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## **Media, ethnicity and patriotism—the Balkans ‘unholy war’ for the appropriation of Mother Teresa**

GËZIM ALPION

In the summer of 2003 an ‘unholy war’ broke out between the Albanians and the Macedonians over the filiation of a beatified woman. The decision of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia to erect a monument dedicated to Mother Teresa, not very far from the centre of Rome, aroused the Albanians’ suspicion and jealousy.

This was not the first time the Albanians felt that they were being robbed of ‘their’ Mother Teresa; some of their neighbours had apparently tried to ‘appropriate’ her almost immediately after the Albanian Catholic nun was ‘discovered’ by the BBC’s Malcolm Muggeridge in 1968. By the time Mother Teresa was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979, the competition of several Balkan countries to claim the celebrity nun as their own daughter began in earnest. According to Albert Ramaj,<sup>1</sup> the Croats were the first to claim that she ‘belonged’ to them. The Croat government issued her with a Croat passport, which was handed on to her by the country’s ambassador in India in the early 1990s. The Croats base their argument mainly, if not exclusively, on the fact that Mother Teresa spoke Serbo-Croat better than Albanian. Several Slav reporters are keen to emphasize that, while she was fluent in Serbo-Croat, she spoke little or no Albanian; something strongly contested by the Albanians. Mother Teresa had a good command of Serbo-Croat because in India she was constantly in contact with Croatian and other Yugoslav priests. As for her knowledge of Albanian, argues Dr Lush Gjergji, the distinguished biographer and friend of Mother Teresa, who met her more than 50 times, she spoke her native tongue very well but was not very confident of her ability to use literary Albanian in public.<sup>2</sup>

Like the Croats, the Serbs have made some attempts to prove that Mother Teresa was originally from Serbia. Unlike the Croats, however, the Serbs have been less outspoken in their claim because Mother Teresa happened to be a Roman Catholic. Both the Croats and the Serbs, though, have suffixed her Albanian family name ‘Bojaxhiu’ to ‘Bojadžijević’,<sup>3</sup> which has always enraged the Albanians.

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<sup>1</sup>See Albert Ramaj, ‘Nëna Terezë—Bojaxhinjtë dhe prejardhja e tyre’, 15 Nëntor 2003, p. 12, <<http://www.stublla.com>>.

<sup>2</sup>Interview with Dr Lush Gjergji, Binçë, Kosova, 30 October 2003; Gjergji’s letter to the author of 10 November 2003.

<sup>3</sup>Ramaj, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Shortly before the beatification of Mother Teresa in Rome in October 2003, the Vlachs also intensified the efforts to prove that she belonged to them.<sup>4</sup> The thesis about her Vlach origin was immediately refuted and ridiculed by the Albanians much in the same way as they had done with the efforts of the Croats and the Serbs to 'appropriate' the celebrity nun.<sup>5</sup>

The Macedonians have never lagged behind in the Balkan contest to get a piece of Mother Teresa. Like the Serbs and the Vlachs, the Macedonians are not Catholics. This, however, has not stopped several Macedonian artists, politicians and reporters highlighting not so much Mother Teresa's Macedonian 'origin' as the fact that she was not completely, if at all, of 'Albanian blood'. The monument the Macedonian government decided to dispatch to Rome was the latest link in the long chain of honours the establishment in Macedonia had been bestowing for several decades upon 'their' Mother Teresa.

The Albanians have always been uncomfortable with what they consider as the Macedonians' excessive veneration for Mother Teresa but the monument was apparently the last straw. What upset the Albanians most was not the monument itself (after all, the Macedonians had already dedicated a statue to Mother Teresa in Skopje shortly after her death in 1997) but the Cyrillic inscription which was allegedly intended to accompany the monument in Rome: 'Macedonia honours her daughter Gonxhe Bojaxhiu—Mother Teresa, Skopje 1910—Calcutta 1997'.

To prevent such an 'injustice', many Albanian intellectuals and politicians wasted no time in dispatching a letter to the mayor of the Eternal City, Walter Veltroni. In their view, the FYR of Macedonia had no right to 'usurp the figure and deeds of Mother Teresa' simply because Skopje, the capital of this yet not properly named 'new' Balkan country, happened to be her native city. Mother Teresa was born there to ethnic Albanian parents on 26 September 1910. At that time Skopje was still under the authority of the Ottoman Empire. As for 'Macedonia', 'Yugoslavia' and 'Albania', such independent 'states' did not exist in 1910.

Either because he heeded the Albanians' advice not to be 'part of this project [Macedonian monument of Mother Teresa] which falsifies history to cash in politically', or simply because he wanted to avoid yet another typical Balkan squabble, Mayor Veltroni was sympathetic to the Albanians' 'predicament' and so, much to their delight, the Macedonians' 'elaborate scheme' to 'steal' Mother Teresa from them, her 'genuine' ethnic brethren, was nipped in the bud.

Naturally, the Macedonians felt that the West had once again misjudged them for reasons they could not and still do not understand. The Balkans is a breeding ground for conspiracy theories, but the Orthodox Macedonians were quick to profess publicly that their intention to honour Mother Teresa with a monument at the heart of Catholic Rome had no hidden agenda. Tome Serafimovski, the author of the controversial statue, and Risto Penov, the

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<sup>4</sup>See Aurel Plasari, 'Bojaxhitë e Nënë Terezës', *Shekulli*, 29 Shtator 2003; and *Bota Shqiptare*, Nr. 93, 2–16 Tetor 2003.

<sup>5</sup>See Ramaj, op. cit., pp. 1–15; Xhevat Ukshini, 'Debati, origjina e Nënë Terezës është shqiptare', *Shekulli*, 11 Tetor 2003; Pëllumb Xhufi, 'Kujt t'ia japim Nënë Terezën', *Shekulli*, 14 Tetor 2003.

mayor of Skopje, denied there was any catch. Both of them, incidentally, have made public their doubts about Mother Teresa's Albanian origin.

Mother Teresa preached peace, understanding, tolerance and forgiveness in India and throughout the world for most of the 20th century, but she apparently failed to inject some neighbourly spirit into her own native Balkans. In their bitter row over her 'blood type', the Albanians and the Macedonians showed once again how intolerant and blinkered some of them still are by their petty, nationalistic paranoia. They missed a unique opportunity to celebrate together the life, work and legacy of their most celebrated Balkan citizen, the only 20th-century world figure from the region to present this traditionally troubled spot in a new and promising way.

