

# Youth Outcomes of Psychological Distress of Albanian Adolescents in Albania

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## ABSTRACT

*Albania is a country of transition facing many challenges including the development and support of health and social services that will enhance the well-being of its population. Albania has one of the youngest populations in Europe and the young people face difficulties with lack of recognition and care of mental disorders, as well as violent and antisocial behaviours that may reflect violent environmental conditions and nutritional deficiencies leading to developmental problems. In this paper the behaviour of some Albanian adolescents was examined; it is probable that they are more at risk from psychological stress. For many of them the need to make a new start at a point in life at which all resources should be committed to distancing the world of childhood and starting to create a position, means a process of inevitable recession.*

**Key words:** *Albania, adolescence, mental disorders, migration*

## Introduction

1991 is a fundamental date in the history of Albania because it saw the end of the 50 years in power of the Party of Work and the beginning of the country's move towards democracy. The epochal change that is taking place in this transitional phase certainly weighs on those who find themselves in a disadvantaged social and economic situation, it also penalizes those who, being culturally dependent on old obsolete ways of thinking, are more reluctant to change. From a guaranteed and protected condition, people found themselves hurled into a context governed by a completely different way of thinking which assigned the achievement of objectives to the force of the individual and his personal enterprise alone, within the conditions of a free market. Mentalities, norms and values that had characterized and regulated social, economic, political and cultural realities during the regime of Enver Hoxha were shown to be inadequate and out-of-date. The customs and habits of the people are also being transformed as the continually evolving result of the effect of disaggregating external forces and the re-equilibrating internal response, in short, the product of the relationship between modernity and tradition. In every country the transformation determines specific responses, »that result from the combination of their institutional and cultural heritage with cultural models im-

ported from outside; different responses that unfold within limits imposed by the international division of labour and by relations of international power«<sup>1</sup>.

## A European project

This contribution involves a comparative study of risk and protective factors of adolescent health and well-being, with particular focus on youth with immigrant (or refugee) experience. This study is part of EU Project ICA2-CT-2002-10006 and aims at identifying contexts and policies throughout two EU (Austria and Italy) and four South-Eastern Europe (SEE, Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo) countries which facilitate the socio-cultural integration of adolescent refugees in terms of developing intercultural identity and promote multicultural tolerant attitudes in host societies.

## Albania: a land to modernize?

Albania is a country of transition facing many difficulties including the development and support of health and social services that will enhance the well-being of its population. Among many required actions that would address economic and social problems, the study particularly stresses the need for a comprehensive reform of the

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Albanian mental health system that would attend to issues of history, politics, poverty, health sector reform, human rights, culture, and societal change. In spite of the history of repression and fear followed by years of anarchy, there is little known about the prevalence of mental illness or its consequences in Albania, and there has been no research in the country that examines the long-term effects of violence and trauma. Of particular concern is the lack of mental health services and trained professionals for children and adolescents as Albania has one of the youngest populations in Europe and the young people face difficulties with lack of recognition and care of mental disorders, as well as violent and antisocial behaviour that may reflect violent environmental conditions, nutritional deficiencies leading to developmental problems, impulsive behaviour, etc<sup>2</sup>.

## Materials and Methods

The target population of the European Project is composed of adolescents who were between 15 and 18 years of age in 2003 and who immigrated to a new country between 1990 and 2000, either as refugees or for economic reasons. The samples in the countries of resettlement included families who were in exile for more than three years, had already decided to resettle and had found their own arrangements of accommodation outside collective refugee centres, had at least one child over 12 years old to account for intergenerational differences in acculturation rate as possible cause of family conflict, and also were of different ethnicity. A matched sample of the native adolescents and their families was used for comparisons. The total sample drawn from all participating countries amounts to 4084 adolescents with a minimum sample per country of 400 youths with an age of between 14 and 22<sup>3</sup>.

In this analysis the profile is outlined of Albanian adolescents resident in Albania at the time of the survey. The sample is formed of 320 adolescents, 201 females and 119 males. The average age of the adolescents interviewed is 17.2 with a standard deviation of 1.41. The prevalent religion of the group is Muslim with 76.8% followed by that of Orthodox Christians with 11.9% and Roman Catholics with 6.9% (Figure 1).

In order to be able to describe the context in which adolescents grow up some characteristics of their parents should be indicated such as, for example, the educational

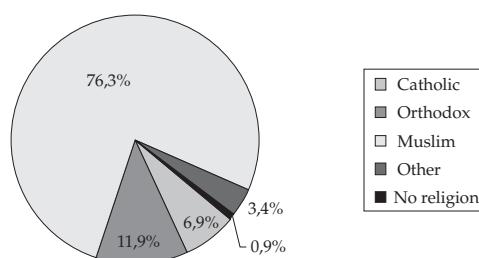


Fig. 1. Percentage composition of the religion of the Albanian adolescents interviewed.

level and occupation. The condition of women which is especially difficult in Albania is reflected in the possibility women have to continue their studies. In fact, only 25.9% of them have a degree compared to 35.9% of the males (Figure 2). Pages of history have described the difficult role of women in the Albanian community, condemned to the most complete discrimination. Women have worked the land, raised children, reinforced traditions, culture and the process of civilization without being able to be in any way involved in social life

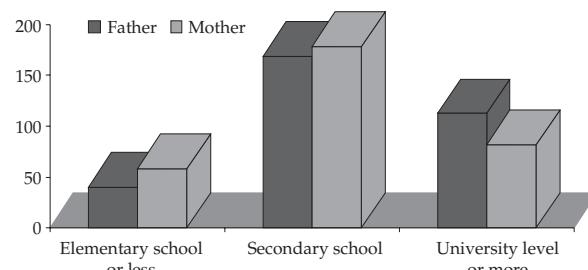


Fig. 2. Educational level of the parents of Albanian adolescents.

