



Weekly Briefing

Albania social briefing:
Debates on scientific research and academia
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The Academy of Sciences of Albania (ASA), founded in 1972, is supposed to be the most important science institution in the country. As of 2019, ASA has 29 regular members, 11 Associated Academician Members and 26 Honorary Members. It has two sections: the Section of Social Albanology Sciences and the Section of Natural Technical Sciences. Part of the structure is also: the Unit of Technological Research and Innovation Projects, the Section for Foreign and Public Relations and the Scientific Library and Publications.ⁱ

The controversy over the institution

As plenty of other government-funded bodies in Albania, the Academy of Sciences was not immune to political influences over the last decades. The first hit to the highest scientific institution in the country arrived in 2007, when then Prime Minister Berisha, reduced it to one only operating section the Center for Albanological Studies. ACA was created as a funded institution with a special title from the state budget, based on programs for studying the main scientific problems presented by it. Many scholars in the country opposed to this move, however, their voices and claims were not heard from the political establishment of the time. It was this moment that shook the academics, creating a great debate about the very existence of the institute.ⁱⁱ

After almost a decade of stagnation and apathy, in 2017 Prime Minister Rama declared that the Government would cut all funds to the ACA by *de facto* closing the institution, and again as one decade prior the only branch that managed to stay active would be the Center for Albanological Studies. Being as colorful as only Rama can be, his declarations could not be more anachronous; he called the Academy of Sciences a kind of Soviet rudiment in Albania by stating that “it continues to be an institution on whose roof the Soviet flag continues to flourish.”ⁱⁱⁱ The funds on research would be funneled directly to universities with an early budget of less than one million Euros.

On May 24th, 2019, in a secret ballot procedure, four vacancies were about to be filled in the ACA. There were four candidates for the position ranking as follows: Skender Gjinushi for the position of Head/Chair of the ACA, Vasil Tole for the position of Vice-Chair, Salvator Bushati for the position of Scientific Secretary and Neki Frasherri for the position of Chairman of the Section on Natural Sciences. All the above mentioned were declared winners automatically after each of them achieved around 35 votes out of 43. These elections were

accompanied by intense public debates also because the draft law on “Reform in the Academy of Sciences” is still under consideration and not approved by the Albanian Parliament.

The new Chair of the ACA directly after his proclamation as the new leader of the highest research institute in the country stated:

"Today is the end of an important process for reform at the Academy of Sciences. But, as we have pointed out, this reform cannot be disconnected from science as a whole, where the Academy should play a primary role. This is also the burden we hold today, not only me, but the Academy's new leadership, so that the Academy is one of the main partners of the society, the government, the assembly to push forward the revival of research, education, as an elite institution that is." ^{iv}

The sharp public debate has not only targeted the process but the new leader of the Academy himself. In many dispute his legitimacy and academic achievements; Skender Gjinushi is a well-known political personality, not only in the new regime, but also in the previous one. He is the current leader of the Social Democratic Party; born in 1949, became a lecturer in the University of Tirana teaching from 1973 to 1978, from 1987 to 1990 he was the Minister of Education and with the political system change, resigned on February 1991 for becoming a member of the Parliament soon after. From 1997 to 2001 he was the Chairman of the Albanian Parliament and Deputy Prime Minister in the following three years. As seen from the above, he is a very active actor in the political scene; however, there has been no tangible work of him in research and science in almost four decades.

Pellumb Xhufi, an esteemed Albanian historian, argues that the roots of the problem of ACA are to be found in the reform of 2007, when the Academy went from having an executive nature, with specific institutions, to being an honorific academy. He believes that this type and level of institutions do nothing more than absorb state budget for formal activities and execute quite simple tasks with national dimension. And yet when the funds for research went to universities rather than the ACA, the results were the same, no visible research was produced.