Like any nation, the Albanians and the Macedonians are very proud of their international high-flyers, now as well as in the past. The Albanians, for instance, boast about several famous Illyrian kings, and about the Roman and Byzantine emperors apparently of Albanian origin such as Diocletian, Julian, Claudius, Constantine the Great, Justinian I and Anastasius. While the Albanians never fail to blame the five-century-long Turkish occupation of their country, they always mention with pride that they allegedly gave the Ottoman Empire 26 grand viziers (prime ministers) as well as some of its greatest architects like Master Sinan. The Albanians are also very proud of the following internationally famous expatriates: Mehmet Isa, the chief builder of the Taj Mahal; the 18th-century Pope Clement XI; Mohammed Ali, the founder of the 1802–1952 Albanian dynasty of Egypt; Karl von Ghega, the architect of the world's first mountainous railway in Semmering, Austria; and the list goes on. Nowadays, the Albanians take pride in modern celebrities of Albanian origin like the Hollywood actors James Belushi and Elisa Dushku and the 1998 Nobel Prize Laureate in Medicine, Ferid Murad.

However, the only internationally renowned Albanian to devote his whole life to Albania was Gjergj Kastrioti (1403–1468), or Skanderbeg, as he is otherwise known. 'Skanderbeg' is a corruption of the Turkish 'Iskander Bey' or 'Lord Alexander', a title the Ottomans bestowed upon him when he was taken hostage as a young boy. Skanderbeg was an outstanding military strategist who led a successful Albanian and Balkan resistance against the Ottomans, thus doing a great favour to the dithering Catholic Europe. He was also unique in that no Albanian leader before him, or since his death, has ever been able to give his countrymen a sense of common national purpose.

Taking pride in stars of Albanian 'blood' is and will probably remain for quite some time a much-loved Albanian national pastime. This explains why the Albanians display such a fierce loyalty and attachment to the figure of Mother Teresa and appear to be reluctant to share her with their neighbours, especially the Macedonians.

Successful individuals like Mother Teresa often prove very handy to boost the morale and pride of their 'native' countrymen, especially if they hail from 'exotic', 'backward' and 'poor' countries like Albania and Macedonia with hardly an impressive record in human rights. In the minds of the Albanians and the Macedonians, a modern celebrity of Mother Teresa's calibre is an inestimable PR to improve their countries' recently tarnished image in the world.

The huge interest in Mother Teresa of different political, nationalist and

religious figures and groups in Albania, Kosova, Macedonia and elsewhere in the Balkans has all the signs of a calculated 'business'. Mother Teresa is apparently being used by some circles in the region, after her death as much as when she was alive, to further their political, nationalistic and religious causes.

The Albanians' and the Macedonians' fuss over Mother Teresa's ethnicity is too loud not to be heard by her many Western biographers and scholars. But while most of them pay no heed whatsoever to the Macedonians' claim that she was Macedonian, many are the Mother Teresa experts in the West who are eager to comment on the Albanians' unprecedented interest in their famous daughter, especially after her visit to Tirana in 1989. 'Within a year of her visit,' notes Emma Johnson, 'she had become a national hero in Albania, praised by both Christians and Muslims, and was featured on Albanian postage stamps and in its history books.'<sup>6</sup>

In 1989, the Communist leader of Albania, Ramiz Alia, skilfully used Mother Teresa's first visit to send a signal to the West that, although he had been hand-picked for the post by a totalitarian atheist like Enver Hoxha, he was still capable of and willing to steer Albania into a completely new direction of multi-party system and religious tolerance. By the same token, Alia saw the visit as another chance to warn hardliners in the politburo that some radical changes, especially restoring freedom of religion, were not only inevitable but also imminent. To avoid open confrontation with the die-hard Communists, however, Ramiz Alia was keen to present Mother Teresa's belated homecoming as a 'private visit'.

If Mother Teresa was the West's unofficial ambassador to Eastern Europe during the cold war, and the Vatican's irreplaceable envoy to reintroduce officially the Catholic faith to Albania, this religious celebrity also served as an inspiration to the political and religious groups in Albania that were trying to give the final push to the discredited Communist system. This is the reason why Mother Teresa, especially her first visit, had such a symbolic importance, and that is why the Albanians, those in power and those who were trying to come to power, used their world-famous compatriot to further their agenda so skilfully and at times unscrupulously.

According to a 1992 presidential decree, Mother Teresa was entitled to travel on an Albanian diplomatic passport, if she chose to. The communist-turned-democrat President Ramiz Alia, also created the 'Mother Teresa Prize' to be awarded to distinguished humanitarian and charity workers. The Kosova Albanians were equally keen to honour Mother Teresa. In 1990 the Mother Teresa Charity was founded in Prishtina. Shortly before her death, the Kosova Albanian leader, Ibrahim Rugova, made Mother Teresa an Honorary Citizen of Kosova.

It has been suggested that the Albanians' excessive interest in Mother Teresa in the early 1990s had something to do with their hope that she would choose Albania as her final resting place. Anne Sebba claims that, in 1995, there was even talk of Mother Teresa's 'apparent, but unlikely wish' to be buried in Albania, something which 'would of course dramatically change the country's

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<sup>6</sup>Emma Johnson, *Mother Teresa*, Franklin Watts, London and Sydney, 2003, p. 98.

familiarity with tourism. Making Albania into a pilgrimage country might be the greatest gift Mother Teresa could give them.<sup>7</sup>

According to Lush Gjergji, when he had asked Mother Teresa shortly before she passed away where she wished to be buried, she had replied: 'In my country, but this is most unlikely. The Indians will never accept this.'<sup>8</sup> Whether or not the Indians would have refused to respect Mother Teresa's wish to be buried in Albania proper or in Skopje is difficult to say. Anne Sebba believes that Mother Teresa's decision to choose Calcutta as her final earthly resting place was motivated primarily by her knowledge that her sisters would always tend her grave lovingly.<sup>9</sup>

Mother Teresa's decision not to be buried in Albania or Macedonia was perhaps more than just a hint on her part to her Balkan claimants that while she liked to belong to all, she was hardly interested in being the 'property' of any particular nation, and that she certainly had no intention of being another bone of contention for the Albanians and the Macedonians after her death.