To confirm the condition of women in Albania, it would be sufficient to examine the situation regarding employment in which, looking at the percentages, access is clearly easier for men (85.6% of the fathers have an occupation) rather than for women (only 41.5% of the mothers have full or part-time work) (Figure 3).

Field research and sociological studies make it clear that women suffer a subtle violence of subordination on the part of men, without the possibility of changing things. By »man« we mean not only the husband, but also the father and brothers who, in the absence of the husband, to all effect take his place. This subordination, however, assumes further tacit submissions by women to her husband's family, to the duties of the good housewife and above all to the opinion of people Psychoanalytical Institute for social research, 1999.

In order to outline a profile of the immigrant Albanian adolescents the main results are shown that refer to protective and risk factors that contribute to the outcomes. The indexes examined are:

- A. Index of psychological well being;
- B. Index of general health;
- C. Index of psychological distress;
- D. Index of academic performance;
- E. Index of resilience;

### Index of Psychological Well-Being

The state of psychological well-being is an important aspect in the growth of an adolescent and it is characterised by two elements such as the satisfaction with life and the level of self-esteem. These elements combined with protective factors can considerably lower the risk of difficulty at adolescent ages and guarantee a mature and psychologically balanced adult.

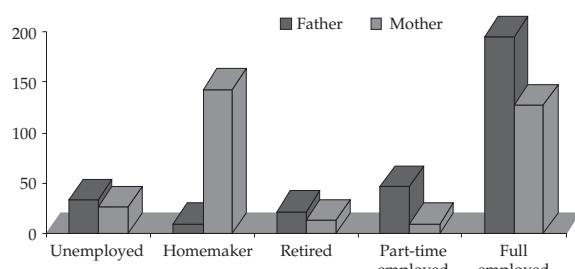


Fig. 3. Occupational level of the parents of Albanian adolescents.

### Satisfaction with life

The Satisfaction With Life Scale<sup>4</sup>, measures life satisfaction as a cognitive-judgmental process. The scale does not assess satisfaction with life domains such as health or finances but allows subjects to integrate and weigh these domains in whatever way they choose. The SWLS is recommended as a complement to scales that focus on psychopathology or emotional well-being because it assesses an individual's conscious evaluative judgment of his or her life by using the person's own criteria<sup>3</sup>.

From the empirical analysis of the data it emerges that the Albanian adolescents have a neutral position with respect to satisfaction with life (59.4%), while 22.2% are completely dissatisfied with the life they lead (Table 1). A likely reason for this result may lie in the complete absence of recreational structures for the adolescents, and this lack certainly does not assist the socialization of young people. In fact, Albania lacks sports facilities, spaces dedicated to culture in which the new generations can act and grow peacefully. It should, however, be stressed that these are »privileges« that were not part of the dictatorial period, in fact the freedom to organize »free time« is a faculty that has only been partially acquired in recent years and in only a few advantaged contexts<sup>5</sup>.

If the interviewees' satisfaction with life is analyzed according to sex the difficult life of the girls emerges yet again. As women they pay for the ancient heritage of a condition of subordination which can and must no longer be accepted. The young Albanian girls suffer greater dissatisfaction (25.4%) compared to males of the same age (16.8%). Isolation hits these young women more; it decisively limits their capacity to act for themselves, instead they are obliged to look after their younger brothers and sisters and to do housework

### Self esteem

Self-esteem is a widely used concept in psychology. It refers to an individual's sense of his or her value or worth, or the extent to which a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes, or likes him or herself. Self-esteem has been found to relate both to socio-economic status and to various aspects of health and health-related behaviour. Adolescents with a low self-esteem exhibit personality characteristics that are associated with a poor self-concept that often reflects neurotic and poor social adjustment<sup>6</sup>.

Longitudinal studies have documented that self-concept and self-esteem change during adolescence. A person's self-concept is subjected to developmental change. As people move from childhood into adolescence, they experience a significant decline in their positive self-concept. A high self-esteem among adolescents is also often associated with a positive perception of parents, and their potential interest in a child's welfare also appears to be a primary factor in providing a young person with a positive self-esteem<sup>3</sup>.

