



**Australian Government**  
**Refugee Review Tribunal**

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# Country Advice

## Albania

Albania – ALB36850 – Muslim-Christian  
Intermarriage – Albanian Social Attitudes –  
Italian Social Attitudes – Albanian & Italian  
State Protection – Relocation

29 June 2010

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### 1. What is the attitude to mixed religious marriages in Italy and in Albania?

#### Albania

Inter-religious marriages are common in Albania, including marriages between Muslims and Christians. However, no official statistics of such marriages are collected and published. Numerous sources suggest that most Albanians have tolerant or moderate attitudes towards mixed marriages.

Statistics of religious intermarriage are not centrally collected in Albania, nor are such data collected in the census. Until the 1990s Albania was officially an atheist state and the last census to record the various religious denominations of households was 1946.<sup>1</sup> In late 2009 the Albanian Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, reportedly “caused a stir” when he suggested that the 2011 census “should record citizens’ ethnicity, religious affiliation and mother tongue.”<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of accurate statistics, estimates suggest that approximately 70 percent of Albanians are Muslim, 20 percent are Greek Orthodox Church and 10 percent are Roman Catholic. Despite the predominance of Islam in Albania, language is said to remain the dominant source of national identity. A combination of this fact and the de-emphasis of religion under communism would explain why Albanians have developed “a strong tradition of religious tolerance” and therefore why interfaith marriages are reportedly “common”.<sup>3</sup>

While there are no official data to support the view, the belief persists that religious intermarriage in Albania is common. In 2009 *Balkan Insight* reported that in Albania “intermarriage between different groups is so common as to be completely unremarkable.”<sup>4</sup> In 2006 the US Department of State described religious intermarriage in Albania as “extremely common” and that Albanians “take pride in the tolerance and understanding that prevail among them.”<sup>5</sup> These views echoed those of the UK Home Office in 2004.<sup>6</sup> A 1995 study reported that intermarriage occurs not only between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also between people of different religions and different ethnicities; “Miall (1995) found evidence

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<sup>1</sup> Likmeta, B 2009, ‘Albania Muslims Can Wear Headscarf In New IDs’, *Balkan Insight*, 23 January <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/16183/> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 1

<sup>2</sup> Hala, M. 2009, ‘Declaring ethnicity and religion in Albania’, *Southeast European Times*, 30 December [http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en\\_GB/features/setimes/blogreview/2009/12/30/blog-02](http://www.setimes.com/cocoon/setimes/xhtml/en_GB/features/setimes/blogreview/2009/12/30/blog-02) – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 2

<sup>3</sup> Vickers, A. 2008, *Islam in Albania*, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Balkan Series 08/09, p.1 – Attachment 3

<sup>4</sup> Likmeta, B 2009, ‘Albania Muslims Can Wear Headscarf In New IDs’, *Balkan Insight*, 23 January <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/16183/> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 1

<sup>5</sup> US Department of State 2006, *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom – Albania*, 15 September, Section III – Attachment 4

<sup>6</sup> UK Home Office 2004, *Country Report – Albania*, 1 April, section 6.28 – Attachment 5

of intermarriage between Orthodox Vlachs and Moslem Albanians, thus suggesting a high level of tolerance between the two groups.”<sup>7</sup>

Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) stated in 2004 that “it is not plausible that as a result of marriage to a Catholic, an Albanian woman would be liable to generalised persecution. Albania is tolerant to different religions and there is very little religious fundamentalism – except possibly for some specific areas in northern Albania.”<sup>8</sup>

One explanation for Albania’s religious tolerance is the high level of non-practicing members of the various religions and denominations; a 2009 report in *Balkan Insight* states that less than 40 percent of Albanians actually practice their nominal religion.<sup>9</sup> This is likely to be a consequence of the fact that at least two generations grew up in an Albania that was officially an atheist state.