The Albanians and the Macedonians, however, did not take Mother Teresa's hint. Or perhaps, they were fully aware where she stood with regards to her national affiliations (or rather lack of them) but chose to turn a blind eye. After her death, and especially on the eve of her beatification, the war of words between the Albanians and the Macedonians intensified as never before. So far, however, no Albanian or Macedonian expert in Mother Teresa, has been able to present any strong evidence that 'their' world-famous icon would have given her blessing to such an unneighbourly, bitter contest or that she would have preferred to belong exclusively to either of the two warring parties. A great deal of the Albanian and the Macedonian literature about Mother Teresa's so-called 'wish' to belong to and be claimed mainly or exclusively, if at all, by any of the two nations is devotional at best and hypothetical at worst.

Hardly familiar with the Mother Teresa discourse and eager to echo the mood and sentiments of their respective people (the mood and sentiments which they are largely responsible for fabricating and sustaining in the first place), several Albanian and Macedonian reporters have tried hard recently to find in few hand-picked letters, speeches and remarks of Mother Teresa crumbs of evidence of her 'lifetime' attachment and devotion either to Albania or Macedonia. Some Macedonian artists, scholars and reporters who have taken a keen interest in and have written widely on her like Tome Serafimovski, Jasmina Mironski and Stojan Trenčevski,<sup>10</sup> the president of the association 'Skopje Woman Mother Teresa', are keen to score points over their Albanian 'rivals' not only from the fact that, in their view, she spoke little or no Albanian

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<sup>7</sup>Anne Sebba, *Mother Teresa—Beyond the Image*, Orion, London, 1998, p. 235.

<sup>8</sup>Interview with Lush Gjergji, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup>Sebba, op. cit., p. 257.

<sup>10</sup>See Jasmina Mironski, 'The Mother is still Agnes in Macedonia', 4 September 1998, <<http://indianexpress.com/ie/daily/>>; Ian Fisher, 'Mother Teresa's saintly spirit remembered, in a truly Balkan way', 6 August 2003, <<http://nytimes.com>>; Ian Fisher, 'Vying for a piece of Mother Teresa's past', *International Herald Tribune*, 7 August 2003; Nicholas Wood, 'Nations row over Mother Teresa', 10 August 2003, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk>>; 'Mother Teresa statue stirs spirits in Macedonia, Albania', 27 August 2003, <<http://balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/>>; Jasmina Mironski, 'Macedonians, Albanians squabble over Teresa's legacy', 15 October 2003, <[http://quickstart.clari.net/qs\\_se/webnews/wed/ad/](http://quickstart.clari.net/qs_se/webnews/wed/ad/)>; Alan Freeman, 'Mother Teresa's origins spark squabble', *Globe and Mail*, 17 October 2003.

but, more importantly, that during one of her visits to Skopje she refused to give a straightforward answer when asked repeatedly if she was Albanian, Macedonian, Vlach, Serb or of any other nationality. 'I am a citizen of Skopje, the city of my birth', she told the reporters eventually, 'but I belong to the world.' During the same visit, referring to the 1963 earthquake, which had almost flattened her native city, she remarked: 'It may look completely different, but it is still my Skopje.'<sup>11</sup>

For a devoted Catholic like Mother Teresa, 'my Skopje' did not necessarily mean the capital of the predominantly Orthodox Christian Republic of Macedonia. Nor did she refer to the city of her birth as 'my Skopje' purely because it had been inhabited by Albanians since ancient times. The possessive adjective 'my' in this case refers to the Skopje of her childhood memories, something she was keen to emphasize repeatedly:

If there were not so much concrete we could be walking on the pavements of the streets where I spent *my childhood*. I am glad to see these places again. At least for a short time I am back in *my childhood* (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup>

More importantly, perhaps, Mother Teresa referred to the city of her birth as 'my Skopje' because of its 16 centuries of documented Catholic legacy. Ancient Skopje was one of the region's thriving cities during Roman and Byzantine times, if not earlier. The Illyrians, like the Greeks, came into contact with Christianity during the Apostolic age. In 'The Letter of Paul to the Romans' 15:19, the apostle states that 'from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ'.<sup>13</sup> The ancestors of the present-day Albanians were among the first Europeans to convert to Christianity. As early as the 1st century AD, they had established in the city of Dyrrachium (present-day Durrës) one of the world's earliest bishoprics. By the end of the 3rd century AD, the Albanians were Christianized. This means that they became Christians for over a century before their pagan Roman conquerors' 'conversion of convenience',<sup>14</sup> and some six centuries before any of the neighbouring Slav nations decided to adopt Europe's 'official' religion.

Mother Teresa's Skopje had its own bishop by the 4th century AD, and since then some of the Albanians in the town have always remained faithful to the teachings of Christ. Skopje's loyalty to Christianity, apparently, made the city of her birth very special to the devoted Albanian Catholic nun, because it symbolized her own people's attachment to Christ. It was primarily in this respect, one could argue, that Skopje had a special place in her heart, and why she, allegedly, called herself a 'Skopjanka', someone from Skopje.<sup>15</sup>

The Albanian Catholic Church, however, has always tried to present Mother Teresa's 'soft spot' for Skopje as yet another proof of her devotion to the Albanian nation as a whole. Albanian Catholic priests are always eager to

<sup>11</sup>David Porter, *Mother Teresa: The Early Years*, Clio Press, Oxford and New York, 1986, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>*The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments with Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, New Revised Standard Version, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1989, p. 171.

<sup>14</sup>Gëzim Alpion, *Foreigner Complex: Essays and Fiction About Egypt*, The University of Birmingham CPS, Birmingham, UK, 2002, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Danica Kirka, 'Nations fight over Mother Teresa's ancestry', 14 October 2003, <<http://the.runningzone.com/CNEWS/WeirdNews/>>.

show that Albania and the Albanian nation were always in her heart. So, for instance, the Archbishop of Albania, Rrok Mirdita, brought with him to Albania after Mother Teresa's funeral in Calcutta in September 1997 the rug, which she apparently took with her when she visited Albania in 1989.<sup>16</sup> Mother Teresa, we are told, prayed on this rug for 8 years until the last moments of her life. The talismanic rug, which is now on display at St Paul's Cathedral in Tirana, is seen by the Albanian Catholic establishment as yet another telling proof of Mother Teresa's 'undisputed patriotism'.