From the empirical analysis it emerges that the Albanians interviewed have an excellent level of self esteem as 98.1% are positioned at medium-high level of the index of self esteem (Table 2). This result, which is in some ways an important element in the growth of the adolescent may have motivations and therefore interpretations that go much deeper, closely connected with ethnic identity. Presumably that security matured alongside the reinforcing of the ethnic identity that the people developed in the difficult years of oppression. The present struggle for civil rights, together with the new movement for democracy in Albania have strengthened the Albanians' awareness and had a positive effect on how they perceive and interpret reality which, with the fall of the regime, is seen to be full of opportunities above all for adolescents. The transformation has, however, involved a huge effort on the part of the young to embrace the new democratic culture in which attention has moved from the collective to individualism, an element which is typical of western society. In fact, while in the communist model every desire for personal satisfaction and every logical thought had to be put aside so as to dedicate energies to the collectivity, the democratic model illuminates above all the individual and his personal sphere<sup>7</sup>.

The strong awareness that the new Albanian generation has developed does not reveal differences according

**TABLE 1**  
SATISFACTION WITH LIFE OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Satisfaction with life	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Dissatisfied	51	25.4	20	16.8	71	22.2
Neutral	119	59.2	71	59.7	190	59.4
Satisfied	31	15.4	28	23.5	59	18.4
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 2**  
INDEX OF SELF ESTEEM OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Self Esteem	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	5	2.5	2	1.7	7	1.9
Medium	105	52.2	62	52.1	167	52.5
High	91	45.3	55	46.2	146	45.6
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

to gender (Table 2), in fact »high self esteem« is claimed by very similar percentages of boys and girls (45.3% for the girls and 46.2% for the boys) supporting affirmation that awareness of ones abilities is a social phenomenon that involves all young Albanians. The percentages are also the same for the medium index of self esteem (around 52.0%).

This result allows it to be affirmed that for the Albanians progress towards democracy is already underway and in some way meets the agreement of the population and above all of the young who, nevertheless, may have had many more aspirations and objectives that have not been realized. Evidently this explains the low number of adolescents that declare they are well satisfied with their lives. It could therefore be affirmed that young Albanians trust in their capabilities, but are not able to fully express them so as to try to improve their lives. Concealed by great vitality and dynamism, the young Albanians feel a great unease about the future, which is more marked due to the disappointment experienced during the transition from the national-communist to the democratic state. Examining the level of self esteem of the Albanian adolescents interviewed it is interesting to be able to affirm that 97.5% of the females feel they have gained awareness of their being, of their own dimension and this fact undoubtedly weakens the figure of the »superfluous« woman as she was conceived during the time of the dictatorship. At that time women were considered to be a superfluous element in the family, with no effective value other than reproduction. In fact, the recognition of equality between women and men is the result of very recent legislative measures, only in 1982 with the introduction of a family code.

#### *General Health Index*

General health status was assessed using a measure of subjective perception of health problems and a measure of objective health indicators.

It is interesting to note that objectively measured problems differ considerably from subjectively perceived health problems so that some countries with perceived high levels of positive health, also report a higher degree of objective health problems, while other countries where

more adolescents reported poor health, have less objectively measured problems.

Perceived health problems are systematically related to socio-economic factors, including age, parental education, socio-economic status and parental structure, while no significant effect was found for objective health problems<sup>3</sup>.

The analysis of the perceived health index is carried out through the following variables:

- 1) Index of Perception of health;
- 2) Index of Medication use;
- 3) Index of medication services;
- 4) Absence from school on account of illness;
- 5) Obesity.

#### *Perception of health*

The concept of measuring adolescent health through standardized self-report is well established. This item is a global measure of general health and the perceived impact of health risks on this population. General health status was assessed by a single question: »How healthy do you think you are?« Response choices were: »excellent«, »good«, »fair« or »poor«.

The subjective recognition of their state of health on the part of adolescents makes it possible to verify their capacity for the self-evaluation of their bodies which is not closely linked to an objective evaluation of their health. The gap between the two evaluations may, in fact, be interpreted as a malaise of a psychosomatic nature linked to situations of difficulty experienced by the adolescent.

The perception of health evaluated by the Albanian adolescents interviewed is generally optimal as 60.9% of them declare they have good health and as many as 20.6% judge it to be excellent (Table 3). This figure shows that the youths have a good evaluation of their health, but this result may also reflect a lack of attention on the part of the Albanian adolescent towards health problems as a result of the social and health situation in Albania with hospitals\* inadequate for needs because in most cases they are overcrowded.

\* The figures on child mortality and malnutrition above all in rural areas describe a situation that in general is more similar to developing countries.

**TABLE 3**  
INDEX OF PERCEPTION OF HEALTH OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Perception of health	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Excellent	38	18.9	28	23.5	66	20.6
Good	129	64.2	66	55.5	195	60.9
Fair or poor	34	16.9	25	21.0	59	20.6
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 4**  
INDEX OF MEDICATION USE OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Medication use	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	38	18.9	34	28.6	72	22.5
Moderate	36	17.9	48	40.3	84	26.3
High	127	63.2	37	31.1	164	51.3
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

Examining the figures broken down according to gender, it can be seen that the perception of health is positive above all in the boys (83.1% of the girls have a excellent/good perception of health compared to 79.0% of the boys). This result may yet again reinforce the idea of greater self-awareness acquired by the girls (Tab. 3).

#### *Medication use*

*Medication use* during the last month was assessed for the following symptoms: headache, stomach-ache, nervousness, indigestion, or other problems. The frequency of medication use for a specific symptom may serve as a definition of symptom severity or reflect the availability and inclination to use medication in a society or group. In addition, using medication available over the counter to treat common problems represents an important component of health care and response to symptoms.

