

FROM COW TO CUSTOMER: INFORMAL MARKETING OF MILK IN ALBANIA

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The so-called transition in Eastern Europe has been, and continues to be, a time of constant change. Researching East European societies and seeking to analyse the changes is like trying to photograph an object that will not stay still. Nowhere is this truer than in Albania. Even recording it is a challenge. This study is a modest piece of ethnography constructed from observations made over several years and systematically checked against one another. It has its origins in data collected in Southern Albania in 1997, when an armed rebellion made it too dangerous for me to go to villages to do fieldwork (see Nicholson, 1999a). Instead I talked to women, and a few men, who came into the town I was staying in, Gjirokastër, to sell their produce. In the course of further fieldwork in several villages in Southern Albania, I have expanded the data, added observations from other towns[1] and data on selling through intermediaries. For some months I participated in the milk trade as a customer.

The origins of the domestic milk trade

The fall of communism in Albania was accompanied by a spontaneous dismantling of the agricultural co-operatives (World Bank, 1992:60). In the chaos and violence, buildings, equipment and irrigation systems were destroyed, and output fell catastrophically (Pata & Osmani, 1994:95). Production also declined drastically on state farms, whose role had been to supply towns with fresh food (World Bank, 1992:3). Much of the processing infrastructure was rendered inoperable (Jaehne & Segré, 1994:98) and systems of collection and distribution collapsed (World Bank, 1992:82). Urban milk supplies ceased in 1992 (World Bank, 1995:17).

At the same time a series of measures transformed the structure of agricultural production, and with it the way produce was sold. The right to keep their own domestic animals, which had not been allowed after 1981, was restored to individual families in

1989, and was formally legalised early in 1990 (Wildermuth, 1995:319). Private markets were also permitted again after having been illegal. After 1991 the co-operatives, and in 1994 the state farms, were privatised, and the land was distributed to the families who had worked on them. It was transformed into private holdings of, on average, about one hectare (in three or four parcels), and each received a share of the livestock. Initially families sought to improve the quantity and quality of their own food. Supplies to towns had consistently been prioritised under the communist system, a cause of resentment, and there was further deterioration during the agricultural crisis of the 1980s (Wildermuth, 1991; Pata & Osmani, 1994:94-95; personal communications). However, the change to capitalism brought opportunities to buy goods previously not available, and hence a need for cash, so the newly privatised farmers were eager to sell their produce. Every agricultural family I am acquainted with sells something they have produced specifically for sale (not merely surplus), and some sell a great deal. Over time a whole series of small-scale trading operations has grown up (see Nicholson, 1999b), but many producers, especially near to towns, simply went out and sold their produce themselves, and this informal trade has continued[2].

The most important and comprehensive trade of this kind is the direct sale of milk to consumers. It is probably the biggest single marketing operation in the country (Nicholson, 2001, 2002). Small farm families were quick to appreciate that selling milk would provide a regular flow of income, and began to sell regularly to customers in town as soon as they had cows of their own. In response to the evident demand, many increased the number they kept, most having started with one, and thus production (c.f. Kodderitzsch, 1999:17). By 1995 the number of cows had doubled (Vinçani, 1997:106), and it has risen further since. The families in this study have between one and five cows each,

which they mostly keep in sheds they have built themselves in the yards of their homes or nearby[3]. It has been estimated that half the milk produced is consumed by the producers, and the rest is sold (UNDP, 1998:5). According to the Agricultural Census of 1998, rather more than half of the latter is sold directly to consumers (Instat, 2000:75). As most sheep's milk (not distinguished from cows' milk in the census) is sold for processing, or already processed, this means that a very large proportion of the cows' milk that enters sale is sold directly. About one in six of agricultural holdings with one or more cows, almost ten percent of all holdings (*ibid.*), sells milk directly to consumers[4]. As about half the population lives in villages, it follows that a large percentage of all households get an income from selling milk. There are some sales in villages between neighbours (to the few who prefer not to keep a cow), and to small businesses such as the restaurants that have sprung up along main roads, but by far the most are to customers in towns (Nicholson, 2002). Production for the urban market is concentrated in villages within 10 or 15 km of towns (many on former state farms that supplied towns under the old system). In some communes adjacent to towns, between 40 and 70 percent of producers market their own milk (calculated from Instat 2001a:181, 208, and Instat 2001b:186). Families have even moved to these areas from more remote villages, built houses and rented land, to participate in the milk trade.