Her 'unwavering love' for Albania is one of the preferred themes especially in Lush Gjergji's impressive work on Mother Teresa. Gjergji is keen to emphasize that in his many meetings with Mother Teresa she constantly professed to him her 'undying love' for Albania and the Albanians.<sup>17</sup> That her own country and people were always in her mind, he argues, is exemplified especially by her words about the disturbances in Albania immediately after the collapse of the fraudulent pyramid schemes in March 1997. Mother Teresa's 'actual' words, scribbled in March 2003, have been turned into a poem—'Për Shqipërinë Time'/'For my Albania'—by the Albanian poet Visar Zhiti. The same poet also has versified Mother Teresa's last prayer 'Dua të kthehem në Shqipëri'/'I want to come back to Albania', which, according to Gjergji, the ailing nun wrote on 27 August 1997, only a few days before she passed away.<sup>18</sup>

An unbiased reader, who is familiar with Mother Teresa's written and spoken work, would notice in the above-mentioned 1997 prayers/poems no departure from her lifetime discourse in terms of themes, tone or choice of words. They reveal Mother Teresa as she always was: an exceptionally devoted Catholic nun who was also worried about what was going on in Albania. As always, however, even in these two works, she finds the root of the problem in people's tendency to stray away from God. Her final wish was to have 12 statues of saints in Albania and another dozen in Kosova so that her nuns could pray for the 'd/evil' to leave her country. Even in such 'patriotic' pieces, Mother Teresa makes it abundantly clear that her main and only wish is 'to serve the poorest of the poor', and she advises 'her' Albanians 'to see God in our neighbour'.

Her exclusively praying 'patriotism' has made the Albanian Catholic Church seek for ways of presenting her in a more down-to-earth way. All the Albanian nationalist movements over the centuries have always been supported by most of the leading Albanian clerics, be they Muslims or Christians (both Orthodox and Catholic). The Albanian Catholic Church, in particular, takes enormous pride in what it is keen to present as its official motto: 'Fe dhe Atdhe' ('Religion and Fatherland'). Mother Teresa has constantly provided her Catholic admirers in Albania with abundant proof of her absolute devotion to Catholicism. On the other hand, they are aware that, in order for her to match

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<sup>16</sup>Korrieri, 12 Tetor 2003.

<sup>17</sup>Interview with Lush Gjergji, op. cit.; Lush Gjergji's letter to the author, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup>Lush Gjergji's letter to the author, op. cit. The Albanian poet Visar Zhiti's versified Mother Teresa's prayers 'Për Shqipërinë Time'/'For my Albania', and 'Lutja e fundit—Dua të kthehem në Shqipëri'/'Last Prayer—I want to come back to Albania' are included in the anthology of poems *Nënë Tereza—Mërmërimë Shenjtoreje*, Botimet OMSA-1, 2003, on pp. 129 and 131, respectively, and in *Mësomë të Dua/Teach me to Love*, translated into English by Avni Spahiju, Rozafa, Prishtina, 2003, on pp. 198–199 and 200–201.



the equation 'Religion plus fatherland equals a perfect Albanian Catholic', she has to be seen by the Albanian nation also as the epitome of Albanian patriotism.

The Albanian Catholic Church, however, knows that 'patriotism' is hardly one of the easily recognized virtues of Mother Teresa, who remains their irreplaceable icon. Proud as undoubtedly the Albanians are that someone from their 'own blood' has been honoured with a coveted international accolade like the Nobel Prize, this is no guarantee that they will take her to their hearts for very long. Unless they also acknowledge Mother Teresa as an all-time great Albanian patriot, her appeal among them will eventually fade away. Only patriotism will retain the brightness of Mother Teresa's sainted halo.

This explains why anytime Albanian Catholic orators mention Mother Teresa's exemplary devotion to Christ, they are equally keen to remind the audiences also of their celebrated sister's 'great patriotism'. One of the preferred 'parables' about Mother Teresa's 'dedication' to 'her' nation is her meeting with the US President Bill Clinton at the beginning of 1997. In that gathering attended also by the leader of Kosova Albanians, Ibrahim Rugova, she is reported to have said to Clinton in the presence of several world leaders: 'Dear Mr President. This (pointing to Rugova) is my brother—the leader of Kosova which is suffering. Please take care of him and my people.'<sup>19</sup> If only the problems of the Balkans could be sorted out so easily!

For the Albanian Catholic Church, securing the pan-national endorsement of Mother Teresa as a Catholic 'saint' who was also a 'great patriot' is of vital importance because this would also elevate the status and bearing of this institution in the eyes of Albanian Orthodox Christians and Muslims alike. The appeal of the Catholic Church in Albania would be much more effective if the Vatican's saint is also the Albanian nation's 'patriot *par excellence*'.

In spite of this prolonged and well-organized campaign to sell Mother Teresa as a great Albanian patriot, the myth of her patriotism has hardly had the desired results among Albanians not only in Albania but also in Kosova and Macedonia. All the Kosova Albanians, for instance, speak very highly of her as a world-famous humanitarian figure.<sup>20</sup> Many of them, however, remain sceptical of her inflated patriotism. Some of them are rather uncomfortable with the sustained efforts of the Albanian Catholic Church to emphasize so much in the wake of her death and on the eve of the beatification that she was a nun devoted to the poor of the world as much as to the Albanians in Kosova.

As for the Catholic Kosova Albanians, they are eager to follow the official line of the Catholic Church but are unable to argue convincingly why they themselves consider her a great Albanian patriot.

Of particular interest in Kosova is the opinion of some academics at the University of Prishtina. They are disenchanted with the myth of Mother Teresa's 'patriotism' endorsed and promoted by the Government of Kosova. This official line, however, has never been contested by any Kosova Albanian

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<sup>19</sup>Engjëll Koliqi, 'Një udhëtim i paharruar me Dr Dom Lush Gjergjin', 27 Maj 2003, p. 4, <<http://www.agimi.com-personazh>>.

