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When I say Europe, I mean Catholicism! The perception of Europe in the discourse of Albanian intellectuals after the fall of state socialism

Abstract

The fall of the socialist system in Albania aroused the desire in the vast majority of society to integrate into European structures. In the same period, many public figures undertook the 'duty' to show the Albanian people the way to European integration. At the same time, they began to describe which elements of the country's culture were European and which were not. From these descriptions, it can be concluded what their perception of Europe and European identity was. In this paper, we will try to analyse the discourse on the image of Europe in the writings of Albanian intellectuals, making a critique of their ahistorical approach when defining the idea of Europe and European identity.

Keywords: European identity, Albanian identity, intellectuals, European integration, Catholicism, Islam, racism, multiculturalism.

Article classification: Case study.

Introduction

After the fall of the socialist system, Albania, like many other countries of the former socialist camp, pronounced its aspiration to integrate into the European Union, a desire which in everyday discourse was expressed with the slogan "to become like Europe." Integration into the European Union has high support in Albanian public opinion, 85% according to the latest polls (Europa 2020), and the idea of integration has formed a hegemony in the discourse of the main political parties of the country, the Democratic Party (centre right) and the Socialist Party (centre left) (Qori 2015). It is also a hegemonic idea in the general public discourse, in both media and academia. So, unlike other countries who either aspire to join or are already members of the European Union, in general, in Albania, there is no public debate regarding European integration, despite political parties or groups

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that speak openly against the integration of the country into the EU. This lack of public debate on the European integration of the country also applies to the concept of Europe. Quite rarely has the public reflected on what it means to be European, what it means for the country to be "like Europe," and rarely has a holistic definition been built on Europe. In fact, it is often presented as the antipode of the Albanian reality, that "everything there is different from here and is naturally better."

However, there are a few Albanian intellectuals, writers, publicists, essayists, and journalists, who, in their discourse and writings, have tried to give a prescription of Europe and European identity. For the Albanian reality, the figure of the writer, the publicist and to some extent, the journalist, are very important. This dates from the end of the 19th century, when the Albanian National Renaissance had as its main figures writers and publicists, and it became more deeply rooted during the period of state socialism, when writers were considered 'the conscience of the nation,' and, together with them, journalists were commissars of the souls of the people. Even some resistance made against the regime during that period came from the spheres of literature and arts. Consequently, the position of intellectuals in the perception of the Albanian public is very influential. For this reason, an analysis of their writings on the concept of Europe, European identity, and integration is important due to their impact on most of society.

This article will first analyse the journalistic articles and essays about Albanian and European identity by the most famous Albanian writer, Ismail Kadare. Firstly, because he is one of the most vocal persons on this issue, but also because of the great influence and fame he has inside Albania and abroad. Then we will examine the writings of lesser-known, but influential within Albania, scholars Aurel Plasari and Piro Misha, as well as painter Maks Velo. While Ismail Kadare has systematically developed his idea of Europe, other authors have not written much about the European identity of Albanians. From a short review of their writings, though, it seems that the approach they have while perceiving Europe and the idea of European identity is essentialist: They consider the European identity as a static identity, unchanged from antiquity to the present day. The main emphasis of all these public figures is on the Christian identity of Europe; more precisely, the Catholic and Protestant identity of Western Europe, which, according to these authors, is also the substance of European identity.

In this paper, we will try to analyse the discourse on the image of Europe in the writings of these Albanian intellectuals, making a critique of their ahistorical approach when defining the idea of Europe and European identity. This critique will be based on the principles of an open, pluralistic,

and tolerant society for the "other." An overview of the historical journey of the concept of European identity will be given first, as will a summary of the main theoretical approaches that aim to analyse this concept. Afterwards, a history of Albania's integration into the European Union will be presented, as well as a summary of the programs of the main political parties related to European integration. The paper will present what the aforementioned Albanian authors have written about Europe, European identity, and Albania's integration into the EU, and a critique of their approach will be given.