How the milk trade is organized

A member of each producer's family travels into the town to sell milk early each morning, or, more usually, on alternate days, "*një ditë po, një ditë jo*" (literally, "one day yes, one day no"). They do not need to sell every day thanks to their acquisition, for the first time, of domestic refrigerators, which they use for storing milk. They leave home at 6 or 6.30am (having got up at 5am to milk) and return sometime between 10am and midday. In most towns more women sell than men. Caring for cows is usually a woman's task, though several members of a family may assist in harvesting fodder and grazing animals, and it is not unusual for a man to do the milking. However, the gender division of labour is pragmatic, and depends on available capacity in the household, the obligations and responsibilities of its various members, and the internal negotiation of allocation of tasks. A few men do not want their wives to sell, but agree because they need money, and men are more inclined to be shy about selling than women. However, some men deliver because

they do not have jobs, others because they have jobs in town, so they deliver the milk too to save travel costs and time, or the milk is sent with a child who goes to high school (*shkolla e mesme*). Thus different members of a household might deliver at different times.

Who delivers is also influenced by the mode of transport used to get to town. Most travel by bus or, more often, by *furgon*, a van with windows and seats in the back that carries about a dozen passengers. They run back and forth on prescribed routes when there are passengers, but several drivers operate a regular service from their village at a set time each morning, or on alternate days, to take milk sellers into town. A few also operate a return service at an agreed time. Otherwise, women take any *furgon* that is going, which might necessitate a wait till it fills, and may walk part or even all the way. *Rrugë* (literally, road, the fare) costs between 50 and 100 *lekë* [5] each way, depending on distance. Most drivers do not charge extra for milk (though they say they would for, say, a crate of tomatoes), but a few charge an extra fare. Some women use donkeys, where there is a short and direct route from their village over mountain paths. Still others have arrangements with people who drive to town in their own cars. Both men and women use these modes of transport, but men also use bicycles (and motor bikes, which have become more numerous), with a crate for the milk on the back, and perhaps cloth bags hanging from the handlebars. This is the dominant mode of transport in the plains. As a consequence, in Fier, which is low-lying and flat, 90 percent or more of those who sell milk are men. In Lushnjë, also on the plain, men are probably in a majority, and they make up a sizeable proportion in Tiranë and Shkodër. In mountainous areas, such as Gjirokastrë, Sarandë and Pogradec a majority of sellers are women.

Each woman (or man) organises her work independently. They may travel into town with a sister-in-law (who is probably also a neighbour), a friend, or a daughter-in-law. They do this for the company, which is valued (c.f. Svenningsen, 1997:179), but, though they might help one another out, for example, with empty bottles if one of them is short, and may even share a cowshed, they do not work together. With just one exception, co-operative forms of working are almost non-existent. The exception is where two people who were once members of the same nuclear family, a parent and grown-up child or adult siblings, divide the work in the village and the work in the town between them. This is, in

effect, a continuation of co-operation within the household.

As with much informal and apparently casual trading in Albania, the sale of milk is not casual (Nicholson, 2001). Most milk is delivered directly to customers who have a regular order, often the same ones over many years (Nicholson, 2002). The milk is sold in recycled 1½-liter cola bottles, *bidonë* (literally drum, or churn)[6]. A few producers also sell sheep's milk in spring when it is plentiful, as well as cows' milk. When informal sale of milk started, a few producers who had relatives in town sold to them and their neighbours. Likewise, people who had contacts in villages (such as the wife of a veterinarian who vaccinated cows) arranged to be supplied. This was as much a case of urban dwellers obtaining a basic food as of country dwellers seeking an income. Other producers sought customers by going round the houses shouting "*Hajde, qumësht*" ("Come here, milk"), or knocked on doors in apartment blocks. In the beginning people were rather cautious, they would ask if "anything" (water or preservatives) had been added to the milk. If the people who bought milk were satisfied with the quality, they continued to buy. Other potential customers sought out a man or woman who was selling in the street who looked decent and clean and bought off them.[7] If the milk was clean and fresh, and had not had water added, they would ask the vendor to deliver to them regularly. If they were not satisfied, they would buy off another person till they found someone whose milk they liked.