<sup>20</sup>The author's feedback from his lecture 'Mother Teresa and the Western Media', at the University of Prishtina, Kosova, and television interviews on Mother Teresa on KTV and RTV21 on 30 October 2003.

academic or the Kosova media. It would take some time for the Kosova Albanian scholars and media to overcome their timidity and express openly their views, even when they clash with stereotypical policies reeking of fake and drummed-up patriotism.

The recent war of words about Mother Teresa's exclusive 'ethnicity' and 'patriotism' (or lack of it) is the last chapter in a catalogue of failures on the part of some Balkan scholars to distance themselves from the traditional Balkan DNA politics and scholarship. Instead of seeing in Mother Teresa's example and preaching the best qualities of the peoples of the Balkans such as the spirit of charity, devotion to family and the courage and good will to forgive, some Balkan scholars were and remained bogged down in banal efforts to determine this remarkable woman's 'ethnic blood type'. Mother Teresa represents a break from stereotypical representations and perceptions of the Balkan people in the West. The people of the region missed a unique chance to prove to themselves and to the world that the nun exemplifies that they have much more in common than what sets them apart.

This is not to say that no Albanian or Balkan scholar took issue with the ridiculous and at times banal contest for the appropriation of Mother Teresa.<sup>21</sup> Their voice, however, was not heard enough because they were in the minority compared to the large number of uncompromising 'experts' on the nun that have recently mushroomed in the region. Moreover, as in the West, the Balkan media often prioritizes 'sensationalist' stories about narrow national interests.

The bickering between the Macedonians and the Albanians apparently started when the Albanian newspaper *Fakti* broke the sensational news about the Macedonians' efforts to 'usurp' Mother Teresa. In spite of several official denials from Sašo Čolakovski, the Macedonian government's spokesperson, and some civic leaders that there was no bad intention in the proposal to donate to Rome a copy of Tome Serafimovski's Mother Teresa bronze statue already established in Skopje, *Fakti* stood by its story. Many Albanian and Macedonian politicians and intellectuals entered the war of words. It was apparently a good time to flaunt Albanian and Macedonian patriotism.

It is difficult to prove whether or not the Macedonians were planning to inscribe on the statue the now infamous words 'daughter of Macedonia'. What is certain, however, is that the media campaign for exclusive rights on Mother Teresa's figure has been going on for quite some time in the Balkans.

The Albanian media, in particular, has been keen to advertise Mother Teresa throughout the 1990s as an exclusively Albanian world-famous celebrity. Newspapers, radio and television channels, and websites appeared to be working in unison with the Albanian Catholic Church and Albanian government especially after her death in 1997. Albania declared 3 days of national mourning when Mother Teresa died, the Sunday of her beatification a national holiday, and 2003–2004 the year of Mother Teresa. Eager for sensa-

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<sup>21</sup>Moikom Zeqo, 'Shqipëria dhe Nënë Tereza', *Shekulli*, 7 Tetor 2003; Gëzim Alpion, 'The Mother who cared for the shunned', *The Birmingham Post*, 5 September 2003; Gëzim Alpion, 'Oh! not Calcutta', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2003 (also printed in *Iran Daily*, 8 September 2003, and *Illyria*, 17 September 2003); Gëzim Alpion, Interview about Mother Teresa, (RFI) *Radio France Internationale*, 17 Shtator 2003; Gëzim Alpion, 'Mother Teresa and the Balkans DNA politics', *BESA Journal*, 7(2), 2003, pp. 28–30; Gëzim Alpion, Interview about Mother Teresa, KTV, Prishtina, Kosova, 30 October 2003; Gëzim Alpion, Interview about Mother Teresa, RTV21, Prishtina, Kosova, 30 October 2003.

tionalist news and in an effort to endear Mother Teresa to the Albanian public, most of the Albanian dailies were eager to publish any scrap of information to cement the myth of her 'undying' love for 'her' native Albania. On 15 October 2003, for instance, *Korrieri* published Mother Teresa's letter to Ramiz Alia of 16 August 1989.<sup>22</sup>

Dear Mr President of our dear Country Albania,

After many years of prayers and desire to visit my oen [*sic*] country after visiting so many through out [*sic*] the Eorld [*sic*], at last the good God gave this beautiful gift to come and to see my people. My oen [*sic*] family lived here for many years and they also died here, so I eas [*sic*] able to visit their graves. I hope together ee [*sic*] eill [*sic*] do something beautiful for God and for our people.

God bless you

M. Teresa, me [*sic*]

The spelling mistakes reveal the editor's laziness to use the letter 'w', which is not in the Albanian alphabet, instead of 'e', as well as perhaps the ignorance that Mother Teresa scribbled 'MC' and not 'me' immediately after her signature. As for the translation offered by *Korrieri*, it apparently betrays the journalist's poor command of English and equally poor translating skills. In the so-called 'përpiktë'/'exact' Albanian translation provided, the phrase 'our dear country Albania' becomes 'vendi *im* i dashur Shqipëria' [*my* dear Country Albania'] (emphasis added), and 'throughout', preceding 'the World', is translated inaccurately. This compound English word is written as two separate words, and the emphasis in the translated version is put on 'out' apparently to suggest that, in the case of Mother Teresa, any place outside Albania meant 'jashtë' (abroad) and not 'home'. The author of the article, it seems, was keen to make as much as possible of the presence of the emphatic 'own' between 'my' and 'country', to highlight how much Albania and Albanians meant to Mother Teresa.

Considering that the Albanian media, the Catholic Church, the political establishment and some intellectuals were—still are—trying to present Mother Teresa as Albania's modern 'national hero', something of a contemporary kindred spirit of the country's only undisputed national hero Skanderbeg, it is hardly surprising if some of the 'errors' in *Korrieri* were intentional. After all, similar and other inaccuracies in translation surfaced in other Albanian newspapers and websites around that time.<sup>23</sup> 'For Albanians,' notes Anne Sebba, 'Mother Teresa proclaims to the world that they can produce inspiring figures of world stature and is therefore of key importance in the battle to restore national pride.'<sup>24</sup>

As for the Macedonians, whose treatment of the Albanians has been and, in spite of some positive developments in the inter-ethnic relations in the country, still remains a sensitive issue, through an 'ambadress' like Mother Teresa, they hope to prove to the West that being devoted to Christianity and tolerant

<sup>22</sup>*Korrieri*, 'Letërkëmbim Nënë Tereza—Ramiz Alia', 15 Tetor 2003.