There is, however, a small body of opinion that suggests that religious tolerance in Albania has been exaggerated for “nationalist purposes”. There have been few cases of inter-religious violence in Albania, however in recent years tension has developed between Hanafi Muslims and young students who have embraced Salafi Islam while studying in the Middle East. A recent example of tension between Muslims and Catholics occurred in the city of Shkoder, when the Mufti and other members of the Muslim community objected to the placement of a statue of Mother Theresa. Some members of the Muslim community suggested that the statue might give the false impression that Shkoder is a predominantly Christian city.<sup>10</sup>

A 2008 anthropological paper reported that prior to the Second World War “intermarriage was almost nonexistent” in Albania. Gilles de Rapper at the Universite de Provence argues that “only exceptional marriages of Muslim men with Christian women” were evident in the genealogies from “the first half of the 20th century”. The author suggests that following the official ban on religion in the late 1960s, more intermarriages occurred, however they were primarily “an urban phenomenon”. He also suggests that negative religious stereotypes persist in parts of Albania, however these are more in relation to work ethics and frugality.<sup>11</sup>

Contradicting the view that intermarriages in Albania were rare prior to World War Two, a 1995 paper reported that “[e]ighteenth and nineteenth century travellers marvel at the intermarriage of Muslims and Christians and the preservation of two confessions in one household.”<sup>12</sup>

A 2003 study also states that although Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Islamic clergy discouraged religious intermarriage, Albanian cultural norms (known as Lek) did permit it; Lek “obtained more obedience than the Ten Commandments, and the teaching of the hodjas and the priests was often in vain if it ran counter to that of Lek.” The study adds, however, that “the number of mixed marriages varied in different regions, among specific groups of

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<sup>7</sup> Lastarria-Cornhiel, S. & Wheeler, R. 1998, ‘Gender, Ethnicity, and Landed Property in Albania’, Land Tenure Centre University of Wisconsin, Working Paper, No. 18, September, p. 41 – Attachment 6

<sup>8</sup> DIMA Country Information Service 2004, *Country Information Report No. 40/04 – Muslim Woman Married To A Catholic Male – Claim Of Persecution*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 30 April 2004), 21 May – Attachment 7

<sup>9</sup> Likmeta, B 2009, ‘Albania Muslims Can Wear Headscarf In New IDs’, *Balkan Insight*, 23 January <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/16183/> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 1

<sup>10</sup> Vickers, A. 2008, *Islam in Albania*, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Balkan Series 08/09, p.12 – Attachment 3

<sup>11</sup> de Rapper, G. 2008, ‘Religion in post-communist Albania: Muslims, Christians and the idea of ‘culture’ in Devoll, southern Albania’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/34793739/Religion-in-postcommunist-Albania-Muslims-Christians-and-the-idea-of-culture-in-Devoll-southern-Albania> – Accessed 17 June 2010 – Attachment 8

<sup>12</sup> Kain, L. 1995, ‘Northern Epiros: The Greek Minority in Southern Albania’, *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Issue 19.2, Summer <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/ourpublications/csq/article/northern-epiros-the-greek-minority-southern-albania> – Accessed 17 June 2010 – Attachment 9

believers, and in different time periods.” In northern Albania in the 1950s and 1960s only 1.6 percent of marriages were mixed marriages. At the same time in southern Albania it was 4.3 percent. However, in the capital Tirane 15.5 percent of marriages were reportedly mixed. The main type of mixed marriage “contracted was between Muslim men and Eastern Orthodox women.” The authors add that with the end of socialism and official atheism, religious intolerance in Albania has increased. Nevertheless, “[i]n reality, religious differences are usually not an obstacle in contracting marriages among young Albanians.”<sup>13</sup>

Most Albanian Muslims are either moderate Hanafi Sunnis or Bektashis, a branch of Shiite Islam associated with Sufism. Furthermore, as reported earlier, less than forty percent of Albanians actually practice their nominal religion. The combination of these facts has made most Albanians secular. It has, however, been reported that support for the deeply conservative Salafist branch of Islam is growing, spread by youths who have returned from study in Saudi Arabia and Yemen.<sup>14</sup> Although they remain small in number, it is likely that they would be less tolerant of religious intermarriage, particularly a marriage where one partner refrains from converting to Islam.

