, or institutionally to the EU, means total collapse of the economy, overt terror of revolutionary parties and a new form of old-style Stalinist totalitarianism. It doesn't mean that the situation is not going to be worse (like good capitalist apologists say: it's going to become worse before it gets better [!!!!]), but that these are economical sacrifices necessary for a future imaginary recovery¹². At worse, even if there is no way out, at least this is the best way to survive within.

As we put it in the beginning, ideology doesn't name a common lie or a false consciousness ready to be unmasked by some enlightened elite. It builds the way we relate to the conditions of our society, even if this

¹¹ I can remember from my childhood in the early nineties how rumors of eternal prosperity were spread. One of them was that if the Democratic Party (right wing anti-communist) were to win, a quasi-infinite number of European ships, waiting in a long-long line from the harbors of Italy to the Albanian isle of Sazan, full of consuming goods would be ready to land and spread the wealth to everybody.

¹² For example, the current economical disaster in Greece is conceived in the Albanian political discourse as a warning at what happens if one doesn't abide to the EU neoliberal policies. And in accordance with the EU hegemonic discourse, the salvation of Greece, and the future of any country including Albania, rests on the tough application of austerity programs.

relation (identification) is built imaginarily or through a fantasy construction which helps our coordination in the "reality", by obfuscating the Real of class struggle¹³. Ideology doesn't concern solely with what people think or feel, but also with how they act, even unconsciously. So, if in the heydays of capitalism and the EU integration it meant a kind of intersection between the public discourse and its private reflection on individual consciousness and concrete political actions (voting, participation in mass rallies in favor of what ideology legitimates), in times of crisis like this one it nonetheless structures society, but in another way. In these times of crises, despite the hegemonic political discourse, there will always be a discrepancy between the public and private opinion. Ideology doesn't work by Orwellian lavishing people's minds, but by constructing a schizophrenic political consciousness in almost everybody. Although more than 85% of the Albanians are in favor of the EU integration, and most of them probably even of its policies, when asked individually or in private conversations they tend to show a radical skepticism towards ideology. Authors from Mikhail Bakhtin¹⁴ to Peter Sloterdijk¹⁵ have used the popular ill-articulated discourses as a resistance towards political hegemonic discourses. Nevertheless, despite the theoretical stances of authors as Mikhail Bakhtin or Peter Sloterdijk who emphasize the folkish distrust or its covert criticism towards ideology in the vest of *kynicism*, ideology finds its actualization in the chasm of man's consciousness: although privately they don't believe in

¹³ "Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our 'reality' itself an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel (conceptualized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as 'antagonism': a traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized). The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel." - Žižek, Slavoj. (2009). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 45, London: Verso

¹⁴ Bakhtin analyses carnival as a practical and discursive resistance towards official truths or imposing ideologies. "...carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, change, and renewal" – Morris, Pam. Ed. (1994). *The Bakhtin Reader. Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*, p. 199. London: Arnold Publishers.

¹⁵ Sloterdijk uses the Diogenian *kynicism* as an irony aimed at delegitimizing the powers' truths: "Those who take the liberty of confronting prevailing lies provoke a climate of satirical loosening up in which the powerful, together with their ideologists of domination, let go affectively —precisely under the onslaught of the critical affront by kynics." – Sloterdijk, Peter. (2001). *Critique of cynical reason*, p. 103. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

it anymore, entering the public sphere or the realm of collective thinking and action, they “magically” act as though they believe in it, or at least this is what they think the Big Other believes for them (Žižek). Ideology functions not as an authentic belief of everybody in the sleeping room, but as a practical identification with the hegemonic view in the public discourse. So if they are asked individually, most probably most of them will even ridicule the ideological content, but if somebody expresses this position publicly, or tries to build some form of collective resistance, they “feel” that the Big Other (the master signifier which in fantasy constructs our cognitive map and leads our everyday actions) is shaken, so that their “normal” social functioning, which is founded on the belief that the Big Other believes in something (the EU etc), is put in danger. I can laugh at ideology as long as the laughter doesn’t wake the others whom I believe that still believe, so that I have to conform myself and survive socially. If my laughter awakes them (the Big Other as the catch of ideology), despite what I privately think, I have to show my solidarity to them, so that no matter what (no matter if my life is a misery), I can be part of the survival club, whose outcasts should perish. In this way ideology not only is not threatened by everybody’s private disbelief, but it builds its consistency on it as long as it gives each individual the perception that privately s/he is resisting, but in vain, because of the impossibility to radically transform the current and eternal state of affairs. This is ideology, which Marx condenses in *Das Kapital*: “Sie wissen es nicht, aber sie tun es.”¹⁶

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¹⁶ The later Marx of Capital used the category of commodity fetishism to express more fully what in The German Ideology, he and Engels called ideology. “...by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it.” – Marx, Karl. (1982). *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume One*. Transl. Ben Fowkes, p. 166-167, London: Penguin Books & in association with New Left Review.