<sup>23</sup>For similar and other inaccuracies in original and translated versions of Mother Teresa's correspondence see *Zëri i Ditës*, 7 October 2003; Ramaj, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>24</sup>Sebba, op. cit., pp. 234–235.

to ethnic minorities, including the Albanians who, according to consensus figures released by the Macedonian government, make for at least 30 per cent of the country's population, is in their 'blood'.

But if the Albanians and the Macedonians are so much touched and therefore entitled to make so much noise about Mother Teresa's occasional use of 'my' in reference to Albania and Skopje, imagine what the Indians should do to 'copyright' her. After all, she lived in India for almost 70 years. Mother Teresa used for India, her adopted country, an endearing diction that she never employed for any other country or people, including 'her' Albanians and Macedonians.

India used to fascinate Mother Teresa for a couple of years before she decided to go there as a nun in 1928. She grew even more attached to this vast, fascinating and populous country as soon as she arrived in Calcutta, West Bengal, on 6 January 1929. As from 1948, the year when she left the convent to live and work in the slums of Calcutta, her identification with India and the Indian people became complete. In the same eventful year, she replaced the dark habit, she had been using for 20 years as a European nun, with the white sari of a poor Indian woman. From 1960, the year she made her first trip outside India, she was keen to show to the world how much she had absorbed India and Indian culture. The white Catholic nun who always dressed and *namasted* (greeted) her admirers around the world like an Indian, saw herself as a natural international spokeswoman of India and the Indian nation. She spoke for India. She was India. '*We in India love our children*', (emphasis added) she told the national convention of the National Council of Catholic Women in Las Vegas in October 1960.<sup>25</sup>

In 1978 Mother Teresa wrote a letter to India's Prime Minister Morarji Desai and parliamentarians to express her concern about 'The Freedom of Religion Bill' proposed in the Indian Parliament. The following are some of the selected excerpts from her long letter.<sup>26</sup> I have italicized the words and phrases that, in my view, reveal her attachment to India and the Indian people:

Dear Mr Desai and Members of *our Parliament*,

After much prayer and sacrifices I write to you, asking you to face God in prayer, before you take the step which will destroy the joy and freedom of *our people*. *Our people*, as you know better than I—are God-fearing people.... I love *my people* very much, more than myself.... *Our people* in Arunachal are so disturbed. All these years *our people* have lived together in peace.... Who are we to prevent *our people* from finding this God who has made them—who loves them—to whom they have to return? You took over your sacred duty in the name of God—acknowledging God's supreme right over *our country and her people*. It was so beautiful. But now I am afraid for you. I am afraid for *our people*.... You do not know what abortion has done and is doing to *our people*.... Mr Desai and Members of Parliament, in the name of God, do not destroy the Freedom *our country and people* have had, to serve and love God according to their conscience and belief. Do not belittle *our Hindu Religion* saying that *our*

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<sup>25</sup>Eileen Egan, *Such a Vision of the Street. Mother Teresa—The Spirit and the Work*. Completed and Unabridged. An Image Book, Doubleday, New York and London, 1986, p. 136.

<sup>26</sup>Kathryn Spink, *For the Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, her Missionaries of Charity and her Co-workers*, Colour Library International, Surrey, UK, 1981, pp. 202–207.

*Hindu poor people* give up their religion for 'a plate of rice'.... I have always made it my rule to co-operate whole-heartedly with the Central and State Governments in all undertakings which are *for the good of our people*.... Why are we [Christian missionaries] not with *our people* in Arunachal?.... The Catholics of *our country* have called an All-India day of fasting, prayer and sacrifice on Friday, 6th April to maintain peace and communal harmony and to ensure that India lives up to its noble tradition of religious freedom. I request you to propose a similar day of intercession for *all communities of our country*—that *we may obtain peace, unity and love*; that *we become one heart*, full of love and so become the sunshine of God's love, the hope of eternal happiness and the burning flame of God's love and compassion in *our families, our country* and in the world.

(sd.) M. Teresa MC

God bless you.

The bill's main target was to restrict the Christian missionaries' activities in India. Mother Teresa was, of course, upset by this, but in her letter she does not speak only on behalf of the Christian missionaries, the Indian Christians or the Christian community in Arunachal Pradesh, which by then had already started suffering the consequences of the Indian government's attempts to keep Christianity in check.

As it is obvious from the letter, Mother Teresa's language and tone are not those of an outsider and certainly not of a concerned European tourist, but of a 'born and bred' Indian. The letter is so skilfully peppered with the singular and plural first personal pronouns 'I' and 'we', as well as the possessive adjectives 'my' and 'our' that no politician in India and no non-Christian Indian would have had any reason to doubt or, even worse, accuse its author of having a motive other than that of protecting the civil rights of all the Indians and of praising and as such urging India's politicians to preserve the country's long-standing tradition of religious tolerance.

Mother Teresa's heart-felt plea to Prime Minister Desai is one of the many passionate letters she addressed to India's leading politicians throughout her long stay in India. In spite of my efforts, I have failed to find a similar inspired message among the letters she sent to politicians in the Balkans and especially to the leaders of 'her' Albania and Macedonia either during the years of Communism or in the post-Communist period. When it comes to India, however, Mother Teresa's devotional refrain to the country and its people remained exemplary consistent. By the time she wrote the 1978 letter, Mother Teresa was already an important voice in India. A year later, the Nobel Prize added weight to her opinion on a global scale. Even when she became almost an unparalleled media celebrity, however, she never ceased considering herself primarily, if not exclusively, as an Indian. As Anne Sebba rightly notes, 'Although several countries have awarded Mother Teresa honorary citizenship she has identified herself most closely with India.'<sup>27</sup>

Mother Teresa was hardly a very eloquent public speaker but she always knew how to win the hearts of the Indians. They had no reasons to doubt her when she confided in them publicly and with pride: 'Ami Bharater Bharat

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<sup>27</sup>Sebba, op. cit., p. 257.

