What about the leader in Albanian reality?

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It is so much written about leadership today and the leader's features are so much investigated, that one can hardly be "original" trying to put down some lines about the subject. Without pretending to bring new ideas, authors of this article will try here to bring new insight about leadership in a not very much studied culture like that of Albania. The following paper does take a social and organisational view of the phenomenon, trying mostly to point out the cultural influences on leadership, specific features fed by specific historical circumstances.

Es ist schon viel über Führung geschrieben worden und die Führungseigenschaften wurden so eingehend erforscht, dass es wahrscheinlich nicht allzu originell ist, darüber zu schreiben. Ohne neue Ideen vorzugeben, versuchen die Autoren dieses Artikels, neue Einsichten von Führung in einer nicht sehr geläufigen Kultur wie der Albaniens zu geben. Der folgende Aufsatz gibt eine soziale und organisatorische Sicht der Dinge und versucht verstärkt, die kulturellen Einflüsse auf die Führung darzustellen, die von spezifischen historischen Umständen genährt wurden.

Key words: leadership / Albania / culture / history / organisation

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1. "Timing and intensity of political and economic reform is often determined by leadership capacity" (Hewett, 1988)

The study of leadership effectiveness is an important point in understanding reality and transformation that are happening in the former -communist countries. As these countries face the consequences of the former regime, trying to step on the unfamiliar road of the market economy and management concepts and practices, the influence of effective leaders becomes crucial to the economic and social success. The more complicated and unsecured the process, the greater the need for a leader.

Albania is the last country that came out of the communist regime. The change was violent and not gradual. This excluded the old *nomenclatura* by the possibility of heading the process.

Like other communist countries, Albanian culture was identified as a collectivistic one. Ideology was very much concentrated on opposing individualistic values. It is pointed out also, that culture in former communist countries is characterised by a high need of uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1996). It was probably for these reasons that dictatorial leaders providing structure and order have had long life in this country.

But it was the destiny of these countries to be challenged to changing their system, which threatened the stability of every single aspect of their lives . Because of their uncertainty- avoiding culture, people were prone to accept (and probably "create") a strong hand leader. This is also fostered by the strong power distance that characterises these cultures (Hofstede, 1996) and the poor economic and sometimes political conditions.

According to Conger and Kanungo (1987) when the system faces a crisis, leaders find it to their advantage to advocate radical change by creating a charismatic image for themselves. This is the case of Albania, where charisma was (and still is) a quality used as substitute for the poor vision of some political leaders. We can argue if we have to do with the case of a situational leadership, or the charismatic one in the Albanian reality, but the importance of circumstances prevails in the discussions.

2. Leadership is a word used only on politics

Differently from some other languages, the English word "leader" has one equivalent word in Albanian, but unfortunately it still means "a political person" in people's minds. Among 240 students of MBA in The Economic Faculty at Tirana University, that had to write as homework an imaginary interview with a leader, only 12 of them organised their interview around an organisational leader (only 10 of them for an Albanian leader), and only 20 others about the actual mayor of Tirana. All the others (86%) were referred to political Albanian figures.

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The word "business" has only existed 10 years in the everyday language of Albanians. Although some entrepreneurs have proved to be successful, we have to accept that Albanian business is not so developed, for many standards it is not comparable with that of other post-communist countries. The fact that this business can't be competitive in the foreign markets is an indicator. It is logical to learn from others' experience without repeating the same errors others have already made .

One can hardly say that the leaders in charge are responsible for all the economic changes that are happening in this country. Even at the organisational level, goals, targets, rules and standards are all imposed. The business leader is mainly a self-made creature that acts by intuition. The situation in the public sector is gloomier, as the centralised mentality still prevails.

The leader notion in the economic literature is mostly analysed in a close relation with that of the management/manager. In Albania "manager" is a notion not older than 10 years, while "manager with leading qualities" is still unknown in overwhelming Albanian businessmen. We may point out two facts.

First, the Albanian businessman (that is the practical head of it in all senses) is mainly a person aged between 20-39 years, with a mainly non-economic education, and in many cases without university education. Even those with economic education need new knowledge according to the new conditions (market economy).

Second, training institutions, including universities not only offer training that does not come in time, but are mostly concentrated on practical and short term issues like how to start up a business, how to track the cash flow, how to make a business plan, etc. Programs for education of managers have been rear or not complete. Human resources problems, as part of these problems have not been properly addressed.