More than half the sample interviewed (51.3%) declared a high use of medicines for the above mentioned pathologies, this figure strongly contradicts the subjective assessment of their health provided by the adolescents. This can be interpreted as a fairly well established habit of using medicines for small health problems, without believing that these disturbances can undermine their general physical well being (Table 4). However, this result should be interpreted in the context of the precarious health situation in Albania which may easily lead the adolescents into »self-medication« that can be defined as the tendency to take medicines habitually without consulting a doctor. The lack of trust in doctors and in health assistance in general on the part of the Albanians is explained by the serious situation that exists in the system and in the quality of services offered.

Examining the use of medicines according to sex, the girls appear to be the greatest »consumers« (Tab. 4), since 63.2% of them state that they have made heavy use of medicines in the last six months compared to 31.1% of the boys (high category in the index of Medication use). These figures are not surprising if we consider that the girls in adolescence pass through a phase of hormonal and physical transformation that is often accompanied by small and modest malaises that could be treated with self-medication type medicines.

#### *Utilization of medication services*

The *utilization of medical services* is an important indicator of general health status reflecting potentially more serious conditions. It was assessed by the frequency of visits to a doctor and hospitalisation during the past twelve months.

The use of medical facilities by the sample examined appears to be equally distributed between the three categories of the variable (Table 5). The Albanian health situation has experienced some changes since the fall of the regime as during the Communist era, all health services in Albania were free and there was an extensive social insurance system. Now Albanians pay for most medical and dental services, there is a shortage of doctors, and the social insurance system has been eroded by the country's increased poverty and economic problems. Those living in urban areas are more likely to get better medical services than those living in rural and mountainous areas.

Looking at the analysis in detail, those that make greatest use of health services are the boys, 69.7% of whom state that they have been treated at least once in the last six months (the total of the combined categories

**TABLE 5**  
INDEX OF MEDICATION SERVICES OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Medication services utilization	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
No	70	34.8	36	30.3	106	33.1
Once	62	30.8	48	40.3	110	34.4
Twice or more	69	34.3	35	29.4	104	32.5
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 6**  
ABSENCE FORM SCHOOL FOR ILLNESS OF ALBANIANS BY SEX

Days	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
0	71	35.3	38	31.9	109	34.1
1–4	113	56.2	74	62.2	187	58.4
5 or more	17	8.5	7	5.9	24	7.5
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 7**  
BODY MASS INDEX OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Days	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Underweight	31	15.4	20	16.8	51	15.9
Normal	148	73.6	86	72.3	234	73.1
Overweight	22	10.9	13	10.9	35	10.9
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

once and twice or more) compared to 65.1% of the Albanian girls interviewed.

#### Absence from school on account of illness

Absence from school is used as an additional indicator of general health status. Respondents were asked to report the number of days of absence from school on account of illness during the preceding 6 months, on a scale ranging from 1 (0 days) to 4 (5 or more days).

The distribution of the variable »Absence from school on account of illness« reveals a marked attachment to school on the part of the Albanian adolescents interviewed, in fact, 58.4% of them claim to have been absent on only 1 to 4 days in the last six months, while as many as 34.1% declare that they have been to school every day (Table 6). These results show not only the adolescents' attachment to school, but also the social role that school has, because it is in the classroom that a strict moral and civic education is given. The teacher also represents a guide in the life of the adolescents, a person of importance to whom they can refer in moments of difficulty. In the school system it is foreseen that in the course of primary and secondary schooling there is one person re-

sponsible for every class, whose task is not only to teach a subject,, but also to educate the class form the social point of view and to treat their relationships with their parents<sup>8</sup>.

Broken down (Table 6) the figures do not show differences according to gender, in this sense school is considered a reference point for all the adolescents and the families often rely totally on the teacher to bring up their children better.

#### Body Mass Index

The items included self-reported weight and height for the calculation of *body mass index*. BMI is a safe, simple, non-invasive and reliable method both for research and clinical work. The reported weight and height are used to calculate body mass index (BMI). As a standard measure of participant's body size, BMI is calculated using the following formula: weight in kilograms divided by height in squared meters. However, the disadvantage with the absolute BMI is that it changes in relation to growth and so it is not possible to have general BMI cut-off points. Instead, in epidemiological studies of children and adolescents it is recommended to use percent-

**TABLE 8**  
INDEX OF SOMATIC STRESS OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Index of somatic stress	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	32	15.9	34	28.6	66	21.0
Moderate	145	72.1	81	68.1	226	70.2
High	24	11.9	4	3.4	28	8.8
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

tiles. Age specific cut-off points in percentiles used to define adolescent thinness or under-nourishment fall below the 5th percentile, while those at risk of obesity are found at the 85th and higher percentiles to the WHO references (WHO Technical Report, 1995). When height and weight cannot be measured directly, the percent overweight can be estimated by the use of self-reported height and weight.

The calculation of BMI shows that the majority of young Albanians (73.1%) fall in the normal weight category. In this they differ from their peers in western countries for whom cases of even serious obesity are more frequently found. 15.9% of the Albanian adolescents interviewed declared that they feel overweight, this may be linked to the situation of poverty and indigence in which they live (Table 7). After the fall of the regime the economic problems of Albania has exposed the population to a difficult economic situation, with an increase in the number of families that live below the poverty line.