State of Research

Critics of the public teaching of Albanian intellectuals about Europe, though rare compared to the hegemonic discourse on Europe's idea, do exist, coming both from the circle of Albanian public figures and at the academic level. Among the first critics was journalist Fatos Lubonja, who in the late 1990s criticized the essential definition of Europe being heard from the leading Albanian intellectuals. In the magazine founded by him, "Endeavour", authors who had a different approach from the main one to the identity of Albanians, the "European roots" of Albanians, links of Albanians with Europe and the East, as well as the idea of Europe, have found writing space.

Researcher and lecturer Enis Sulstarova has made a thorough systematic criticism of the idea of Europe in Albanian public discourse. In his books and articles, he has made a Saidian critique (based on the concept of Edward Said's Orientalism) of the orientalist approach of Albanian politicians and intellectuals regarding Europe, Albanian identity, and the so-called "European identity of Albanians" (Sulstarova 2012) (Sulstarova 2013).

Adrian Brisku has also written about orientalism in the literature and publicist works of Ismail Kadare, and has analysed and criticised orientalism in the discourse of Albanian politicians and public figures, and their essentialist concept of Europe (Brisku 2006).

Arlind Qori has also criticised the ideas of Europe presented in the programs, lectures, and policies of the main parties of Albania. In his dissertation, he calls the idea of European integration the "ideological node" of all ruling ideologies in today's Albanian politics. This is because, by all Albanian politicians, European integration is presented as salvation from poverty, corruption, and economic and social difficulties for the Albanian people (Qori 2015).

This article focuses mainly on the religious aspect, which is overemphasised by the Albanian intellectuals analysed below in their discourse

on Europe and the essence of European identity. This particular element, as well as other elements of the supposed European identity, according to Albanian intellectuals, will be critically analysed to determine their ahistorical approach. Another important point of this article is to present the issues that can appear in a multi-religious society and secular state, like the Albanian one, and the overemphasis of a certain religion as a crucial part of the Albanian and European identity- discourse which can endanger the cohesion of society and promote various conflicts on religious or regional grounds.

Methodological framework

This article will be based on a critical analysis of the public discourse of Albanian intellectuals. Public discourse includes daily communications, public debates, and scientific knowledge produced in scientific institutions, which in today's society has the status of truth (Jäger 2001, 33). The public writings of intellectuals, although not scientific knowledge, are more important than everyday communication, even more so than political or social debates. This is due to the impacts of these individuals on the public sphere, which in the case of Albania, for the reasons mentioned in the introduction of this article, are even greater than in other countries. Thus, an analysis of their writing about Europe, European, and Albanian identity is important because they have a strong impact on society. This article will critically analyse the writings on these issues of Ismail Kadare, Aurel Plasari, Piro Misha, and Maks Velos, considering their writings as public discourse. Through this critical analysis of public discourse, the aim is to identify and criticise the hegemonic approach to an issue or idea that exists in a certain place and time.

An important element of public discourse is the reciprocal relationship it has with reality, what it is influenced by and how it influences reality (Foucault 1972, 49). Regarding identity issues, this relationship is even more complicated, because public discourse does not only interpret reality, but constructs one based on the concepts and ideas of the articulators. Therefore, a critical analysis of this discourse also tends to deconstruct this 'imaginary reality'.

A Brief Overview of the Concepts of European Identity

Use of the term "European" in the sense of identity began with Pope Pius II who, with the term "European civilisation", presented Catholicism threatened at that time by Ottoman Islam (Waswo 2000, 24). In the period of the Enlightenment, "Europe" was understood as the centre of the rational

and civilised world, around which was ignorance and barbarism (Waswo 2000, 27). Europe was thereafter no longer identified with Christianity but with modernity, marked by industrialisation and the capitalist development of the economy. The idea of Europe after the Second World War is related to the creation of lasting peace in Western Europe, the goals being to avoid a second Holocaust and another war between European states. Thus, the cautious resurgence of West Germany aimed to avoid a repetition of the scenario at the end of the First War. It was also aimed at curbing the spread of communism in western Europe, and, for this purpose, after the Second World War, a social consensus was reached between the countries of Western Europe. In this struggle against the spread of communism, Europe reaffirmed its mission to defend freedom and human rights. The Cold War clearly defined the borders of Europe, including within Europe only those liberal democracies of the West. In the discourse of Western European leaders, the socialist part of Europe was not "European", but "Asiatic" (Bauman, 1998, 2). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, this perception changed, with many former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe coming to join the European Union, and thus becoming 'entirely' European (according to that discourse that only liberal democracies of the West were European) (Delanty 2003, 11). The enlargement of the borders of the European Union and the consolidation of the EU institutions did not flatten the debate on European identity, what it means to be European, whether a European identity exists that replaces the national one, but remained different enough from the globalist identity.