## Italy

Religious intermarriage is increasingly common in Italy; however the overall numbers of such marriages remain small. Neither of these facts is indicative of general social attitudes towards mixed marriages. Indeed, it remains generally unclear what the attitude of most Italians is to mixed marriage; less clear again are Italian attitudes to mixed marriages within migrant communities. The Catholic Church does permit mixed marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics, providing that the Catholic spouse remains an active Catholic and that any subsequent children are baptised in the Catholic Church. However, the extent to which Catholic doctrine remains influential in shaping Italian attitudes remains debatable. Perhaps more important is the growing public anxiety concerning Islam and the migration of Muslims to Italy. Given this anxiety, it is likely that mixed marriages that resulted in the Muslim partner converting to Christianity would be welcomed by many in Italian society.

Intermarriage between people of different religions, including between Muslims and Christians, is increasingly common in Italy. In 2005 it was reported that there were approximately 10,000 mixed marriages in Italy a year. Despite this relatively low number, the Global Commission on International Migration argues that this is not a good indication of the level of integration of Italian society. The Commission also states that the frequency of mixed marriages is higher in Italy’s Northern regions “where the process of integration is more advanced.”<sup>15</sup>

In 2006 the Catholic charitable organisation Caritas reported that the number of marriages between Italians and foreign natives living in Italy has risen tenfold in the previous 15 years, many of which are also religiously mixed; “[i]n 1991 there were 60,000 such ‘mixed marriages’ registered in Italy; last year there were 600,000...About 10% of the mixed marriages involve a Muslim with a Catholic spouse. In the vast majority of such cases, the children are raised as Muslims. If the wife is Catholic, statistics show that she is likely to convert to Islam.” Catholic Culture.org reports that despite the increase in the number of

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<sup>13</sup> Murzaku, I.A & Dervishi, Z. 2003, ‘Albanians’ first post-communist decade. Values in transition: traditional or liberal?’, Find Articles.com, source: *East European Quarterly*, Summer, 22 June, pp.6-7  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_7063/is\\_2\\_37/ai\\_n28145230/?tag=content:coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7063/is_2_37/ai_n28145230/?tag=content:coll) – Accessed 17 June 2010 – Attachment 10

<sup>14</sup> Vickers, A. 2008, *Islam in Albania*, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Balkan Series 08/09, p.13 – Attachment 3

<sup>15</sup> Global Commission on International Migration 2005, *Public Policies and Community Services for Immigrant Integration: Italy and the European Union*, *Global Migration Perspectives*, No. 45, September – Attachment 11

mixed marriages, the average Catholic-Muslim marriage in the city of Milan only lasts five years. In the southern city of Lecce such marriages last an average of 13 years. One of the reasons suggested for the relatively short lifespan of mixed marriages, particularly in the north, is the level of social pressure placed upon such couples.<sup>16</sup> The majority of mixed marriages take place in Northern Italy, also the home of the Northern League, a political bloc with a strong anti-migrant agenda.

An estimated 87 percent of citizens born in Italy are Roman Catholic. However, regular religious observation is even lower in Italy than in Albania, with only 20 percent of Catholics regularly participating in church services.<sup>17</sup> The position of the Catholic Church on mixed marriages, especially between Catholics and Muslims is complex. In 2004, Pope John Paul II released “a strongly worded document urging Catholics, particularly women, to be cautious about marrying Muslims.” The Pope referred to women as the “least-protected member of the Muslim family” and stated that “bitter experience” has demonstrated that European women face difficulties when they marry Muslim men.<sup>18</sup> Echoing the Pope, in 2005, “Italian bishops gave warning against Catholics marrying Muslims, citing cultural differences, and fears that children born into mixed-faith marriages would shun Christianity.”<sup>19</sup>