Breaking down the figures according to gender particular differences are not noted in the normal weight category, as 73.6% of the girls interviewed claim normal weight in relation to their stature compared to 72.3% of the boys (Table 7). Nor are significant differences noted in the other two categories which leads to the conclusion that the Albanians interviewed have a good attitude towards weight and to the transformations of the body that come in adolescence.

#### *Index of Psychological Distress*

The index of psychological distress was measured using the indicators of the most common somatic complaints, anxiety symptoms and depressive behaviour, based on Hopkins Symptom Checklist 25<sup>9</sup>, and RADS – Reynolds Adolescent Depression Scale<sup>10</sup>. *Somatic symptoms* (10 items) include items most frequently related to stress<sup>11</sup>, *anxiety* (5 items) is assessed by difficulty relaxing, nervous arousal, tension, irritability and feeling of threat. *Depression* (20 items) refers to dysphonic mood, sadness, loneliness, sleep disturbance, anhedonia, pessimism, self-injurious or suicidal tendencies, self-depreciation, reduced speech, worry, social withdrawal, loss of interest, appetite disturbance, helplessness, confusion. The items are rated on a four point Likert scale ranging from almost never to most of the time depending on the extent to which specific states are experienced. The separate scores for the three subscales are calculated by averaging

the items on the relevant subscale. The variable can be presented as a dichotomous variable, scored 0 if the youth does not meet the cut-off for clinically significant symptomatology (<2.5), and scored 1 if the youth does exceed the cut-off (>2.5). Scores below 45 (or 1.5) indicate possible denial of problems, faking good as this is below usual scores for normal populations.

#### *Somatic symptoms*

The somatic symptoms are analysed through different items which usually increase phases of stress.

The figures show a moderate index of somatic stress for 70.2% and low for 21.0% of the adolescents interviewed. This suggests that it is likely that the family, the school and the peer group intervene to mitigate positively the problems that are often linked to physical symptomatology that is closely linked to the radical changes that the passage from childhood to adolescence brings. Some psychological studies argue that the family structure in Albania is characterized by an organic micro-community in which the bonds determined by blood ties allow the creation of a network of cooperation and solidarity that can extend well beyond the narrow nuclear family. This means not only obligations and duties, the everyday reconfirmation of which is necessary for the perpetuation of the bond, but it also leads to the creation of a protective social network (Psychoanalytical Institute for social research, 1999).

Examining the figures broken down according to gender (Table 8) significant differences are noted above all in the extreme low and high categories of the index of somatic stress. A low somatic stress is perceived most by the Albanian adolescent boys interviewed, which may be motivated by the typical male mentality that tends to minimize the difficulties that he meets and to have a rather arrogant attitude. On the other hand, the Albanian girls interviewed suffer more the family climate which is not yet adequately able and/or prepared to concede room for freedom and movement, and this situation may be experienced by them in a traumatic way. This frequently stressed female condition explains the higher percentage of the high index of somatic stress in the adolescent girls interviewed (11.9% compared to 3.4% of the boys).

**TABLE 9**  
INDEX OF ANXIETY STRESS OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Anxiety stress	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	4	2.0	12	10.1	16	5.0
Moderate	72	35.8	64	53.8	136	42.5
High	125	62.2	43	36.1	168	52.5
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

### *Anxiety*

Anxiety is a particular characteristic of sensitive and emotive subjects and it often results in difficulty in relaxing, in the manifestation of nervous behavior, tension and irritability.

The empirical analysis (Table 9) shows that more than half of the sample interviewed (52.5%) state that they have a high index of anxiety stress, a result that suggests that the evident political transformations associated with the changes which adolescence brings may be experienced with anxiety by the adolescent. This result confirms that the union of narrowly personal problems and environmental (external) problems may be a difficult combination to be managed by an adolescent who is still dealing with measuring his personality. In this period the Albanian adolescents seek an identity, a personality, with their own characteristics and explanations of the meaning of life. To all this are added the physiological changes of the body that can lead to an identity crisis.

Breaking the figures down according to gender, it is noted that anxiety stress is felt more by the girls, in fact adding together the high and moderate categories of the index, anxiety stress is perceived by 98.0% of the Albanian adolescent girls interviewed as compared with 89.9% of the boys. This result confirms, yet again, the difficult situation experienced by girls in Albania which frequently sees them the victims of both physical and psychological violence. The path to emancipation is difficult and requires a period of consolidation before the opportunities, rights and social condition, that are currently enjoyed exclusively by men. are recognized not only on paper for women.

### *Depression*

The Albanian adolescents have had to face an extremely difficult situation because they have had to experience three crises simultaneously; that of the Albanian state, that of the cultural and educational model and that of adolescence. If adolescence is interpreted as a moment of strong emotive upheaval in which, through a dialectic of individual-society, the future of personal identity is decided<sup>12–14</sup>: the interweaving of the effects of these three crises cannot but have determined great confusion on the part of the Albanian boys and girls. With the fall of the Hoxha regime, the adolescents have come to lack a social and cultural model to refer to, but they have also found themselves without the psychological structures that

might have sustained them in facing the upheavals of adolescence, above all in a changed context. The result of this is has been that two prevalent psychopathological tendencies have been seen in adolescents, who have passed from the rigid communist system to a completely different reality: *»One is linked to extrovert behaviour, the abuse of alcohol and drugs, uninhibited sexual behaviour and violent behaviour. The other is linked to introverted behaviour and includes states of depression and attempts at suicide«*<sup>15</sup>.

