



# ALBANIAN ADVOCACY FOR CHAMERIA IN EUROPE



Introduction



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# Introduction

*A book on the Chameria advocacy campaign to get the Cham issue on the international political agenda, mobilize the people and get historical justice for the Cham community.*

## About the book

This book is a selection of articles, press releases, speeches and photo's that I made during my work with and for the Cham. Most of the activities took place during an 18-month-period between 2017 and 2019, although some activities go until May 2022. I only made small, non-content-related, edits to the articles and copied the speeches as is. The information presented in these documents contains much of the history and the problems facing the Cham. I have organized the activities into six categories for the purpose of this book: mobilizing Chameria, rallying international support, cooperation with underrepresented nations, and advocacy at the European Parliament, the European Commission and the United Nations. I have tried to present a clear overview of the advocacy campaign to get the Cham issue on the political agenda and mobilize the Cham people. However, the articles and photo's unavoidably present a somewhat distorted picture of the advocacy campaign. For example, most of the meetings we had as the Chameria delegation with policy advisors and politicians were behind closed doors. This is especially true for the advocacy campaign in the European Parliament, where numerous Greek parliamentarians and their supporters actively tried to suppress the Cham issue, which meant that many parliamentarians only agreed to meet with us behind closed doors. Furthermore, the reports, letters to governments and pamphlets which I wrote and that the Chameria delegation used to



advocate the cause, have not been included as reprints in the book since the information therein is already present in the speeches and articles. I created this book with the intent for people to understand the issues facing the Cham and the advocacy campaign to move it forward. Furthermore, I hope that it will provide other Cham-Albanians and their supporters information and insights they might use for their advocacy campaign in the future. Those readers who quickly want to know the most pressing issues facing the Cham can go to the presentations I made to the European Regional Forums of the United Nations, included in the final section of the book on pages 297-312. The historical background of the Cham can be found in the text about Lodewijk Thompson on pages 67-74 and the European Parliament conference of the 75<sup>th</sup> commemoration of the expulsion of the Cham on pages 201-212.

### **About my involvement**

I have worked with underrepresented peoples, nations and states for over twenty years. These activities were mostly focused on human, economic and cultural rights advocacy at the European Union and the United Nations. During these years, I have co-written dozens of international reports on the situation of marginalized communities and have actively advised indigenous leaders and representatives of underrepresented states on political and economic possibilities. Furthermore, I have worked especially close with the Captains Council of the Rehoboth Basters, the government in exile of West Papua, the government of Somaliland and the Frisian Movements.

I got involved with the Cham community when I was working at the UNPO, where the Democratic Foundation of Chameria applied for membership. At the time, April 2017, I was in charge of researching and evaluating membership applications. Furthermore, I was the lead organizer of a football tournament of underrepresented peoples that took place in June 2017, in which

Chameria took part. In the next months and years, I worked very close with the president of the Chameria foundation, Festim Lato, and other Cham, Albanians and Kosovars on moving the Cham issue forward. We achieved a lot and were able to put the Cham issue in the spotlight and on the international political agenda. However, despite our successes, the overall aim of getting the Cham issue resolved remains an objective that has alluded us.

### **About the Cham**

The Cham are an Albanian speaking community who lived in a region what is now northwestern Greece and which was part of the Ottoman Empire for many centuries. They were driven out to Turkey and Albania in several waves during the time-period between 1913 and 1944 and were stripped of their citizenship. Their land, houses and other possessions were seized and nationalized through several laws in 1947, 1953 and 1959. The Cham have tried to reclaim their rights since that time and have been advocating for historical justice for decades.

### **About the campaign**

In September 2016, European Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, said in a public meeting regarding the possible future accession to the EU of Albania and other countries in the Western Balkan that “the existing Cham issue is a matter that needs to be resolved between the two countries involved, Albania and Greece”. However, the internal politics of these, and other, countries has not had the effect of providing historical justice for the Cham community. Instead, the Cham have been ignored and their grievances have not been heard nor their discrimination addressed. In previous years and decades, the precarious situation of the Cham has been used and abused for political machinations to further the interests of Albanian and Greek

politicians, which did not result in any solution for the problems of the Cham community. Since the time that the Cham were expelled from their homeland, they established numerous associations to organize their community and promote the cause for historical justice. Most of these activities had limited effect. One major advocacy campaign that did make an impression was the advocacy campaign of the Republic of Chameria that took matters in its own hands and focused on getting the ignored and neglected Cham issue on the international political agenda.