Amar' ('I am Indian and India is mine').<sup>28</sup> She never deserted them in her lifetime and, naturally, chose to stay with them even after her death.

Considering her lifetime and post-mortem devotion to India, it is difficult to see how several Balkan peoples, especially the Albanians and the Macedonians, could claim that Mother Teresa belongs exclusively to them, or that she was an Albanian or Macedonian 'patriotic' figure. If Mother Teresa was a patriot at all, she was hardly from the brand of patriots that the Balkans has produced so far. Her 'patriotism' had no trace of nationalistic, chauvinistic and racist paranoia and phobias which have often been the scourge of the Balkans in the last two millennia, and especially since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the 20th century.

Mother Teresa's so-called Balkan-type patriotism and especially her alleged involvement with Balkan nationalist causes invented and propelled by some of her Albanian and Macedonian admirers and zealots have also been noticed by Christopher Hitchens, a Washington-based English journalist, who is hardly the most objective reporter of our time. In Hitchens' long list of celebrity 'crooks', Mother Teresa comes top. He remains hostile to the 'saint' from the Balkans now as much as when she was alive. In the 1994 Channel 4 controversial programme *Hell's Angel*, his image-smearing book *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, which appeared in the following year, and in several interviews,<sup>29</sup> Hitchens attacks Mother Teresa, for being, in his view, among other things, a friend of dictators and swindlers, a proselytizer, Calcutta's main image-wrecker, and the West's tool to salve its guilty conscience about 'the wretched of the world'. If this muck-racking sensationalist had his way, Mother Teresa should have been prosecuted for crimes against humanity.<sup>30</sup>

Hitchens' motives for attacking Mother Teresa are, understandably, hardly without blemish. His argument is often flawed, especially when he claims that Mother Teresa was involved in the cause for 'Greater Albania'. 'Agnes Bojaxhiu', postulates Hitchens, conveniently using Mother Teresa's original name, 'knows perfectly well that she is ... a fund-raising icon for clerical nationalists in the Balkans.'<sup>31</sup> Hitchens offers no evidence whatsoever to substantiate his conclusion that Mother Teresa herself was implicated in the Albanian nationalists' cause. 'In Tetova,' he notes, 'the Albanian centre of western Macedonia, and in Kosovo too, local zealots speak of Greater Albania as the response to Greater Serbia, and they flourish their pictures of Mother Teresa.'<sup>32</sup> Hitchens also insinuates that the fact that she paid homage on and placed a wreath by the grave of Enver Hoxha in 1989 proves that 'An Albanian Catholic nationalist ... might, on "patriotic" questions, still feel loyal to an ostensibly materialist Communist regime.'<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Johnson, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>29</sup>For some of Christopher Hitchens' vitriolic attacks on Mother Teresa see his following interviews in: *Worldguide*, 24 December 1995; *Free Inquiry*, 16(4), Fall 1996; *LiP Magazine*, 15 September 1998.

<sup>30</sup>See Christopher Hitchens' interview in *LiP Magazine*, op. cit.

<sup>31</sup>Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*, Verso, London and New York, 1995, p. 98.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

Hitchens, apparently, comes to the conclusion that the 'saintly' Albanian Catholic nun did commit the dreadful 'sin' of patriotism simply because she was the daughter of Nikollë Bojaxhiu, a charismatic and successful Albanian businessman and the only Catholic member of the Skopje city council, who loved his country. In Hitchens' view, if someone comes from a patriotic family, then that person should also be a patriot. Hitchens' axiomatic conclusion 'like father, like daughter', however, was never true in Mother Teresa's case. Her father's patriotic views did not, could not have had any impact on her partly because he died when she was only 8 years old and partly because, in the wake of his death, the Bojaxhius' immediate concern was how to earn a living. Shortly after Nikollë's premature death, 'his business partner appropriated the assets of the business and the family was left with nothing but their shelter'.<sup>34</sup>

Hitchens is right when he concludes that in the Balkans, 'yesterday as today, allegiance to the Church was more than a merely confessional matter. It was, and is, imbricated with a series of loyalties to nation, region and even party'.<sup>35</sup> One must add, however, that when it comes to the imbrication of the Church with national and other loyalties, the Balkans is hardly unique.

In spite of her patriotic background, Mother Teresa was not a 'patriot', not the kind of patriot that Hitchens, and some Albanians and Macedonians have in mind, anyway. She was by no means beyond or above politics, which explains why she remained to the end of her life a powerful religious as much as a political figure. She spoke out in several cases on politically sensitive issues one does not usually associate with a nun. In one form or another, Mother Teresa's presence was felt almost in every troubled spot in the world. She did not hesitate to make her often-controversial views clear whether it was the Bhopal tragedy in India, several conflicts in the Middle East, or the as yet unresolved problem of Northern Ireland.

When it came to issues related to the Balkans, however, Mother Teresa maintained a silence, which many, including some of her Albanian admirers, found puzzling and even disturbing. Nothing could detract her from her stubborn disengagement with the political, ethnic and religious conflicts of her native region. And much to the dismay of the Albanians, she was certainly resolute in her lifetime decision to keep quiet in public about the treatment of her fellow countrymen in Serbia and Macedonia. She was determined to keep herself aloof from any thing that could 'compromise' her non-intervention stance in the Balkans in spite of the fact that this contradicted openly with the policy of her Missionaries of Charity worldwide. And yet during her life and until now no Albanian reporter or scholar has ever questioned in public the carefully crafted public myth of Mother Teresa's 'patriotism', not even made a half-hearted attempt to argue that at times her engagement in Albania and the Balkans could have been perfectly justified on humanitarian grounds, especially in 1990. In that year many Albanian children in Kosova suddenly fell ill. The Serb-run health service was, apparently, completely unprepared for the emergency situation. The Kosova Albanians claimed that the Serb authorities were unwilling to intervene because the epidemic itself was caused by chemi-

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<sup>34</sup>Egan, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>35</sup>Hitchens, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

cal warfare agents including Sarin or/and Tabun.<sup>36</sup> The alleged intoxications took place when the Serbs started implementing their new segregation policy in the elementary and secondary schools in Kosova. The news of the mysterious poisoning of 7000 Albanian children in kindergartens and schools did not take long to reach the West but the international community was unable to react accordingly because by that time Kosova was hardly anyone's priority.