The level of depressive stress perceived by the Albanian adolescents is rather high, in fact 76.9% of them state that they have moderate depressive stress and 14.4% perceive it to be high. This situation may be explained by the existing climate in Albania, where the transitory phase of the passage from the dictatorial regime to a democracy does not permit adolescents to be given many certainties. In addition, the adolescents experience their own phase of transformation and find they must correlate what they learn from their families, which however remains anchored in the old regime, with what they learn on a daily basis both from their peer group and from the western world.

Examining the differences according to gender (Table 10) the situation appears to be more difficult for the Albanian adolescent girls, 18.9% of whom state that they have a high level of depressive stress (compared to 6.7% of the boys). This figure is not surprising considering the situation of women. Without doubt, depressive stress is experienced in a generalized way by all the adolescents, which is natural in this transitional phase.

### *Index of Academic Performance*

Academic progress can represent an interesting element for an evaluation of the psychological condition of the adolescent, because it is thought that if the adolescent is committed to academic activity he or she is likely to enjoy a good level of psychological well-being. On the contrary, family upheavals and psychological problems typical of the adolescent may have a negative effect on the academic performance of the adolescent.

The index of academic performance is calculated as the average of »current grades« and »last year's grades«.

**TABLE 10**  
INDEX OF STRESS DEPRESSION OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Index of stress depression	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	14	7.0	14	11.8	28	8.8
Moderate	149	74.1	97	81.5	246	76.9
High	38	18.9	8	6.7	46	14.4
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 11**  
DISTRIBUTION OF AVERAGE CURRENT GRADES OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Average grades	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
0–2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
3–4	16	8.2	27	23.3	43	13.9
5–6	89	45.9	60	51.7	149	48.1
7–8	70	36.1	24	20.7	94	30.3
9–10	19	9.8	5	4.3	24	7.7
Total (*)	194	100	116	100	310	100

In this variable 10 replies were missing that cause a lowering of the replies from 320 to 310

### Current grades

The *average current grades* variable indicates the academic performance of the adolescent in the present year and makes it possible to determine the academic level.

The young Albanians were asked to indicate their average academic grades in the present school year: there were five possible replies.

Tab. 11 shows that the performance of the Albanian adolescents (native) interviewed is not satisfactory, as many as 62.0% of them had an average of between 2 and 6. On the basis of this figure we can say that the present situation together with the depression stress perceived by the adolescents can cause their poor academic results.

From an analysis of the figures broken down according to sex (Table 11), a greater commitment is noted on the part of the girls interviewed 82.0% of whom refer a average grade in the current year that is higher than sufficiency. The boys interviewed, on the other hand, do not appear to show a strong attachment to school and the results are rather poor (75.0% refer and an average grade in the current year of between 2 and 6).

### Last year's grades

The *last year's grades* variable indicates the academic performance of the adolescent in the previous year and makes it possible to determine the academic level which has been reached. Making a comparison with the *average current grades* variable it can be established if the adolescent has made improvements at an academic level.

The academic performance of the Albanian adolescents was generally been better last year than it has been in the current year, in fact 49.4% of them report an average grade of between 2 and 6 compared to 62.0% in the current year. This drop may be motivated by structural changes in the psyche of the Albanian adolescent as these changes can be accompanied by minor physical disturbances that may effect academic performance.

Examining the differences according to gender it can be observed that the academic performance of the adolescent girls interviewed have deteriorated, as last year 62.7% of them had an average of between 6 and 10, while in the current year this percentage has fallen to 45.9% (Table 12). This may be due to physical changes linked to hormonal development which can cause difficulty of adaptation in the girls. For the boys, however, the situation remains virtually the same as that of last year.

### Resilience Index

The concept of resilience reflects the individual variations in the response to risk<sup>16–18</sup> and is used to refer to the children who, under circumstances of some adversity, develop normally and remain mentally healthy.

Resilience is not a single attribute of a child, but rather a dynamic process that changes constantly and is different depending on the circumstances. Rutter (1987 and 1993)<sup>19,20</sup> described resilience with six points: 1) A person's response to a stressor is influenced by the way in which he/she perceives the situation and by his capacity to process the experience, attach meaning to it, and incorporate it into his belief system. 2) It matters greatly

**TABLE 12**  
DISTRIBUTION OF LAST ACADEMIC YEAR'S AVERAGE GRADES OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Average grades	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
0–2	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
3–4	9	4.7	24	21.2	33	10.8
5–6	63	32.6	55	48.7	118	38.6
7–8	77	39.9	28	24.8	105	34.3
9–10	44	22.8	6	5.3	50	16.3
Total*	193	100	113	100	306	100

\* In this variable 14 replies were missing that cause a lowering of the number of replies from 320 to 306.

how people deal with adversities and life stressors. 3) People's ability to act positively is a function of their self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy. 4) Secure and stable affective relationships and success, achievement, and positive experiences as well as temperamental attributes are important. 5) Non-shared environmental influences tend to have a greater effect than shared ones. 6) An ability to cope successfully with stress situations can be strengthening: throughout life, it is normal to have to meet challenges and overcome difficulties. Resilience is not achieved only by avoiding stress, but also by encountering stress at a time and in a way that allows self-confidence and social competence to increase<sup>21</sup>.

