

## Greeks

### Profile

Greeks make up the largest ethnic minority in Albania. There are no official up-to-date figures, but according to the 1989 Census, there were 58,758 Greeks. Other estimates put it much higher. The size of the Greek minority is especially contentious on account of the history of claims to southern Albania made by the Greek government in Athens, and of the substantial support within Greece and among Greeks in Albania, for the establishment of an autonomous district of 'Northern Epirus'.

### Historical context

The origin of the Greek minority is disputed. Many Greeks claim descent from the Greek population which settled in the Albanian lands during the pre-Christian period. Other sources indicate that Greeks moved into the region only much later, mainly as indentured labour during the Turkish period, or that many Greeks are really 'hellenized Albanians'. It is impossible to evaluate the accuracy of these divergent accounts, although it may be that all contain elements of truth. Certainly, there appears to be a continuous history of Greek settlement in several of the Albanian coastal cities. The majority of the present Greek population is, however, concentrated inland, south of a line running roughly from Vlora to Korca.

Assimilationist policies practised by the interwar governments led to the closure of Greek schools and to discriminatory measures against Greek Orthodox monasteries. After the communist take-over, a number of Greeks were appointed to high positions. In general, the communists were less interested in discriminating on grounds of ethnicity as of religion. In this respect, the campaign against the churches hit the Greek minority disproportionately, since affiliation to the Eastern Orthodox rite has traditionally been a strong component of Greek identity.

After the reforms of 1990, Greek churches were reopened. The pressure group, and subsequent political party for the promotion of Greek human rights, OMONIA (Sociopolitical Organization – Democratic Union of the Greek Minority), founded in January 1991, took an active role in securing the return of ecclesiastical properties. A particular difficulty, however, was the absence of a trained clergy, which has led to a strong reliance upon priests coming from Greece. Greek-language education was additionally expanded, and bilingual education was permitted in the first eight grades of elementary school.

Nevertheless, tensions remained which are caused principally by fears of Greek irredentism. Having won five seats in the parliamentary election of March 1991, OMONIA was banned since it violated Law 7501 (1991) which forbade 'formation of parties on a religious, ethnic and regional basis'. On behalf of OMONIA, the Unity Party for Human Rights contested the 1992 elections, and OMONIA continued as a member of this party. Following a border incident in 1994, provoked by Greek nationalists from Greece, six leaders of OMONIA were convicted of illegal arms possession, and of spying for Greece. Their trial was widely regarded as unfair and the six were subsequently released. In a separate incident in 1993, a Greek archimandrite, Chrysostomos Maidonis, was expelled on grounds of expressing

'openly territorial claims' and engaging in 'the distribution of maps, leaflets and brochures that present and demand the hellenization and annexation of southern Albania to Greece'. Demonstrations in support of the archimandrite were violently suppressed by the Albanian police. The Greek government responded to the expulsion of the archimandrite and to the OMONIA trial by deporting in 1994 about 100,000 Albanians working illegally in Greece.

Tensions continued and during the local government elections in Himare in October 2000 there were a number of incidents of hostility concerning the Greek minority, including the tension and nationalistic rhetoric that arose between the Albanian majority and Greek minority, as well as the defacing of a number of signposts in Greek in the south of the country.

There is a 30-minute radio broadcast by Radio Tirana in the Greek language twice a day, and a 45-minute programme every day in Greek, broadcast by Radio Gjirokastra.

### **Current issues**

While violent incidents have declined in recent years, the ethnic Greek minority has pursued grievances with the government regarding electoral zones, Greek-language education, property rights and government documents. Minority leaders complain of the government's unwillingness to recognize the possible existence of ethnic Greek towns outside communist-era 'minority zones'; to utilize Greek on official documents and on public signs in ethnic Greek areas; to ascertain the size of the ethnic Greek population; and to include more ethnic Greeks in public administration. While Greek-language public elementary schools are common in the southern part of the country, where most ethnic Greeks live, OMONIA complains that the community needs more classes both within and outside the minority zones. Every village in the Greek zones has its own elementary-middle (nine-year) school in the Greek language, regardless of the number of students, which has declined in recent years due to emigration to Greece; Gjirokaster has two Greek-language high schools. Teacher training is available for teachers of the Greek national minority at the Pedagogical High School in Gjirokaster, and there is a Greek language branch at Gjirokaster University.