In this attempt to shape a European identity, two approaches can be identified: The essentialist and the constructivist.

The essentialist approach perceives the European identity as an identity already formed, with foundations in the past. The foundations of this past are found in the Greco- Roman civilisation, Christianity, the Enlightenment, and modernity (Padgen 2002, 2-3). The essentialist approach to the concept of Europe is Eurocentric and Orientalist, and as such it perceives European civilisation as unitary and superior to other civilisations, especially to the "backward, despotic" Orient. Despite negative historical experiences such as Nazism and the Holocaust, this approach always considers European civilisation as positive and in constant progress. Essentialists consider that a concept or idea has been consistent in the definition of civilisation and European identity, from antiquity to the present day. For some authors, this constant concept signifies freedom as a defining feature of all European societies (Padgen 2002). Other authors have emphasised that the main and unchanging characteristic of European societies has always been individualism and dynamism.

The other approach which tries to analyse the European identity is the constructivist one. According to this approach, Europe is an entity with many meanings, not an essential one (Boon & Delanty 2007, 2). For constructivists, Europe does not have a common denominator, and they see each era projecting Europe according to its ideology. Thus, more than the core of European identity is a projection of what this identity is; a projection that is challenged and transformed according to historical circumstances and the political or cultural approaches of those who make this projection. The constructivist approach considers Europe as a plurality of identities, not a homogeneous European one. Even authors who are part of the constructivist approach consider the essence of European identity in this ongoing dialogue between different cultures, opinions, and approaches. According to these authors, this constant confrontation between different opinions will lead to the point that the European identity will be that of a culture that does not exclude any other culture from its public space (Af Malmbrog & Strath, 2002, 6).

The constructivist approach criticises the essentialist firstly because it is ahistorical, as according to the constructivist it is incorrect to claim that there is an uninterrupted European civilisation, which lasted millennia, from Greco-Roman antiquity to the founding Treaties of the European Union (Passerini, 2003, 25). Second, constructivists raise the issue of the danger of this thesis. Given the events of the last century, among them the two world wars, the Holocaust, extermination and colonialism, for constructivists, an identity that becomes exclusive to others endangers individuals or social groups that are not called to this identity (Af Malmbrog & Strath 2002, 10). For constructivists, Europe is made up of many traditions that produce a culture and a common heritage that is preserved through a critical spirit and can contribute to the well-being of people, as well as other cultures.

Albania's path towards European integration

After the fall of the socialist system in Albania in 1991, the new political forces proclaimed Albania's aspiration to integrate into the European Union. In parallel with the democratic changes and the proclamation of Albania's aspirations to integrate into the European Community, the public and political discourse which considered Albania an integral part of "European civilisation" began, although it was not clear at the time what this phrase meant. The political platform of the Democratic Party in 1990 draws a parallel between the efforts and aspirations for democracy of the Albanian people and the efforts made for the democratisation of other peoples of Central and Eastern

Europe, which aimed at "a democracy of the Western-type" (Berisha 1991, 1). During the thirty years of its existence as a political party, through its electoral programs, the Democratic Party always referred to this "European essence" of the Albanian people, and this Party was self-described as the only one that best represented this essence. In this spirit, the Democratic Party's 1996 electoral program referred to the Albanian people as an essentially European people, and neither the centuries-old occupation (meaning the Ottoman Empire) nor the 45-year dictatorship (socialist regime) had violated this affiliation (Rilindja Demokratike 1996). This discourse continued in the electoral platforms of 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and the last one in 2021, where the western and European "essence" of the Albanians is repeated, and noted again as best represented by this party.