The index of resilience is a composite variable containing 5 positive developmental outcomes consistently described in the literature as consisting of the categories of:

- a) Index of Social competence
- b) Index of Empathy
- c) Index of Problem solving / Self-efficacy
- d) Index of Goals and aspirations
- e) Index of Positive values

These assets are those that the research suggests protect a young person from involvement in health-risk behaviours, and contribute to improved health, social and academic outcomes. They are the natural developmental outcomes for youth who experience homes, schools, communities, and peer groups rich in the external assets or developmental supports and opportunities<sup>3</sup>.

#### *Index of social competence*

The social competence index refers to having flexibility in relationships, the ability to work effectively with others, to effectively exchange information and ideas, and to express feelings and needs to others. The lack of this social skill is associated with adult criminality, mental illness, and drug abuse.

From the analysis of the index of social competence (Table 13) it emerges that the Albanian adolescents interviewed have a good relational capacity, in fact as many as 71.2% of them reveal a social competence index in the moderate/high categories. On the basis of this it can be

affirmed that the Albanian adolescents are more open with others, that they do not have problems in making friends and in conversing in such a way as to affirm their own opinions without in any way having difficulty with those who hold different opinions. The remaining part of the sample (28.8% of the interviewees), on the other hand, declare that they have low social competence. These are presumably adolescents with low self-esteem who are unable to integrate adequately in their peer group.

The analysis of the data broken down according to sex shows that the girls have a greater predisposition to social relations than the boys, only 28.6% of whom declare high social competence (compared to 31.8% of the girls). A explanation of this is that the phenomenon can be interpreted as a desire on the part of the girls to escape the confines of the home and experience new things in different contexts, to be able to finally affirm their identity (Table 13).

#### *Index of empathy*

Empathy is the understanding and caring about another's experiences and feelings. It is considered essential to healthy development and the root of morality and mutual respect. It is a commonly identified individual attribute in resilience and emotional intelligence research. Lack of empathy is associated with negative behavior like bullying, harassment, teasing, and other forms of violence.

The empirical analysis reveals a marked sensibility on the part of the Albanian adolescents interviewed towards all that which belongs to the world of their peers and which is not directly linked to their personal sphere. It is the ability of the adolescent to be fully aware of the difficulties of others, to understand,, to sense, and to help the people who are nearest to them during the phase of adolescence. In fact, as Tab. 14 shows, as many as 71.7% of the Albanian adolescents interviewed claim they have a high capacity for empathy.

Examining the figures broken down according to gender it can be noted how this attitude is typical of the Albanian girls, as 79.2% of them claim to have a high index of empathy compared to 59.0% of the boys interviewed.

**TABLE 13**  
INDEX OF SOCIAL EMPATHY OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Index of Social competence	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	49	24.4	43	36.1	92	28.8
Moderate	88	43.8	42	35.3	130	40.6
High	64	31.8	34	28.6	98	30.6
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 14**  
INDEX OF SOCIAL EMPATHY OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS ACCORDING TO SEX

Index of empathy	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	15	7.6	24	20.5	39	12.4
Moderate	26	13.2	24	20.5	50	15.9
High	156	79.2	69	59.0	225	71.7
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 15**  
INDEX OF PROBLEM SOLVING OF ALBANIAN ADOLESCENTS BY SEX

Index of problem solving	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	31	15.4	30	25.2	61	19.1
Moderate	40	19.9	29	24.4	69	21.6
High	130	64.7	60	50.4	190	59.4
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

This result therefore confirms the desire and the will of young Albanians to play a role in society and to be able to represent an added value in it (Table 14).

#### *Index of problem solving*

Problem solving includes the ability to plan, to be resourceful, to think critically and reflectively, having the ability to act and exert one's will. Resilience research and other research on successful adults have consistently identified the presence of these skills.

59.4% of the sample of interviewees declare they have a high capacity in the resolution of problems, they therefore show a strong predisposition to finding the best solutions to face the difficulties of life. However, around a fifth of the sample (19.1%) believe they have a low problem solving ability, a perception which may be explained by a poor self-esteem and a lack of awareness of their real abilities. The poor problem solving ability may also be caused by the present period which sees the adolescents in a phase of inertia and confusion in which they have scarce familiarity not only with their physical and psychological abilities (Table 15).

In the evaluation of the figures according to sex the girls seem to show more readiness in solving problems. It is likely that their more positive attitude (64.7% of them declare a high capacity for resoluteness) is an indication of the cultural change with regard to women which Albania has begun in recent times: women are no longer relegated to the margins of society, but are active protagonists in the new context (Table 15).

#### *Index of goals and aspirations*

Goals and aspirations are an expression of the intrinsic motivation that guides human development. Having goals and aspirations refers to using ones dreams, visions, and plans to focus the future; in other words, to have high expectations and hopes for oneself.

