MEMBER PROFILE

CHAMERIA

Democratic Foundation of Chameria
Status: occupied territory
Population: no reliable figures (no official data exists for ethnicity in Greece) but best estimate for people who speak the language and/or have an Arvanite consciousness is 200,000
Area: approximately 10,000 square kilometres
Language: Arvanitika (dialect of the Albanian language) and Greek
Religion: Muslim and Orthodox

UNPO REPRESENTATION
Democratic Foundation of Chameria
The Democratic Foundation of Chameria (DFC) has been a Member of UNPO since June 2017.

UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE
The Democratic Foundation of Chameria aims at the recognition of the right to repatriation for those who want to return to their indigenous lands. It advocates for the Chams to be recognised and protected by the international community and for their human, political and cultural rights to be respected. The purpose of the DFC is to protect the interests of Cham-Albanian residents and former residents of Chameria.

OVERVIEW
Chameria is a centuries old territory inherited and inhabited by the Cham people, an Albanian-speaking ethno-cultural group also referred to as Arvanites. The majority of the land was incorporated into the Greek State by the Conference of the Ambassadors in London in 1913, without the consultation or agreement of the Chams and with a small section of the land becoming part of the newly formed country of Albania. Cham people today are seeking the right to return to Chameria by being granted Greek citizenship, whilst keeping citizenship of the countries in which they currently reside. They are also calling for the recognition of their status as a minority group.

The restoration of their right to property is another main concern of the Chams, as Muslim Chams have seen this alienated by the Greek government since the early 20th century, following the signing of the Turkish-Greek peace agreement and the 1923 population exchange between the two nations. Muslim Chams in particular have been persecuted by the Greek government from this period onwards, being expelled from Greece following WWII.

The Cham people have a unique language, culture, tradition and ethnicity that distinguishes them from the Greeks. Yet their language, Arvanitika, has no legal status in Greece and is not taught at any level of the educational system.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

At the beginning of the 20th century, the north-western part of the Greek region of Epirus was mostly populated by a distinct ethno-cultural group, known under the ethnonym “Chams” [Çamëri in Albanian, Τσιαμουρία or Τσιάμικο in Greek]. This population was scattered among a wide area, covering what is today the Western part of Greece’s Thesprotia prefecture and small parts of what today constitutes Albania.

Formally under Ottoman rule, Chameria never fully constituted a distinct administrative division. It was annexed to Greece in 1912, after the Ottoman Empire withdrew from a large part of the Balkan Peninsula. The whole area of Chameria constituted an Albanian/Arvanitika-speaking enclave and was isolated, at least in strictly geographical terms. The Arvanitika-speaking area was quite compact and demarcated by local geography, as well as symbolically distinguished as the land where the Chams lived. It can therefore be argued that the Muslim and Orthodox Chams of this area made up a distinct ethno-economic group. Even though the vernacular of the area was Arvanitika, a much higher status was attributed to the Greek language.

Following the annexation of the Cham area by the Greek State, many Chams eventually identified themselves with the Greek state and their new found Greek citizenship. However, having this large population who spoke a distinct Albanian language and who were in geographical proximity to Albania made the Greek State fear that the Chams could easily be recruited to the ranks of Albanian nationalists. Overall, the existence of a region whose population was roughly half Muslim and almost entirely Albanian-speaking was considered a serious problem for the Greek State, which had to be confronted both practically and discursively. The government thus tried to eliminate all pro-Albanian movements in the area, while adopting policies aimed at masking that the majority of Cham communities within the territory spoke Albanian/Arvanitika and not Greek.

From 1923 to 1928, the Greek State was eager to encourage the supposedly hostile Cham population to migrate to Turkey. The Greco-Turkish exchange of populations was, in theory, in line with the Lausanne Convention and based on the criterion of religion. Also known as the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations, the Lausanne Convention is an agreement between the Greek and Turkish governments signed on 30 January 1923, aimed at the repatriation of refugees from the Greco-Turkish War of 1919-1922. The population transfers involved approximately two million people and centered around movement of Muslims from Greece to Turkey and Orthodox Greeks and Turks from Turkey to Greece. Muslim Chams were targeted and suffered harassment tactics carried out by local paramilitary groups and were often given ultimatums, forcing them to leave the country as part of this population exchange. The way the exchange was implemented further cemented divides between the area’s Cham and Greek communities and gradually led Muslim Chams to veer towards Albania in search of greater protection. It also led to the creation of stronger links between the Albanian state and the Muslim population of Chameria.
When the Italian army invaded Greece, coming from Albania in 1940, an irredentist discourse supported by the Italians was already present in both Albania proper and among numerous communities of Chams within Greece. The very day of the invasion, leaders of the Muslim Cham community were arrested and sent into exile, which gave the community proof of the Greek authorities’ negative perception of the Muslim Chams. In the following days, the Cham refugees went to fight alongside the Italian army which was invading Greece. However, the Greek army reoccupied the area only days later, exiled nearly the entire male Cham population and turned a blind eye to the atrocities committed by local Greeks against Muslim Chams. The clashes that followed for several weeks were the final breach between the two communities. During the subsequent reestablishment of Italian control and re-occupation of the area, a quasi-administrative network of Muslim Chams appeared. By the year 1943, they were then systematically employed by the German occupation forces which had taken over control after the Italian capitulation. This collaboration is part of the explanation for the Muslim Cham exodus which would occur in 1944-45.

At the end of World War II, Greek guerrilla forces took control of the area at a time when Muslim armed military forces had already been deprived of the support of the German army. When the Germans withdrew completely, guerrillas shot and killed not only the surrendering armed forces of Muslim Chams, but also women and children. Some Albanian sources suggest that the number is as high as 2,000. At the end of 1944, most of the Muslim Cham population had left the country, with only a few hundred staying behind.