With the democratic changes, the Socialist Party, which was the successor of the Labour Party of Albania (the party state of the socialist period), captured slogans about Europe and the European essence of the Albanians. Although such phrases are not mentioned in the electoral platform of the 1991 elections, there are still references to European civilisation as a model to follow. This spirit continued in the subsequent electoral programs and public discourses of the main figures of this party, because European civilisation was seen as an inspiring model (Zëri i Popullit 1991). This changed completely in the electoral program of 2009 (the first elections after the change of the leadership class of the Socialist Party). The program outlined the metaphor of a European family in which Albanians are an essential part. In it, the European Union is presented as a common home to which Albanians must return (Rama 2009).

With the fall of the socialist system, the two main political parties in Albania, who have shared power during the last thirty years, came to an agreement on the European integration of Albania. The idea of Europe is seen as a radical affiliation for Albania; respectively, a civilisational goal is encountered in most of the political programs and electoral platforms of the main political parties in Albania. In the public discourse of Albanian politicians, the integration of Albania into European institutions and the affiliation of the Albanian people to European civilisation is a key point (Qori 2015). In the same discourse, European civilisation is considered a superior civilisation before others, and Albanians are a "natural" part of this civilisation.

The Perception of Europe in the discourse of Albanian Intellectuals

Parallel to this hegemonic idea of European integration in Albanian political life, many intellectuals and public figures in Albania speak about the "European essence of the Albanian people." At the same time, European civilisation has been described in orientalist terms, the negative opposite of which is the Ottoman Empire and Soviet communism. The most famous and vocal of these intellectuals is the prominent Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, who, in addition to his role as a writer, since the late 1980s, has created the profile of a public figure. To him, the role of "conscience and guide of the nation' is often given. In Ismail Kadare's public discourse:

"The Ottoman invasion of Albania is a historical incident that separated Albania from the core of its western identity. This historical event had the most serious consequence in terms of the identity of the Albanians and their massive conversion to Islam, seeing them detaching themselves from the roots of European civilisation, which is based on Catholicism" (Kadare 2012, 17).

Therefore, for Kadare, "Albania became a battleground between the European side of Albanian identity, represented by the Catholic faith, and the oriental side of this identity, represented mainly by adherents to Islam" (Kadare 2012, 31).

A historical incident Ismail Kadare also considers relevant is the period of socialism in Albania. He avoids a social and political analysis of this system, however, and merely characterises the 45-year period of state socialism as "an oriental dictatorship" (Kadare 2012, 203). Kadare's thesis was supported by other public voices in Albania, the first among them being Arshi Pipa (a member of the anti-communist Albanian diaspora who lived in the US). Pipa considered Albanian communism as Crypto-Islamism, a descendant of the Ottomans. For Pipa, this was the reason, "communists in Albania were so vocal against Western Europe because, by being Crypto-Islamist, they hated the Catholic essence of Europe" (Pipa 2010, 73).

Another Albanian scholar, Aurel Plasari, continues in this line, writing: "the reason why Albanian Stalinism was wilder than its counterparts in the rest of eastern Europe is that it was a Stalinism with the most pronounced oriental features" (Plasari 1995, 51). Here, according to Plasari, is the great ferocity of the Albanian regime and its great hatred for the rest of the world, even the socialist East, after 1960.

In the essay "The European Identity of Albanians," written on the eve of Albania's membership in NATO and the signing of the Stabilization and Association agreements, Ismail Kadare tries to explain why Albanians deserve

to integrate into the European Union, justifying this integration with what he calls the "essence of their European identity," (Kadare, 2006, 13). He wrote, "Europe hates and does not approach those people with different behaviour and clothing from it, especially those from the Middle East," (Kadare 2006, 48), and in his essay, he tries to highlight those elements of Albanians that make them European, as well as to eliminate from Albanian society those elements which he considers non-European.

Ismail Kadare does not express in this essay how he perceives European identity and what its characteristics are, but a thorough analysis of the reasons why, according to him, Albanians are European can lead indirectly to conclude what his concept of Europe is. Thus, for Kadare:

"The first and most important reason why Albanians deserve to be part of Europe is their language, because Albanian is an Indo-European language and one of the oldest languages of the continent. The other reason, even more significant than the first, is the geographical affiliation of Albania in Europe. Albania is located in the area which was between the ancient Greco-Roman civilisations, which the author calls a precursor and foundation of current European culture. The third is race, since Albanians are a white race, like that of the entire European continent, and as such, they are entitled to be an integral part of Europe" (Kadare 2006, 20-21).