The Pope and Bishops’ words were controversial in Italy, however, they are more likely to reflect official concerns about Catholic women leaving the faith, rather than Church xenophobia towards Islam. No similar statements have been found indicating concern for Muslim women marrying Catholic men. The Catholic Church states that marriage between Catholics is a holy sacrament and that mixed marriages between Catholics and non-baptised persons makes the couple vulnerable to “religious indifference”. Thus, mixed marriages require “the express permission of ecclesiastical authority” in order to gain special dispensation. This dispensation is granted on the basis “that the Catholic party confirms the obligations, which have been made known to the non-Catholic party, of preserving his or her own faith and ensuring the baptism and education of the children in the Catholic Church.”<sup>20</sup>

Concern about the growth of Islam in Italy has been a regular feature in the Italian press over the past decade. Despite the fact that the majority of mixed marriages occur in the north, it is also the region where concern about the spread of Islam in Italy is strongest. The Northern League members of parliament have sought to introduce legislation restricting the building of new mosques and in August 2009 a northern town banned the wearing of “burkinis” in its public pool on the grounds that it “could disturb small children” and is “a potential violation of pool hygiene rules.” Local Muslims interpreted these actions as Islamophobia.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> ‘Muslim-Catholic marriages on the rise in Italy’ 2007, Catholic Culture.org, 16 January <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=48655> – Accessed 22 June 2010 – Attachment 12

<sup>17</sup> US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report – Italy*, 26 October, Section I – Attachment 13

<sup>18</sup> Lemmons, E. (undated), ‘Church Teachings: Interfaith Marriages’, For your Marriage <http://foryourmarriage.org/catholic-marriage/church-teachings/interfaith-marriages/> – Accessed 22 June 2010 – Attachment 14

<sup>19</sup> ‘Islam in Italy’ (undated), Euro-Islam.info website <http://www.euro-islam.info/country-profiles/italy/> – Accessed 22 June 2010 – Attachment 15

<sup>20</sup> ‘Part Two – The Celebration Of The Christian Mystery; Section Two – The Seven Sacraments Of The Church; Chapter Three – The Sacraments At The Service Of Communion’, in *Catechism Of The Catholic Church* (second edition) St Charles Borromeo Catholic church website, section 1635-1637 <http://www.scborromeo.org/ccc/p2s2c3a7.htm> – Accessed 22 June 2010 – Attachment 16

<sup>21</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Italy*, 11 March, Section C – Attachment 17

Some Italian Muslims, primarily those on the political left, have made attempts to reduce the bureaucratic obstacles to mixed marriages, particularly those involving the marriage of Muslim women to Italian residents or citizens of Christian background. In 2007 a Moroccan Muslim member of Italy's parliament expressed concern that Muslim women seeking to marry Italian men require a certificate of permission from their respective embassies. Countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia or Algeria only issue such certificates providing the non-Muslim males converts to Islam. Despite his Muslim Moroccan origins, Khaled Fouad Allam has sought to overturn this requirement in order to maintain the integrity of Italy's secularism.<sup>22</sup> However, there are no reports that Albania requires such conversions; perhaps unsurprising given the reported commonality of inter-religious marriage and the secular nature of the state.

## **2. Are there any grounds upon which State protection might be withheld or denied to a person in Albania or Italy?**

### **Albania**

There is no evidence that the Albanian police force does or might deliberately withhold protection from couples due to their inter-religious marriage or relationship. Both the Albanian government and the police forces are secular; "[a]ccording to the Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal".<sup>23</sup>

The primary issue regarding police protection is not religious bias, but rather the twin issues of professionalism and resources. The recent improvement in the professional development and capacity of the Albanian police force was examined in detail in a previous RRT Country Advice.<sup>24</sup> In that response it was established that the police force was once closely associated with the atheistic Albanian Communist Party, however since the start of the new century it has undergone significant professional development. Positive signs of the effectiveness of this investment include a dramatic drop in the number of homicides, and a dramatic improvement in the number of 'cold cases'<sup>25</sup> solved.<sup>26</sup>

In 2008 a new 'State Police Law' was introduced which, according to the European Commission, is having a positive effect on the behaviour of police managers and on recruitment.<sup>27</sup> This professionalism should enhance the capacity and the willingness of the state to provide protection, regardless of the religious, ethnic or political background of the victim.