From the results obtained from the sample examined (Table 16) it emerges that as many as 93.8% of the sample interviewed have very clear objectives and aspirations (adding together the moderate and high categories of the index of goals and aspirations) and this makes it possible to affirm that despite the difficulty experienced in their lives, the young Albanians, are able to foresee a future full of opportunities and dreams in which the im-

**TABLE 16**  
INDEX OF GOAL AND ASPIRATION OF ALBANIANS BY SEX

Index of goals and aspiration	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	11	5.5	9	7.6	20	6.3
Moderate	6	3.0	17	14.3	23	7.2
High	184	91.5	93	78.2	277	86.6
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

**TABLE 17**  
INDEX OF POSITIVE VALUE OF ALBANIANS BY SEX

Index of positive value	Females		Males		Total	
	V.a.	%	V.a.	%	V.a.	%
Low	6	3.0	5	4.2	11	3.4
Moderate	36	17.9	48	40.3	84	26.3
High	159	79.1	66	55.5	225	70.3
Total	201	100	119	100	320	100

provement of their existing conditions of life will be possible. The economic conditions of the country have obliged the population to live in difficult situations; for this reason the young hope to be able to aspire to a better future that begins with the growth of the local economy and can guarantee greater security to future generations.

Breaking down the figures according to sex (Table 16), it is noted that yet again the girls interviewed have more aspirations than the boys. (91.5% of them claim to have a high index of goals and aspirations compared to 78.2% of the boys). This result is not surprising in view of the difficult position of women within the Albanian community, a disadvantageous condition which is slowly improving in these years, allowing women to have many possibilities that they were previously denied.

#### *Index of positive value*

Positive values refer to internalized attitudes toward risk behavior and are strongly related to ability to resist peer pressure to engage in such behaviors.

The index of positive values makes it possible to measure the degree of maturity the adolescent has attained, as this index is used to determine commitment and the ability to distinguish what may be damaging for the health. It emerges from the analysis that when the moderate and high categories of the index of positive values are added together, 96.6% of the total is concentrated. This means that the restrictions and sacrifices that they had to face in the passage from the old regime have strengthened the psychological aspect of the adolescents, enabling them to make precise and sensible choices (Table 17). This result can also be interpreted in the light of the role of the teacher who, in many circumstances, can

substitute or contribute to the parental role in bringing up the adolescent.

The analysis of the figures by sex do not show significant difficulty in either of the sexes and it can be affirmed that positive values are found in the young, independently of sex, and closely match the great desire of the Albanian adolescent generations for a better future in their homeland (Table 17).

#### **Conclusions**

The passage from a dictatorial regime to a democratic one is not always easy and painless. It is a process which, while it offers the population many opportunities, may be experienced in a traumatic way because of the loss of the recognition of a sense of ethnic identity. The outlook for the period of transition is of a difficult path to the building of a new identity and of new ways of life and in this context adolescent Albanians are at the cutting edge for the starting of a new process of recovery. In fact, the young show great potential for the country, they are full of self esteem and awareness of their abilities, but they complain of frustration and are dissatisfied with their lives, because they recognize the opportunities which democracy brings but are unable to exploit them adequately. To this is added the situation of the girls who are at the start of a process of emancipation that faces hostility above all of custom. The disillusionment and dissatisfaction bring to the surface unanswered requirements and needs; from these it is necessary to take the first steps to respond to the difficulty, both in terms of anxiety and of depression which the survey has shown is felt by more than half of the sample. These figures give an idea of the scale of the lack of social balance in various aspects of Albanian life today, and the extreme levels that delu-

sion and disillusion in their country have reached in many young Albanians also at a psychophysical level (certainly the abuse of medicinal products declared by the youths interviewed should be monitored).

The natural response to a situation of this type is the loss of interest in studies, this phenomenon emerges clearly from the data on academic performance which is clearly declining, especially amongst boys. Despite the different degrees of satisfaction expressed, the goals and aspirations of Albanian adolescents are high, a fact which

demonstrates a new willingness to participate, a new desire to occupy social spaces, starting a movement from below that effects the entire process of change which has involved the whole of Albanian society for some years. It is also this social action, which can instill in the young a reinforced civic sense, which a new image of Albania is able to transmit to the world helping the country to escape the limited and narrow spaces to which prejudice has relegated it.

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## PSIHOLOŠKA POTRESENOST ADOLESCENATA IZ ALBANIJE

### S A Ž E T A K

Albanija je tranzicijska zemlja koja prolazi mnoge promjene u zdrastvenim i socijalnim sistemima koji služe boljem održavanju zdravlja u populaciji. Albanija ima jednu od najmladih populacija u Evropi kojoj nedostaje skrbi za mentalne smetnje. Nasilno i nedruštveno ponašanje reflektira se na okolinu te zajedno sa prehrambenim nedostacima vodi do problema u razvoju. U ovom radu proučavani su problemi u ponašanju nekih albanskih adolescenata koji su imali veći rizik za psihološki stres. Za mnoge od njih postoji potreba za početkom novog života koji se razlikuje od onoga kojeg su imali od djetinjstva.