Another young Albanian researcher, with an extraordinary proven track of academic publications worldwide, Taulant Muka (also a notorious “whistle-blower” for plagiarism issue in the country) addressed to the President of the Republic with an online petition requiring the withdrawal from duty of the new Chair of the ACA.^v While analyzing the importance of an institution, he recalls that for several years the ACA has been represented by an amorphous group of politically influenced people who are not related to the aims and scientific activity of this institution. According to international bibliographic databases like Scopus, in the last 10 years, the Academy of Sciences of Albania has had only 22 scientific products, far from similar institutions in the region.^{vi}

Skender Gjinushi is quite notorious in the Albanian public scene - not for academic achievements and contribute to science- but mainly for his bitter vocabulary, redundant comments of any sort, hostile attitude and a sense of entitlement that borderlines the absurd. He will be the face and the ambassador of Albania's academia, once again demonstrating that meritocracy and true achievements are a bygone concept.

Is it all about the future funding of the ACA?

On May 10th, the draft law on reform in the Academy of Sciences is presented via a parliamentary group. The initiative of this group of Socialist Parliament Members (PMs) was presented in the Education Commission and media. The review of the "Draft Law on Reform at the Academy of Sciences", Art. 23§ 2.a., stipulates that the funding for the ACA is provided by the state budget.^{vii} The present PMs also urged to learn more about the contribution of this institution to brain absorption, but also to the development of scientific research in the country.^{viii} During the discussions of the Parliamentary Commission, a budget increase was proposed for the Academy of Sciences. The amount was not made public but it is expected to absorb some substantial funding because it was argued that the ACA will not be an honorary institution any longer, but will have the right to set up research centers for specific fields.

The debate on the ACA is only a fragment of a deeper and wider social problem – the entirety of the educational system.

The state of higher education system and research is lagging behind and this will be a burden for generations to come. The students' protest unveiled many disguised issues and obliged the Government to back up on some of their demands while trying to make Albanian universities decent institutions for knowledge and research. It is unfortunate to notice that the development of research in the country is left to the academics' own devices, while the Academy of Science is represented in the majority by people deeply connected to politics. Beside the fact that this has become a mere honorary institution, the debate on whom and what, is again divided in party line politics.

Some final notes

While scientific works from Albania appear to be very few, it is noted that Albanians researchers abroad have contributed abundantly in their specific areas of expertise, of course with a foreign affiliation. This demonstrates that there is plenty of potential, but it's not well explored. This phenomenon has become the norm for more than three decades. It is an unavoidable path when the brightest and the diligent have no space of flourishing. In order to succeed and persevere, and possibly achieve a decent academic status, a political association is required by all means.

The question remains, how can a scholar be unbiased when the same academic environment is shadowed by political influences? There are only two options: either compromise and pursue an academic career on the lines of a given party or uphold high moral, ethical and academic standards outside of the system with intact research integrity. The first option, as the easiest way out, belongs to the *pseudo* researchers, who achieve a lot in personal gains through connections but not in science (although, as exception to the rule, there are few outstanding scholars who decided to fight their battles in the country and achieve their status despite political streams); the second, is for the persistent ones, who still believe in upgrading and upholding a strong tradition of Albanians literati, unfortunately obliterated in the last decades; usually, the latter choose to pursue their career abroad.

ⁱ Academy of Sciences of Albania, official website. Available at: <http://akad.gov.al/ash/>

ⁱⁱ The Academy of Sciences and the man that is ending the Soviet model. *Mapo*. Available at: <https://revista.gazetamapo.al/akademia-e-shkencave-njeriu-qe-po-i-jep-fund-modelit-sovjetik/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The government shuts down the Academy of Sciences. Available at: <https://insajderi.com/qeveria-mbyll-akademine-e-shkencave/>

^{iv} New Head of the Academy of Sciences is elected. Translated from *Shqiptarja*. Available at: <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/zgjidhet-kryetar-i-akademise-se-shkencave-gjinushi-akademik-sme-ka-bere-politika-por-matematika>

^v Online Petition started from Taulant Muka. Refusal to approve the election of the new chairman of the Academy of Sciences. Available at: <https://shekulli.com.al/muka-peticion-metes-refuzoni-miratimin-e-zgjedhjes-se-kryetarit-te-akademise-se-shkencave/>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Draft Law on the Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Albania. Available at: https://arsimi.gov.al/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Pligj_Akademia_e_Shkencave1.pdf

^{viii} The debate on the ACA sparks again. *Opinion*. <https://opinion.al/hapet-serish-debati-per-akademine-e-shkencave-fuga-duan-ta-shkrijne/>