The most severe critic of the Albania police service remains the US Department of State, which recently repeated verbatim its 2008 summary of the service's capacity and professionalism; "[t]he overall performance of law enforcement remained weak. Unprofessional behaviour and corruption remained major impediments to the development of an effective civilian police force."<sup>28 29</sup> One particular concern is that a third of all court orders

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<sup>22</sup> Ambrosi, E. 2007, 'Our law will help Muslim women', Reset Doc, 6 November <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/00000000588> – Accessed 17 June 2010 – Attachment 18

<sup>23</sup> US Department of State 2009, *International Religious Freedom Report – Albania*, 26 October, Section I – Attachment 19

<sup>24</sup> RRT Country Advice 2010, *Country Advice ALB36280*, 16 March – Attachment 20

<sup>25</sup> Hitherto unsolved crimes from past years.

<sup>26</sup> US Department of State 2009, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2008 – Albania*, 25 February, Section 1a – Attachment 21

<sup>27</sup> European Commission 2008, *Commission Staff Working Document: Albania Progress Report*, 5 November – Attachment 22

<sup>28</sup> US Department of State 2009, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2008 – Albania*, 25 February, Section 1d – Attachment 21

<sup>29</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Albania*, 11 March, Section 1d – Attachment 23



are not enforced.<sup>30</sup> This is likely to be the result of professional capacity, indolence or bribery, rather than the deliberate withholding of protection for religious reasons.

Internal relocation in Albania remains feasible. Department of Foreign Affairs (DFAT) advice to the then Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) states that relocation of Albanian couples to other towns remains an option, adding that “[i]n large towns, mixed marriages are not rare.”<sup>31</sup> The UK Home Office stated in 2008 that Albanian law allows freedom of movement and adds that “the Government generally respected this right in practice.” Obstacles to internal relocation primarily relate to accessing government services; “[i]nternal migrants must transfer their civil registration to their new community to be entitled to government services, and must prove they are legally domiciled either through property ownerships, a property rental agreement or utility bills. Many cannot provide this proof and thus lack access to essential services.”<sup>32</sup>

## Italy

Italian law criminalises domestic violence perpetrated by all family members and authorities do actively prosecute perpetrators.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Article 3 of the Italian Constitution “guarantees equality before the law and fundamental freedoms, and guards against discrimination on the grounds of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, and personal and social conditions.”<sup>34</sup>

However, a number of human rights organisations allege that Italian authorities are less concerned about pursuing the perpetrators of violent crimes against ethnic minorities than protecting the Italian majority. Indeed both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International suggest that the Berlusconi government provides what is tantamount to support for violence towards migrants. Human Rights Watch stated in September 2009 that the Italian government’s public rhetoric and policies have tended to equate “foreigners” with “criminals”, exacerbating a “climate of racism and xenophobia.”<sup>35</sup> Amnesty International has stated that “rising xenophobia in Italy is reflected in the increasingly vocal anti-migrant and anti-Roma rhetoric of, in particular, regional and local politicians.”<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, despite this rhetoric, there is no evidence that police withhold protection to migrants or pursue perpetrators of such violence with less vigour.

Much of the recent anti-migrant rhetoric and violence in Italy appears to be aimed at people from North Africa and the Middle East, rather than older communities, many of whom now hold Italian citizenship. However, there is evidence that negative attitudes towards the Albanian community persist, despite the fact that the majority of Albanians now reside in Italy legally and a high proportion of Albanians learn to speak the host community language compared to the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) international average.