In this context, leadership, partly because of the inherited mentality, partly being an abstract notion, is left out of the businessman's attention. Its relation with the business reality is mostly considered like a relation of the politics with the business. But even in this point of view, the experience discourages the use of the leadership concept in business.

Although 10 years have passed, we are still at a point that seems as that of departure in terms of the leadership concept. Whenever economic or political instability can be detected in horizon, the authoritarian and centralised decision-making are called upon. It is clear that having collective values (Hofstede, 1996), people like Albanians prefer a leader who can guide the masses and unite them around a common goal. But do we have historical and/or cultural peculiarities? Knowing the Albanian past and present reality, we would like to argue on some of them.

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3. ”Leadership starts with ambiguity, begins with contradictions, goes through total lack of clarity, and must nevertheless end up with results” (Koestenbaum, 1991)

In the popular image, leaders were viewed as masters of all the knowledge. They deny fear and failure and are self-sufficient. One who has doubts is soon wiped off.

Analysing this mentality, we can understand that leader is supposed to be the one that comes out of the crowd only in the moments of radical change. As far as here, the popular image is mainly in compliance with the modern theories of leader as head of change. But the notion stops here. It sees the leader as the effective factor only on drastic change. As such, it is difficult to transfer the political or social concept in organisational life. Albanian mentality finds it difficult to identify a leader who is at the head of everyday changes, who doesn’t expect a war or a revolution to become “alive”, who has his/her own doubts and needs to grow like every other person at the world. This kind of person is mostly considered as an unstable individual, who doesn’t know what he wants, etc.

This mentality was heavily strengthened during the communist period, when “leaders” were the materialised gods on earth, in whom people had to believe and obey blindly, and sing songs and adore by order. Even in a kindergarten you could find the huge size photos of 12 people who were “the leaders of the Party”. One could never know any thing about the real life, problems and difficulties of these persons. They were *just successful,* ready made for worship. It has even happened that the leader smiling on TV in the morning, was arrested for betrayal the same night, but to the simple common person it was never allowed to put doubts on anything before the completed fact. He was ordered to believe that the leader chosen by the party was just the Sun, whose sunspots can’t be seen with the naked eye. This was a way to preserve a class of chosen individuals, and to deny prosperity and desire of growth to the simple individual. The latter was taught not to think about change. The only knowledge allowed for him was the technical one. The philosophy of life was “owned” by other minds.

Understanding that leaders are humans who need to grow, who suffer and learn is the first point to the difficult way of understanding the complex phenomenon of leadership. It is the only way a leader can step down the pedestal of worship, and become one of us, who can be encountered in everyday life of our organisations (in the broader sense of the word). It is the only way we can try to start teaching leadership, and make people consider their capabilities not only as followers.

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4. Patriarchal family

Before the Second World War and for many years after, the basic organisation of society was the patriarchal family ruled by the oldest male member, according to a not legal, but still written code that stressed obedience.

There are ancient separate buildings that still serve as tribe houses spread in all the hills and mountains of this country. The tribe life is characterized by the common efforts of the big family for the well-being of every member, but the priorities in meeting everybody's needs were decided by the head of the family that usually was the oldest (and in some cases the most awkward minded) male. Here we have the example of the team work and the "director" or leader, but we can't identify this kind of organisation with the one that serves as the place for growing the effective leader, as the spirit is completely different, and the leading activity is considered successful only when intended compliance of the family life with an awkward rule of social life written in the 17th century. Not to mention the fact that the rules of inheritance keep out the promising young individuals from the leading positions. Who had the courage and a vision that was different from that of the head family had to suffer hell for trying to go his own way. All the other members could see him as strange and consider him rebellious for the sake of it .

The patriarchal concept of no competition in the family was strongly embraced by the communist mentality. Trying to perform better and more effectively was officially awarded, but practically punished in a sophisticated way. All this, fed the fear that doing better could be perceived as taking away from the share of the others. As Luthans at al. (1998) pointed out, a desire to blend into the group, and not to challenge the standard way of doing things, gave way to a population with little motivation to strive to meet higher standards.

This preference for the family-like organisation can be detected even in today's business.

In a questionnaire about different problems of management in the today's business in Albania handled in 160 cases (Llaci et al., 2002), it was revealed that more than 30% of the business managers believe that there exists a spirit of loyalty in their businesses. This is more obvious in the small businesses, where employees are mainly family members or relatives, or where the employees have been employed for a long period of time. About 40% of business owners used the top-down delegation of authority, while the rest relied on the strong supervision of their dependents.

