

Albania's Visa Liberalization

An Outsiders Perspective

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Abstract

The recent liberalization of Albania's Visa policy on travel is arguably the most positive situation for the Albanian people in decades. They are no longer required to obtain Visas to visit other European countries and places them on equal footing with other European nations in developing both personal and professional relationships. There is no need to "feel" inferior in any in terms of their ability to travel. This liberalization will undoubtedly provide additional opportunities for both personal and professional travel throughout the region additionally, as witnessed by the tremendous celebrations of the announcement it has also served as a source of pride. However, along with the pride and opportunities the liberalization could have some both short term and some long term negative impacts. This paper will attempt to explore some of both the positive and potential negative impacts of these important changes.

Visa liberalization for Albania an American's perspective. First let me say that for the past six years I have been part of faculty exchange programs, first with the University of Vlore and more recently the University of Shkodra. As part of the exchange program, professors from the Albanian Universities are invited to Sandhills Community College in North Carolina in the United States. In 2005 I was given my first taste of how complicated the Visa process can be for Albanian citizens. After numerous letters and phone calls to embassy personnel the professors were finally granted their Visas, three days before their scheduled departure. Since 2005 the process has improved little, if any at all. In 2010 it took a total of five faxed letters to the embassy by my office before the professors were granted their Visas. This is despite the Universities having established a track record with over 20 Albanian professors visiting Sandhills without incident and despite the requirement for Albanian professors to lecture abroad. The process for Albanians desiring to travel for personal reasons to other European countries was often met with a denial of their Visa.

The recent changes to Visa policies allow Albanians to travel throughout European countries without the need to obtain the often unobtainable Visa. I will attempt to illustrate past policies by relating the following: Recently a young Albanian woman (I will call her Sue) was studying abroad in Prague where she met a young man (whom I will call John) from another European country. John visited Sue in Albania

and Sue desired to visit John to meet his family. However, when Sue applied for a Visa she encountered the mounds of bureaucratic red tape. Sue paid her application fees and made numerous trips (4) by bus from Shkodra to Tirana to the embassy to provide a never ending list of documents, ranging from John's utility bills and proof of employment, to proof that she had funds for a round trip plane ticket. She missed four days of classes at the University and spent over 200E in the process. The results of the process left her feeling inferior to other Europeans, caused a tremendous amount of stress on her and her family, and cost money her family could have used elsewhere. YES, her visa was denied. I will note here that since the liberalization of the visa process, Sue has been able to visit John, spending a considerably less amount of money than the original application fee alone.

What can Albanians, and indeed Albania, expect as a result of the Visa liberalization? First, Visas in the past were very restrictive as to their purpose. Now Albanians can travel freely for leisure and personal reasons. The result of this is that Albanians will come into contact with a wider variety of Europeans. I will point out here that I have travelled around the world for nearly 40 years and have never encountered a more hospitable people than the Albanians. They greet you with open arms and heart, without regard to your religious beliefs or nationality. Some other nationalities do not share the Albanian's hospitality. Although travelers may encounter certain "coldness" in their travels, they should not take it personally because they are Albanian. While they will encounter some resentment due to the communist background of Albania or the fact that Albania is predominantly a Muslim nation, more often the "coldness" will simply be that not all cultures are as hospitable as Albanians. I will point out here that there are places in Europe with a genuine distrust for the Muslim world. This is an opportunity for Albanians to demonstrate their religious tolerance and help to dispel some of the distrust they may encounter.

Initially, at least, the primary consequences of visa liberalization will be that Albanians are now free to travel to other European nations. This travel will result in funds desperately needed within Albania will be spent on goods and services produced outside their border. Local businesses in Albania, particularly those that rely on discretionary income for their livelihood, may feel an impact, as Albanians save for travel purposes. This impact can be minimized by a concerted effort on the part of the travel and tourism industries and indeed the Albanian government to attract tourists from other European countries to visit the "New Open" Albania, with her spectacular coastline and beautiful mountains. A word of caution here- visitors will not return if they encounter trash problems and/or an attitude of indifference on the part of service employees.

As more and more Albanians visit other European locations and witness firsthand the level of services provided in other countries, the Albanian government can expect

additional pressures from the travelers concerning the basic goods and services provided. More reliable electric and water, refuse removal, improved roads, and more reliable public transport demands will be forthcoming. Fortunately, demand for travel to other locations should speed the process of the development of additional airports within Albania, thus helping to alleviate some of the traffic congestion experienced in Tirana. The travelers will also witness the use of green space in urban planning and hopefully will understand the need for proper development planning. One can only hope that the Albanian government is able to improve these services, while avoiding the unsustainable economic model found in some of its European neighbors.

The need to change the “Culture of Service” within Albania has long been recognized as problematic for those of us in the academic world. The increase in Albanians traveling to foreign locations will result in a demand for these changes on the part of hospitality consumers upon their return to Albania. Both private and public institutions should be prepared to assist in the transformation of the service industry. Again, this goes back to what was stated earlier about foreign travelers to Albania encountering a perceived attitude of indifference, and choosing not to return. It is not so much an attitude of indifference, but how can a service employee provide great service when they have never experienced it?

I would be remiss if I did not address the potential impact on Albania’s culture. Albania is culture rich in family traditions and moral values. Few cultures of the world can boast of the relationship between parents (particularly fathers) and their children, as more and more Albanians travel to other European destinations and experience the “freedoms” enjoyed by younger generations, the potential exists for there to be an erosion of family values. In my humble experience, the moral values displayed by Albanian women prior to marriage should be emulated world-wide. Again, the exposure of more and more Albanians to cultures that don’t demonstrate such restraints, could result in an erosion of these morals, and again, result in strains on the family structure. On a positive note, the exposure of more Albanian travelers to foods and business models from different cultures should open the door for additional business opportunities within Albania.

The last negative impact of the visa liberalization is the potential for an increase in criminal activity. The potential to turn a quick profit coupled with high unemployment inside of Albania could lead to an increase in the drug trade and perhaps even a return to human trafficking, along with other illegal activities. These activities should be dealt with swiftly.

In closing, I congratulate all Albanians on this historic moment and I am humbled to call Albania my second home. I thank you for the hospitality you have extended

me and the other visiting professors from Sandhills Community College, and I look forward to a long relationship with my friends in your great country.

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