As further proof of the Europeanisation of the Albanians, Ismail Kadare presents the common history during the ancient period and the Middle Ages (Kadare 2006, 25). Given that after the Middle Ages, Albanians had a break from European civilisation after being conquered by the Ottoman Empire, Kadare writes that, "the culture accumulated during antiquity and in the Middle Ages was enough to keep the European spirit alive in the Albanian people" (Ibid).

The other commonality between European civilisation and Albanians is culture, writes Kadare. He divides culture into two categories, popular and cultivated. The popular culture of the Albanians is the totality of the customary code, epic poetry, and the traditions of the Albanians that, according to Kadare, are "part of the European cultural arena" (Kadare 2006, 27). Kadare then further divides cultivated culture into two categories: The culture and literature developed by the Catholic clergy in Latin during the Middle Ages, and, in opposition, the literature of the Sufi verses, developed mainly during the Ottoman period in Persian or Arabic. Kadare considers the latter as "degenerate" literature, a kind of Turkish-Albanian hybrid, anti-European, and consequently anti-Albanian (Kadare, 2006, 27). However, he emphasises: "the reserves accumulated by the popular culture and that of the culture cultivated by the Catholic clergy create an impassable wall of oriental

literature which cannot change the European essence of the Albanian people."

Ismail Kadare defines Europe based on geography, languages, race, the common history of antiquity and the Middle Ages, as well as popular culture, and that cultivated by the Catholic clergy in Latin.

Kadare's definition about Europe needs to be analysed and deconstructed. In terms of the first common element between Albanians and Europe, the language, which Ismail Kadare calls "the basis of the European identity of Albanians," as an ancient language, the truth is that in Europe, both new and old languages are used, even languages that were not part of everyday use until a few years ago. Languages are not a dead organism that remain in a static state, but a living body that give and take benefits from each other, and are enriched by such contact.

Regarding the geographical element that Kadare presents as an indicator of the European identity of the Albanians, the idea of Europe precedes geography, and the geographical contours of Europe have changed along with the idea and the historical circumstances of this idea. The idea of Europe has never matched and does not match today the geographical definition of the European continent. Geographically, Europe includes Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, a part of Russia, and Turkey, although Ismail Kadare himself presents these countries as the antipode of European identity. On the other hand, some former colonial states such as Spain, France, and Great Britain (while it was part of the EU) still retain some of their colonial possessions, areas which are now legally part of the European Union, and the citizens of these regions are as European as those of central European areas. (Sulstarova, Kadare's rigid Europe 2006, 48)

A dreadful argument given by Kadare as to why Albanians are European is that of race- that Albanians are a white race like the rest of Europeans. This argument is appalling as, historically, Europe has always been a place of mixing between different peoples and ethnicities; thus, one cannot speak of a "European race." Moreover, racial differences between peoples are linked to the totalitarianism of the last century, both Fascism and Nazism (Sulstarova 2006, 47-48).

The issue of historicism given by Kadare as the determinant of the Albanian- European community can be used as a counter-argument to his thesis. Firstly, because he defines Europe as only Western Europe, and since the division of the Roman Empire by Emperor Theodosius, the lands on which Albanians live today are on the eastern side of that line. Moreover, the two periods he defines as historical incidents, the Ottoman and socialist periods, would be crucial in the anti-European historicism of the Albanian people. According to Kadare, both the Ottoman Empire and the socialist

regime are essentially anti-European.

Whether popular or cultivated, Kadare does not have a unit of measurement of a culture being more European or Oriental, nor does he say which of these is more rooted and valued in the consciousness of the Albanian people. On the other hand, to exclude a whole array of oriental literature developed among Albanians for several centuries in Persian, Arabic, Ottoman Turkish, or even Albanian, because it is considered "inferior literature," even "harmful to the Albanian people," is cultural engineering, which, in what is called current Europe, is unacceptable. Europe is much more multicultural than the concept that Ismail Kadare puts forth for it (Sulstarova 2006, 49).