5. "Each Albanian is a head on its own" (popular saying)

People in this part of the World are known for their lonesomeness, and for separateness and autonomy they prefer with respect to vision. One can find marvellous villages at the seaside all around the world, but not in Albania.

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Buildings are up to the mountains, where a normal visitor can't reach without being seen.

In all the popular songs, the leader is the one with courage that sacrifices his life up to death. So, the image of a leader is always an "one moment history". Most of the time the individual has to die for deserving the attention. Strangely enough, the only leader that had a vision and strived for uniting people toward a common goal (Skanderbeg, XVI-th century) is the only hero that died by a natural death. Since then, there isn't in the modern history even a single story telling the deeds of a visionary person, or considering vision as a worth mentioning characteristic of a leader (besides those for the head of the Communist regime, that need to be treated in a special point of view).

This characteristic can be seen even in the business. According to the same questionnaire mentioned above (Llaci et al., 2002), it came out that 75 % of the small business owners do not allow their dependents to take by themselves the decisions related to the functions they are appointed to. According to the same questionnaire, in about 80% of the cases, it is the entrepreneur who participates directly in the company's decisions.

The autarchic style of management is evident in the Albanian business, where the owner/manager wants to control everything in details, even for the small activities performed by his dependents (Llaci et al., 2002). Centralisation and control are not unknown even for the western cultures, but the specific characteristics of the people here add their effect. Briefly described, these are some of the main historical and cultural reasons for the serious deficiencies leadership presents not only when considered for academic purposes, but even for practical ones.

6. Is this place sterilised forever?

Leadership is not taught as a subject in any kind of school in this country. In the training programs for the public administration even in those for high executives, one can never find even a line about leadership in organisation. Creation of leadership intelligence is left to the individual's imagination.

Despite the mentality and situation, the information collected from questionnaires quoted above, shows that nowadays, the tendency in the decision making process is decentralisation. This was confirmed by about 80% of interviewed persons. As Llaci et al. (2002) point out, questions directed to different businessmen about how they explain this kind of evolution, 90% answered "Decentralisation of decision making in their own businesses is linked with the growing process of their enterprises, as well as with the rate of increase in the number of employees and activities".

If we want to make an analysis of leadership loosely citing Koestenbaum, we may say that the today's organisation life in Albania needs leaders with *vision*.

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In the present conditions, vision means managing the relations with other powerful organisations as well as with developed countries. The today's organisation life in Albania needs *realistic* leaders who can size up economic problems in terms of specific conditions of the country, without surrender to corruption and bureaucracy. This of course demands for *courageous* leaders, characterised by determination and perseverance that know what patriotism is.

All the activities of the leader can't be complete if he/she is not *ethic*. In the Post Communist Era, when the system of values seems to have made amazing changes, being ethical is a challenge on its own. Ethical leaders need to be customer oriented. Being ethical is still seen as a premature requirement by the Albanian organisation leader. Coming from the planned economy where the word "profit" did not exist, the new private business has embraced with all its potential the concept of profit to by all means. This of course gives life to unethical behaviour inside the organisation as well as out of it.

7. "A picture is worth a thousand words" (Chinese proverb)

About 79% of the businesses in Albania are micro-businesses. Many of them are directed by successful people that considering the theoretical frameworks can even be qualified as leaders. Considering the fact that many small businesses are more micro-businesses, operating in a restricted environment, with a limited number of "followers" we can understand why some small businessmen who really are successful leaders of their businesses do not even get concerned about this. Even in the big successful entrepreneurships people are shy to affirm leading qualities they already have, or in the worst of cases do not even know they are real leaders, who have made real changes in the activities they are engaged in. It is the duty of society, of the academic institutions and non governmental organizations to affirm these values. Not only training is necessary to change the way of perception in the field. Making publicly known the good examples by naming the leadership qualities of certain people will be a well-paying activity as well. The public, as well as the real business leaders need to be educated to understand that leader is not only a political word. All the interested institutions have to work more in separating the two concepts (business leader vs. political leader) in the minds of people.

Conclusion

Being in a still not consolidated phase of transition, Albanian reality has a strong tendency to favour the political faces of leadership, compared to other forms of it. Although as a post communist country Albanian culture is characterised by collectivism, high uncertainty avoidance need, and high power distance, the historical conditions of life make us believe the existence of a strong individualistic spirit. The leading styles that prevail in management are

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far from being participative. The past and present life practice give strong arguments in favour of this. But is this individualism going to prevail the social and economic life for long? Although it is still too early to draw conclusions, we can give arguments that a change of "course" can be detected.

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