Each woman has between 10 and 20 customers. As well as private households, they sell to institutions, restaurants, bars, small ice cream factories and shops (for ice cream and to sell on), which saves time and effort. They are known as her "*zënë*", which means literally "occupied"; other women will not try to sell there. She might also say they are the people with whom she is "*e lidhure*", linked, with a connotation of being tied. A customer will say she has "a woman" (who delivers). The *zënë* rarely forms a coherent block, though a woman will try to find customers within quite a small area. In an apartment block where she has a customer she will often also sell to neighbours. If she has sufficient customers, she might stop selling to one who lives a long way from the rest of her *zënë*. Occasionally a customer will move away and be lost, but she will find another to replace her. Depending on how far she has to walk, it will take an hour or so for a woman who works quickly to deliver to her *zënë*. Each one sells

between 15 and 30 bottles, usually about 20. Customers buy between one and three each. Most pay on receipt, but some pay at specified intervals. No extra charge is made for the bottles, but customers are asked to return them.

The milk is delivered to a customer's door. In old towns built on mountainsides, such as Gjirokastër or Berat, the producers have to trudge up steep hills, and everywhere they have to climb up three or four floors in apartment blocks with no lifts. In Fier some of the men who sell call to their customers on upper floors, who then fetch the milk or haul it up with a rope, but most deliver to the door. The producers park their milk on a step or in a corner and deliver to one or two houses at a time. Some have built up relations of trust with shopkeepers, who keep it while they deliver. Where several people sell from a particular street corner, as in Fier and Lushnjë, they keep an eye on one another's milk. In Gjirokastër there is just one focal point for the milk trade, at a narrow corner where two streets fork, known as *farmacia* (the pharmacy; there are, in fact two pharmacies there, and until recently there were three). Women organize their deliveries there, and leave some milk behind while they deliver smaller amounts, then come back to leave the empty bottles and deliver the next lot of milk. Though bottles of milk are not left unattended for long, there appears to be an unwritten rule that no one touches them. Empty bottles, always in demand, are more carefully guarded. Some sellers have arrangements with shopkeepers or market traders to look after their bulky bags of empty bottles while they do errands before they return home.

Some women have been selling milk since 1991, and many of the rest have sold for a long time. They and their customers will tell with satisfaction how many years (as many as ten) some of these arrangements have lasted. Customers take care to maintain a good relationship by remaining loyal because they like to have a reliable supply of good quality milk from a source they know. If a woman whose milk is good stops selling, her customers might accept her recommendation of another woman to buy from. Producers and their customers are on first name terms, and they get to know one another quite well. A customer might order additional items, such as eggs, and might even buy a producer's calf (for slaughter), so they both get a better bargain than if it is sold to a butcher. Some do small good turns for one another, such as the customer who allowed a woman whose children were in Greece to receive calls from them on her phone. When someone in a

customer's family dies, the milk seller makes a formal visit to give condolences.