One of the most vocal public figures regarding the European identity of Albanians is Aurel Plasari, a researcher of Albanian literature also engaged in the public life of the country. In his long essay "Theodosius' Line Reappears: Where the Albanians Will Hold It," written in 1992, Plasari attempts to analyse the former socialist countries, how these countries carried out democratising reforms, and how well they were integrated into the market economy system and liberal democracy. Plasari categorises the former socialist states into two groups: The "vanguard" states and the "backward".

"The vanguard states are mainly the countries of Central Europe that have managed to successfully implement the reforms, and consequently which have been liberated from the communist past, while the backward states are the nations of Southeast Europe having difficulties implementing the reforms. They have not managed to break free from the clutches of Marxism" (Plasari 1995, 16).

According to this author, the key factor influencing this is "the religious and consequently cultural identity of these states." Countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, with the religious identity of the Roman Catholic Church, can make process in market liberalisation, democratisation, and thus walk the path of reform. The countries of Southeast Europe, however, which were under the influence of Orthodox Christianity during the Byzantine Empire, as well as those under the influence of Islam during the period of the Ottoman Empire, according to Plasari, had "difficulties in the process of decommunisation, and in advancing on the path of reforms of liberalism and democracy" (Plasari 1995, 20).

Thus, according to Aurel Plasari, the road to Europe is more or less determined, determined at the moment when Theodosius divided the Roman Empire into East and West. To his mind, the essence of the West is affiliation with the Roman Catholic religion, and only those countries that have this affiliation and culture can walk the path of democratic reforms and achieve progress.

Reading Plasari's essay, it can be concluded that his idea for Europe is that of a homogeneous society with a deeply religious, Roman-Catholic identity, and he considers Protestantism as a religion essentially similar to Catholic. Thus, the political culture of the citizens of Catholic or Protestant Europe is fundamentally similar but completely different from that of Orthodox Christians or Muslims. But, as he "undertook" the duty to show the Albanians the way to European civilisation, progress and democratisation, if he stopped at these statements, Plasari would have shown that Albanians were hopeless, as most Albanians belong to the Muslim faith, at least traditionally, regardless of how much they identify with this religion. At this moment, like Kadare, Aurel Plasari makes a centuries-old historical leap. According to him, although the line of Theodosius left the Albanians on the eastern side of the Empire, they had constant contact with the West due to the geographical luck of being near Italy and, consequently, at the time of the Great Schism (1054), a good part of the Albanians remained under the Church of Rome (Plasari 1995, 30-34). While the Ottoman invasion, according to Aurel Plasari, although lasting five centuries, failed to change the Western essence of the Albanian people, this appeared at the moment the Albanians declared independence from the Empire and tried to make their country like the Occident. At a similar historical crossroads, Plasari places the Albanians after the fall of the socialist system, and he also advises them to go to Catholic Europe, erasing those signs of the Orient that may appear among them (Ibid. 57).

Another important author for the Albanian public, Piro Misha (current director of the National Library of Albania), has also been very vocal about the issue of identity and European integration in Albania. In an essay published in 1997, "Albanian history and cultural identity," Misha aims to trace what he calls the "European substratum of Albanians," which he identifies in "the ruins of ancient cities found in Albania today, with the Paleo- Christian basilicas and the Byzantine churches, as well as in the iconography developed in the post-Byzantine period by local iconographers" (Misha 1997, 10). So, for Misha, the essence of European identity is related to Greco-Roman antiquity and then to Christianity; therefore, he identifies evidence of the European in Albania in that heritage of the ancient and Byzantine period. He further considers the Ottoman conquest of Arbanon as "a catastrophe for the Albanian people, whose natural way to the West was interrupted by this conquest." The Albanians who emerged from this invasion came out with a disfigured identity, half Oriental and half European. The main reason for this, according to Misha, was the massive conversion of Albanians to Islam (Ibid. 29).

The last public figure whose discourse will be examined in this paper is Maks Velo, a painter and writer who had a very strong public voice in Albania, especially on topics related to the European identity of Albanians and European integration. Unlike Ismail Kadare or other intellectuals, who are reluctant to directly attack Islam or Muslim believers in Albania, Maks Velo is more direct in this regard. He considers Islam a horrible thing in itself, and attributes the social problems that Albania has to religion, "the barbarity that this religion conveys to Albanians" (Velo 2000, 252). In this sense, Velo writes that Albania is "part of oriental barbarism", and claims that the gap between Albanians and Europeans is so deep that it is already insurmountable. Velo even calls on Europe to protect itself from Albanians because they are "a danger to European civilisation". His description of Europe is mainly in aesthetic terms, presenting it as the culmination of aesthetic achievements in the visual arts, painting and sculpture, the antipode of which is barbarism, the lack of aesthetics in the oriental picture, and the art of social realism, which, according to Maks Velo, have irrevocably crippled the aesthetic tastes of Albanians, and the latter are now without hope (Ibid. 255).