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<sup>30</sup> Freedom House 2009, *Freedom in the World Country Report Albania*, 16 July – Attachment 24

<sup>31</sup> DIMA Country Information Service 2004, *Country Information Report No. 40/04 – Muslim Woman Married To A Catholic Male – Claim Of Persecution*, (sourced from DFAT advice of 30 April 2004), 21 May – Attachment 7

<sup>32</sup> UK Home Office 2008, *Operational Guidance Note: Albania*, December, p.7 – Attachment 25

<sup>33</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Italy*, 11 March, Section 6 – Attachment 17

<sup>34</sup> Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Italy: Overview*, July – Attachment 26

<sup>35</sup> Human Rights Watch 2009, *Human Rights Watch UPR Submission on Italy*, HRW website, 1 September <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/09/01/human-rights-watch-upr-submission-italy> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 27

<sup>36</sup> Amnesty International 2010, ‘Italy: All Migrants Must Be Protected Against Attacks and Exploitation’, AI website, 12 January <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR30/003/2010/en/7b1dfe58-d30a-4c03-87c7-ce42cbac6051/eur300032010en.html> – Accessed 16 June 2010 – Attachment 28

Albanians constitute the largest foreign ethnic group in at least seven Italian regions, the second largest in a further six regions, and the third largest ethnic group to take up Italian citizenship.<sup>37</sup>

Despite these positive signs of attempted integration, Albanians remain socially excluded. One reason for this is the common association of Albanians with crime; “Albanians have received large coverage in the representation of the Italian media and their image has largely been associated with criminality and moral decay.”<sup>38</sup> This has made Albanians stereotyped and consequently stigmatised. A 2008 study found that forty percent of Italians associate immigrants with criminal activities; “[s]uch a phenomenon is considered a matter of increasing concern, especially for members of some immigrant communities such as Albanians.”<sup>39</sup> Responses from seven hundred participants in an Italian survey indicated that thirty six percent of the interviewees “deemed that Albanians are mostly inclined to violence compared to other immigrant groups.”<sup>40</sup> There is no evidence that such negative public attitudes result in either reduced state protection afforded to Albanian victims of violence, or greater vigour in pursuing Albanian perpetrators of violence.

## Attachments

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<sup>37</sup> Piperno, F. 2002, *From Albania To Italy: Formation and basic features of a binational migration system*, CeSPI website, May, pp.8-12 <http://www.cespi.it/PASTORE/Italy-Albania.PDF> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 29

<sup>38</sup> Piperno, F. 2002, *From Albania To Italy: Formation and basic features of a binational migration system*, CeSPI website, May, p.14 <http://www.cespi.it/PASTORE/Italy-Albania.PDF> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 29

<sup>39</sup> Dimitrova, R. 2008, ‘Chapter 2 Socio-demographic Overview of Immigrants and Immigrant Children in Italy’, in *Immigration in Italy*, OpenstarTs website, 31 March, p.29 <http://www.openstarts.units.it/dspace/bitstream/10077/2684/4/Chapter%202.pdf> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 30

<sup>40</sup> Dimitrova, R. 2008, ‘Chapter 2 Socio-demographic Overview of Immigrants and Immigrant Children in Italy’, in *Immigration in Italy*, OpenstarTs website, 31 March, p.33 <http://www.openstarts.units.it/dspace/bitstream/10077/2684/4/Chapter%202.pdf> – Accessed 18 June 2010 – Attachment 30

8. de Rapper, G. 2008, 'Religion in post-communist Albania: Muslims, Christians and the idea of 'culture' in Devoll, southern Albania', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*  
<http://www.britannica.com/bps/additionalcontent/18/34793739/Religion-in-postcommunist-Albania-Muslims-Christians-and-the-idea-of-culture-in-Devoll-southern-Albania> – Accessed 17 June 2010.
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