A major issue that plagues the ability to get historical justice for the Cham community is the fact that they are excluded from democracy and the Rule of Law. Greece is a modern democracy. However, the Cham are excluded from democracy due to the fact that the debate in Greece on what is considered just and reasonable, excludes the interests of the Cham. Any move towards greater recognition of the Cham as a distinct people who have rights to an identity, are blocked and excluded from the public debate. This is because the generally accepted views in Greece of the Cham are that they are World War II collaborators and a remnant of the Ottoman Empire. This unfair labelling of the Cham as an enemy of Greece denies the multifaceted reality where multiple views can be right and true at the same time. The exclusion of the interests of the Cham is an undemocratic act that uses historical misinterpretations as an excuse to keep land, possessions and the right to a cultural and national identity away from the Cham community. One of the main efforts of the Chameria advocacy campaign was therefore to change this narrative, so that it would include the interests of the Cham as well. Furthermore, although Greece is governed by the Rule of Law, the Cham are also excluded from the Rule of Law by the fact that the one-sided view of history was used to strip the Cham of their houses, properties, land and citizenship. In addition, the Cham lack legal protection where it comes to minority rights. Unlike many other



European countries, Greece has not ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities nor the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which means that minority rights are not well protected in Greece. As a result, the Cham community is not allowed to establish Albanian-language schools and is hindered in its self-organization. The advocacy campaign of the Republic of Chameria was focused on getting democracy and the Rule of Law for the Cham. This campaign was focused on self-organization and mobilization of the Cham people, as well as international advocacy in order to get support from powerful political actors. The main political actor that can influence the future of the Cham community in the region is the European Union (EU). The historical territory of Chameria, which is now northwestern Greece, lies within the EU. However, most Cham currently live in Albania, which is an aspiring member of the EU. The separation of the Cham from their traditional lands also leaves them outside the EU. The border between Greece and Albania is an external EU border, which Albanian citizens can freely pass. However, the Cham who were born in Chameria and fled during World War II cannot cross this border, due to the fact that their Albanian passports do not mention their country of birth to be Greece. Instead, their passports only mention the city of birth. The Cham are therefore faced with a dilemma, because if they accept the Greek requirements than this would validate the claims of Greece to the territory of the Cham and would subsequently have an impact on the claims that they have on their territory, houses and properties.

### **About the community**

The Cham were driven out of their ancestral territories in the period between 1913 and 1944. Most of them settled in Albania and Turkey with others finding new homes across the globe. As is inevitable among dispersed groups of people, the Cham also face challenges in

maintaining their group identity. One aspect of the campaign to find a solution for the historical injustice committed against the Cham was therefore to rejuvenate the identity and make it a vital community again that brings opportunities and hope to its members. In addition, the fact that a group stands up for the rights of the Cham provides the members of the community the self-confidence, clarity of mind and courage to rebel against their subordinate position.

The Republic of Chameria was an advocacy vessel to mobilize the Cham and highlight the main problem that hinders the ability to solve the Cham issue, namely their exclusion from democracy, the Rule of Law, their territory and the opportunities to shape their own future. The advocacy campaign was aimed at bringing Chameria into Europe as a social and political entity that can offer the Cham community the opportunities they are now denied. The future of Chameria lies in Europe and the opposite is true as well. The European values of democracy, Rule of Law and self-determination are in the interests of the EU, Greece, Albania and the Cham community. When you look at the region in fifty-year intervals than the geopolitical make-up of the Balkan appears radically different every time. The interaction of states, peoples and cultures in 1850 was very different from that in 1900. The same is true for the situation in 1950 and 2000. The Balkan will almost certainly look radically different in 2050 again as well and I hope that the competing narratives of the various cultural groups will find a shared home within Europe and with each other.