Examining the discourse and the writings of these Albanian intellectuals about Europe, European identity, and the integration of Albania into the European Union, it seems that their perception of Europe is essential, considering Europe and European identity as a solid thing, an immutable core of centuries. This essence is found in the common Christian identity of Europe; however, Orthodox Christianity is excluded from this identity, which is labelled as Eastern, Byzantine, or Oriental. Therefore, the essence of European civilisation is found, according to Albanian intellectuals, in the Roman-Catholic and Protestant roots of Western Europe. It is interesting how, in this discourse, for example, the differences between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism (what they call "Western Christianity") are silenced, as are the centuries-old conflicts that have occurred in western Europe between the followers of these two religions. Here, another problem can be highlighted. These intellectuals, while talking about the European integration of Albania, also talk about the implementation of market reforms in Albania, to make a complete transformation of the Albanian economy to capitalism. It is unclear how much they are aware of Weber's idea expressed in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," that the root of the success of capitalism lies in the Protestant ethic of work, as opposed to which he places the morality of Catholicism. According to Weber, this is why Protestant countries are more economically developed and more industrialised than Catholic ones in Europe (Weber 2005). It cannot be said that the Weber thesis is an indisputable axiom. There have been and are many objections to it. There are

also various theses on the causes and reasons for the beginning and success of capitalism in one country or another, as well as the cause-and-effect relationship between capitalism and Protestantism (Marx & Engels 2004). However, this point was raised here to show that the reality is much more complex, heterogeneous, and with greater internal contradictions than appear in the writings of the aforementioned.

Another contradiction in this discourse is that of Orthodox Christianity, which is labelled Byzantine, Eastern, or non-European. Meanwhile, in the same discourse, Europe complies with the European Union, but this kind of discourse "forgets" that Greece, as an Orthodox-majority country, was already part of the European Union, and later Romania and Bulgaria were integrated into the EU. Apart from this, Roman Catholic-majority countries like Poland or Hungary, although they managed to make the transition faster from the socialist regime to a liberal-democracy, already have internal problems with right-wing populism, xenophobia, the rights of gender and sexual minorities, and academic freedom - values which are at the core of the European Union.

While Christianity has indeed left extraordinary traces in the culture of Europe, be it in arts, culture, or literature, the relationship of European societies with the Church, at least since the Enlightenment, has been a dialectical one. What is called the "Age of Reason" in Europe came after a break with ecclesiastical hegemony in public life. Many religious minority groups, such as the Jews, have been an integral part of European society and have contributed to the development of European civilisation. Further, it can be mentioned that the contacts of Europeans of the Middle Age with the works of Hellenic antique philosophers were made through Arabic. The works of Greek philosophers lost in the West were preserved in Arabic (also Hellenic in Byzantium), and later translated into Latin during the Middle Ages, a period that is recognised as the 'Recovery of Aristotle' (Shlomo 1986, 126). Currently, in Europe, there are millions of Muslims, atheists, agnostics, and people with different religious or cultural identities for whom the "religious roots" of European identity do not say anything. They have a different perception of European identity: An identity based on tolerance and multiculturalism.

A good part of these Muslims living in Europe are originally from Muslim-majority countries which have been colonies of European countries and have been exploited and governed colonially. The wealth accumulated by these colonies has helped develop arts, culture, and education in Europe. So, indirectly, the "backward" part of the world has contributed to the development of the advanced part (Europe). This colonial relationship between the advanced and the backward part is one of the factors that has

left the latter in that state of underdevelopment (Rodney 2018).

