

The State is God

Michael Martens Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
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3sat dispels old stereotypes: the series "Return to Europe".

TV images show a world of chaos, Afghanistan perhaps. Or maybe somewhere in Iraq? Small boys, probably child soldiers, barely ten years old, run through dusty streets with submachine guns. Hordes of grim-faced men plunder as they pass through derelict cities. Women have also taken up arms. If these images were shown without commentary, few would suspect that they originated in Europe. But these scenes were recorded in Albania, barely ten years ago. They are from 1997, when the state collapsed, when the population, which had bought into fraudulent investment schemes, were robbed of all their savings by crooks. After the speculative bubble burst, it took only days for the remnants of public order that had held the bankrupt state between Kosovo and the Adriatic together, to disintegrate. In retrospect it is astonishing that the country did not descend from a state of anarchy into civil war.

To this day Albania is associated with these images, which evoke thoughts of crisis zones around the world. What else has one heard about the country? Accounts of blood feuds in the mountains perhaps, Karl May's Land of the Skipetars of course, and then there was that crazy dictator who sealed off Albania from the rest of the world and built those strange bunkers everywhere, what was his name? That's right, Enver Hoxha. He was then shot by his own people, right? Or was that Ceausescu?

There is probably no country in Europe where there is as great a gap between the perceptions that are held abroad and the reality today. A foreigner who arrives by plane in the year 2008 is first stunned by the spotlessly clean airport and then by taxi drivers who, at the end of a ride, ask for the previously agreed price and not some absurdly exorbitant figure – wouldn't it be nice if the taxi drivers in Athens and Bucharest were to emulate their counterparts in Tirana? Today's Albania is a far cry from the violent lawlessness that rocked the country a decade ago.

The 45 minute film "Albanian Renaissance" (Sunday, at 9 pm) tells a different story of Albania. The director does use archive footage from 1997, but these images are shown primarily to draw a contrast, to show that Albania is changing more quickly than the reputation, overshadows the country like a black double-headed eagle. The film accentuates stories like that of the youth movement

Mjaft! (Enough), whose activism has been highly successful in invigorating the rigid political system. The mayor of Tirana Edi Rama, who breathed new life into Albania's capital, gets to have a say. Stories of return are told by people who left their home country at the height of the crisis, but are now joining the army of entrepreneurs who have discovered the country as an opportunity for investments.

With so many positive or at least 'normal' stories, the film sometimes risks exchanging the negative Albania-cliché, for a positive one that would be equally inappropriate. But as soon as this impression arises, it pans from the smartly dressed high-flyers of Tirana to a mountain village somewhere in rural Albania. In the past two hundred families lived there – today only eight are left. A widowed farmer's wife explains that she was betrothed by a matchmaker while "still in her mother's womb", for a bridal price of five Lek. She then recounts how she and her predetermined husband shared a good but hard life and had seven children. Another inhabitant of the village says: "The state is God on earth. Every government makes the people feel its power."

Villages that are disappearing and on the other hand, cities struggling to cope with mass migration from rural areas – this contrast can also be seen in the other episodes of the remarkable series, "Return to Europe". The concept was largely developed by the European Stability Initiative, a think tank based in Berlin and Istanbul, whose analyses of the Balkans are among the best of what is written about the region.

The most striking quotes in the film are those by so-called ordinary people. Take for instance the shoemaker in a suburb of Tirana who says: "If the state were to fulfil its duties, then I would also be prepared to pay for electricity, water and gas." This sentence reveals the formidable challenges that confront the government and society in Albania.

Return to Europe: Albania, Sunday at 9 pm on 3sat. It will be followed on the 25 May and 1 June by films on Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Further episodes will be shown in autumn.