Disturbed by the lack of the international will to intervene, the Albanian community in the USA collected considerable financial and medical supplies to come to the aid of the children of Kosova.<sup>37</sup> In spite of their efforts, the Albanian Americans allegedly were unable to convince the Serb authorities to allow them to send the financial and medical assistance to Kosova. The UN was asked to act as a mediator but the organization apparently declined to be involved.

Finally, a request was made to Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity hoping that her sisters would agree to distribute the humanitarian aid in Kosova. The response from Mother Teresa, or rather from those who hid behind or spoke for her, was not long in coming but it was hardly what the anxious American Albanians had been expecting. The Missionaries of Charity refused to assist them arguing that Mother Teresa and her order were not involved in politics or politically motivated charity missions. This was very disheartening for the Albanian Americans who had requested her help particularly because she was an impartial figure with enormous political influence in the West and in some Balkan political circles.

Apparently, this incident has not been known to Kosova Albanians, the Albanian media and the Albanian scholars on Mother Teresa. As for those few who knew about it, they chose to sweep it under the carpet because it was deemed politically incorrect to be made public especially during the national and regional hysteria throughout the 1990s, after her death and prior to the beatification. Once again, the Albanians preferred to keep quiet for the sake of preserving a myth about a world celebrity who happened to be Albanian.

Mother Teresa is probably one of the most publicized and written about women of the 20th century. The vast biographical literature about her, however, is very selective. If her numerous biographers and analysts are more generous with the biographical information they disclose and more objective with the arguments about her and her work, the Mother Teresa we know will not be very much different from the real Mother Teresa. Albania, Macedonia, the Balkans as well as India and the whole Catholic world would benefit if the fog about this 20th century almost 'mythological figure' is cast away.

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<sup>36</sup>For more information regarding allegations on the involvement of the Serb Secret Police in the intoxication of Kosova Albanian children in March and April 1990, and on the former Yugoslav Army's production of chemical weapons see: Zeljko Toth, 'Serbian plants of death', *Večernji List*, 28 November 1995; 'The Albanian children, victims of Serbian death factories', 30 November 1995, <<http://www.hri.org>>; Halim Hyseni, *E Vërteta për Helmimet në Kosovë 1987–1990/The Truth on Intoxications in Kosova 1987–1990*, Prishtina, 1996. Interviews with the Kosova Albanians: the journalist Sami Islami, TVP Education Editor in 1990; the poet Xhemal Peci.

<sup>37</sup>Initially, the author of this article received the information in writing from a source that does not wish to be identified. That Mother Teresa and her order declined the request of the Albanian Americans to distribute the medical supplies in Kosova in spring 1990 was confirmed to the author by Lush Gjergji during the interview in Binçë, Kosova, 30 October 2003 and in Gjergji's letter to him of 10 November 2003. In the interview and the letter Gjergji maintains that Mother Teresa's refusal was in keeping with her lifetime policy of non-involvement in political conflicts.



Mother Teresa represents not only the best of what is Albanian, Macedonian, Croat, Serb, Vlach, Indian and certainly Catholic but also of human nature. She became a world icon mainly as a result of the almost unprecedented international publicity she received for over four decades. Moreover, she was and remains so popular because she struck a cord with millions of religious and secular people in a century where wars were and still are commonplace. Mother Teresa offered hope to a largely dejected world and optimism for a better future to millions of pessimistic and cynical people. At times she chose to be 'politically correct'. On the other hand, few people like her have had the courage, integrity and moral authority to challenge taboos in India, the Balkans and in the West. She was the sort of 'angel' where political, nationalist and religious leaders were, some still are, afraid or reluctant to tread. Not very many people agreed with what she did and this was mainly because some of them were blinkered by prejudice and irrational hatred for the 'other'.

Mother Teresa had a vision and farsightedness, which is still not fully understood by some of her admirers and critics who approach her unconventional legacy employing conventional means. Mother Teresa was true to what she preached and was prepared to do first for herself before asking others to follow her. Her decision to send flowers to the grave of a dictator like Enver Hoxha, for instance, was a well-calculated and well-meaning public gesture. She intended to send a message not only to 'her' Albanians, but also to other nations in the Balkans and across Eastern Europe, that they should learn to forgive. The last thing the impoverished Albanians needed when they were on the verge of a national catastrophe was to be reminded, let alone induced, by an internationally venerated religious and humanist icon like Mother Teresa that they should be intolerant and seek revenge. It would be wrong to assume that she found it easy to send flowers to the grave of Enver Hoxha who since 1960 had allegedly refused her requests to visit Albania to pay her respects to the graves of her mother and sister. Yet she had the strength and wisdom to forgive him. And not only him. Unlike her brother Lazar who, some would argue, was a rather controversial figure at times, Mother Teresa never expressed in public what she was ready to confirm in private that Serb nationalists could have poisoned her father.<sup>38</sup> In doing so, she was not necessarily condoning a despotic leader like Enver Hoxha or an extreme form of nationalism like the one often manifested in Serbia and elsewhere in the Balkans. Her symbolic gesture was more an indication of her staunch belief in the goodness of human nature, and of the need for people to make sacrifices for the sake of a better future.

Mother Teresa was above and beyond the stifling narrow-mindedness of Balkan-type nationalism and patriotism. By choosing not to conform to the easily recognizable stereotypical Balkan patriot, she invented in fact a new

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<sup>38</sup>In an interview, which appeared in the Italian magazine *Gente* in December 1979 and January 1980, Lazar Bojaxhiu states that his father Nikollë was poisoned by the Serbs. Lush Gjergji told the author of this article in Binçë, Kosova, on 30 October 2003, that he had specifically asked Mother Teresa if she knew anything about those who were responsible for her father's death in 1918. Mother Teresa had replied: 'There were rumours implicating the Serbs, but nothing has been confirmed.'

borderless and trans-national patriotism. She apparently believed in an inclusive and not exclusive 'patriotism'. Her humanist 'patriotism', offers a welcoming alternative to this traditionally unstable region and beyond. If only she had been more publicly articulate about it.

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