One critique that the constructivist approach makes to the essentialist regarding European identity is the danger that comes from imagining identity as a static, rigid, and immutable thing throughout history, excluding those segments or social categories that do not fit into this identity. The constructivist approach reminds us of the tragic events of the 20th century, such as the Holocaust or the various genocides, that have originated from this principle (Af Malmbrog & Strath 2002). This critique is also valid for Albanian essentialists. First, Albanian society is multi-religious. Although there have been no conflicts on religious grounds until now, this does not mean that society is immune to them. The overemphasis or overestimation of one religion over others would contribute to the formation of divisions based on religion, which coincide to some extent also on geographical divisions. In certain socioeconomic conditions, centrifugal forces based on these religious and regional divisions can be formed, as can radical forces which aim at domination over other social groups. On the other hand, the problems that Albania has, according to the reports of the European Commission, are not issues related to the cultural identity or religion of Albanian society, but are problems that have to do with rule of law, corruption, human rights, separation, and balance of powers. To blame these political problems on the religious identity of the majority of the Albanian people or the Ottoman invasion is at the very least intellectual laziness, and it can have dangerous consequences, as mentioned above. The Albanian people should not be presented with an archaic, essentialist concept of European identity, which could lead to arrogance or the radicalisation of various social segments based on their religious identity, but should be made aware that Europe has a history of multiculturalist reality, and is founded on respect for minorities, tolerance, and understanding.

Conclusions

This paper analyses the writings of some Albanian public figures- the writer Ismail Kadare, scholars Aurel Plasari and Piro Misha, and painter Maks Velo, regarding the idea of Europe, European identity, and the integration of Albanians in Europe. Initially, a synthesis of two approaches was presented, which deal with the conceptualisation of European identity, and the essentialist one, which considers European identity as something rigid and with one essence from Greco-Roman antiquity until today. In addition, the constructivist approach, which considers European identity to be fluid and related to the particular historical, social, and political circumstances

of a given period, is an important one. In the constructivist approach, the essence of European identity lies in this constant "tension" between different identities, this dialectic, and the constant clash between different cultures and identities. Constructivists also criticise essentialists for the danger that comes to society with this approach, recalling the tragic events of the 20th century.

Afterwards, a brief history of Albania's journey to the European Union was presented, as well as the lectures of the main political parties in the country regarding integration. In the political programs and the public discourse of the latter, it is clear that the idea of EU integration is hegemonic and goes beyond the left-right division. The opponents of each of the main political parties try to show themselves as the more authentic representative of the European spirit in Albania.

Most of this paper dealt with the writings of Albanian intellectuals Ismail Kadare, Aurel Plasari, Piro Misha, and Maks Velo on Europe and European identity. In general, they did not write directly about Europe or European identity, but, by claiming for themselves the roles of the guide for the Albanian people on their path to Europeanisation, they have shown what elements exist in the Albanian people that approximate the culture and history of Europe. or these intellectuals, the commonality between the Albanian people and European civilisation lies in Greco-Roman antiquity and a period of the Middle Ages where, according to them, the Albanians were well integrated into the society and common civilisation of Europe. The Ottoman invasion, even after the socialist period, is considered a historical incident that left a heavy mark on the Albanian identity, especially the Ottoman period, because, during this period, most Albanians converted to Islam. These historical events took the Albanians away from their "mother" European civilisation. These intellectuals also give themselves the role of advisor, suggesting how Albanian society can eradicate from its mentality those "remnants" of historical events in order to get closer to European civilisation. Thus, it can be concluded that the perception of these Albanian intellectuals about Europe and European identity is essentialist: The concept of a rigid Europe and a European identity unchanged from antiquity until today, emphasising Christianity, especially Catholicism, as its root identity. The advice of these figures for Albanians is to adapt as much as possible to this rigid identity of Europe, eliminating from themselves those characteristics which do not match their perception of Europe.

At this point lies the main criticism towards these intellectuals, firstly because they represent an archaic concept of Europe and European identity. By highlighting a particular religion being closer to European identity, when Albanian society is multi-religious, this type of discourse endangers the

cohesion of society and may promote various conflicts on religious or regional grounds. The Albanian people should not be presented with an archaic essential concept of European identity, as it could lead to arrogance or the radicalisation of various social segments based on their religious identity. They should instead be made aware that Europe has a multicultural history, and its basic foundations are respect for minorities, tolerance, and understanding.

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