Even if it could be assumed that the ethnic cleansing which occurred during that period was just a series of ad hoc, isolated incidents, the result was nevertheless later welcomed by the re-established Greek State after the liberation from Nazi occupation. In 1945 and 1946, the prosecution of more than 2,100 Chams, mainly males, followed. They were sentenced as war criminals and collaborators with the Occupation Forces in absentia. Their real estate assets were subjected to general confiscation. The confiscated properties came under ownership of the Greek State.

The atrocities which took place against the Muslim Cham population are not mentioned in any official documents and were absent from the public eye for many years. From the mid-1990s, with the emergence of the Cham issue in bilateral Greek-Albanian politics, more
publications came into view however, their common aim was to emphasise the alleged criminal behaviour of Muslim Chams and conceal the ethnic cleansing the Chams were subjected to.

Today, the Greek government considers the Cham question a non-issue, partly because the Greek part of Chameria is now inhabited mostly by Greeks. This is the result of the Greek State actively pursuing a strategy of reducing the numbers and rights of the Cham minority in order to stunt the development of a national Albanian minority in Chameria. The Greek States policy aimed at reducing the number of Cham people and their presence in registries, seizing their land and property, leading to a reduction in their total presence, their national affiliation and their entitlement to fair treatment.

CURRENT ISSUES

Restoration of citizenship
When the mass exodus of Muslim Chams from Greece began in 1944 (see historical background), and around 1,930 then lost their citizenship rights to Greece due to their perceived collaboration with Italian-German forces in WWII. This number grew as Greek special laws were put in place that rescinded the right to citizenship of the majority of Muslim Chams who had fled persecution in Greece. Only the population of Orthodox Chams who remained in Greece were able to retain Greek citizenship, but without any minority rights. Those evicted from Greece mainly fled to Albania where they lived as refugees until 1953, when the Albanian government granted them Albanian citizenship. Those Chams that found refuge in Turkey and the United States respectively obtained the Turkish and American citizenships.

The DFC aims at the restoration of Greek citizenship for those who have had it rescinded due to these special laws, allowing them to return to their ancestral homes.

Minority recognition and right to language
The Greek government does not consider the Chams living in Greece as a separate ethnic group and have assimilated the majority of Orthodox Chams into the mainstream Greek community. This has led to a destruction of culture, traditional way of life and most notably, language.

Like all other minority languages, Arvanitika, an Albanian language, has no legal status in Greece and is not taught at any level of the educational system. Furthermore, the use of Arvanitika has been strongly discouraged in schools and within institutions, such as the armed forces, and speakers are dissuaded through the use physical punishment or humiliation. This has led many Cham parents to discourage their children from learning their mother tongue so as to avoid similar discrimination and suffering.

These deterrents are a significant cause of declines in the use of Arvanitika, with urbanisation being another. Arvanitika has continued to survive, until recently, in many small homogeneous villages where most people use the language regularly. However, those who moved to the cities soon abandoned the use of the language as it was not spoken in the
city and its use is often perceived as a sign of backwardness. As a consequence, younger urban generations were cut off from the language as it was neither taught at school nor used regularly by family members at home.

Today, Arvanitika is threatened with extinction. The language is still used by some middle-aged and elderly people but continually less by the younger generations. The DFC seeks the recognition of the Chams’ minority status in Greece and with this, a legal recognition of the Arvanitika language.

**Right to land and property**

Access to land and property is an ongoing issue for the Cham people. Alienation of property began in the 1920s with the exchange of population between Turkey and Greece, where many Muslim Chams were transported to Turkey and lost their land. After World War II, Cham properties were nationalised by the Greek State. In 1953, a law adopted by the Greek parliament provided that rural immovable properties whose owners had left Greece without permission or passports were considered abandoned and therefore those Chams who had fled no longer had claim to their land.

This nationalisation of property and land has continued to be justified by the position of the Greek government, who state that the Muslim Chams who fled collaborated with the opposing Italian-German forces during World War II and thus are considered war criminals and punishable under Greek law. Therefore, the majority of Muslim Chams cannot return to Greece nor do they have a right to their land.

The Democratic Foundation of Chameria stresses the need for the Cham peoples’ right to land to be respected. Those who have seen their properties being taken away from them, since 1923, should also have the right to have this property restored to them.

**CULTURE**

Since the 1980’s, some efforts have been made to preserve the Arvanite culture. A congress was held in 1985, during which four cultural associations were created: the Arvanitikos Syndesmos Hellados (the Arvanite League of Greece), which has since 1983 been publishing the bimonthly; Besa; the Kentro Arvanitikou Politismou (Centre for Arvanite Culture); the Arvanitikos Sylogos Ano Liosion (Arvanite Association of Ano Liosia) and the Sylogos Arvaniton Corinthias (Association of Arvanites of Corinthia). A number of books on the Arvanite culture have also been published in order to educate and preserve the Cham culture and traditions.

**POLITICS**

The Cham issue was oppressed for many decades until in the early 1990’s several political organisations arose with the aim to bring it to the political agenda again in both Albania and Greece. In 1994, the Albanian government recognised the killing and expulsion of the Cham population from their ancestral lands in Chameria in World War II as a genocide and erected a monument in Konispol, southern Albania. Each year on the 27th of June, this crime against humanity is officially commemorated.
On 30 October 2016, a new political organisation was established to advocate for the rights of the Cham people and to provide them with representation. This organisation is called the Democratic Foundation of Chameria and is led by president Festim Lato.

In a subsequent event, on 9 September 2017, a cabinet was installed under his leadership and a constitution for Chameria was also presented and adopted. The organisation seeks to promote the Cham-issue by running multiple advocacy campaigns in Albania, Greece as well as in other European countries.