The agreement with customers is just a verbal understanding, but though seller and buyer may be on good terms, it is asymmetrical. A customer can change to another producer if she is not satisfied, or she may not buy what has been ordered if she is short of money or wants to buy something else. Sometimes a bar or cafe will close for a day without warning (e.g. due to a family bereavement), and if the weather is cold shops do not buy what they have ordered to make ice cream. The women are left with unsold milk, but, reluctantly, they accept it as a risk they have to take. They are usually careful not to lose customers. There are always a few women who do not have customers, or who would like to have more, and some who have previously not sold, because they have moved into the district, or they belong to a new generation of married women. So those who have a *zënë* can be relied upon to deliver regularly and punctually in all weathers. [8] Only a woman who is very confident of the reputation of her milk and sure of the loyalty of her customers will risk being late occasionally (and then she will explain why). If a family crisis intervenes or they are unwell, they will arrange for someone else to deliver on their behalf. They maintain contacts with customers who temporarily stop buying. If they have insufficient milk to keep their *zënë* supplied they get extra from a close friend whose milk they know is of good quality. They may even, though rarely, buy extra bottles from someone they do not know well, though they check it for freshness first (Nicholson, 2001), but this is new. A potentially critical time is when cows calve. Some women with more than one cow maintain supplies by having them calve at different times. Those who give up delivering tell their customers in advance. They explain that if their milk is of good quality, it does not cause problems (customers concur). The customers find a temporary alternative and resume buying when the producer has milk again.

A producer may give up selling, perhaps because she finds other work, or her family moves to Greece or Italy to work. For others, delivering milk eventually becomes too much. It is heavy work. Most of the women who sell are in their thirties or forties. Men tend to be slightly older on average [9]. Even for this age group, carrying large quantities of milk uphill in all weathers, or up many flights of stairs, is wearing. They return home tired, their arms, shoulders, and heads aching, and they still have work to do. As they get older it

becomes more difficult. They get breathless climbing all the stairs. One described how she carried the milk up a steep hill on her shoulder. She would walk a bit, then put it down, walk a bit, then put it down, and so on, till she got to the top. So eventually she gave up selling.

Selling in the street

A certain amount of milk is sold in the street and odd bottles are sold in some markets, but while this is the most visible part of the milk trade, it is only a very small part of it [10] and has declined over time. It has evolved through custom and practice, and unlike market traders and other street sellers, those who sell milk in the street do not pay a charge (usually about 30 *lekë*), they are said to be just waiting [11]. The delivery of milk is so efficiently organised that there is limited demand for casual sales. Those producers who only sell in the street, who for any reason do not have a *zënë*, are very few indeed. A few more sell bottles they have left over after they have delivered to their regular customers, but most only deliver what is ordered (*porosi*) and take unsold milk home and make cheese with it. These include several women who in the past sold their surplus in the street, but no longer consider it worthwhile. They prefer to make more productive use of their time. A number regularly sell herbs and vegetables in the market after they have delivered their milk.

When this research started, on any day up to a dozen women, and perhaps one or two men, might be selling at *farmacia* at any one time between early morning and about midday (Nicholson, 1999b). When milk was plentiful (the early research was done in May and June) some would stay there for several hours. In winter, and in mid-summer when they came early to avoid the heat, there would be fewer. Most would stand in a row extending for about 15 meters from a raised triangular platform at the intersection along the north-facing side of some shops. The shop building has a narrow shelf at arm height, just wide enough for a row of bottles. Milk is also displayed on the raised platform (in other towns bottles of milk are set out along a curb). Those who sold regularly often stood in the same places. More people would be on the raised platform, or at the far corner of it. Another small group who came regularly sold across the street opposite the south side of the intersection. One man said, with a grin, he sold there because it was near a small bar, an explanation borne out by observations of his activity.

On a good day all the milk would be

sold by 10:30 am, perhaps even sooner. On a bad day it took a couple of hours longer. When there was not much milk and trade was brisk, the atmosphere was cheerful. When there was a lot of milk and few people were buying, the women were subdued, knowing they would have to stand for a long time and might not sell all their milk. On any day, until the last bottle was sold, there was an underlying anxiety. Even so, most stayed until they had sold out. Only rarely did they leave sooner if by midday there seemed no chance of selling more. Then they would take the remaining milk home, or get a shop or market trader to sell it.

Some women sell with a companion, especially if they feel shy about selling at first. Women, and to some extent men, keep one another company. Informal, but transient, alliances develop. They use pre-existing relationships and form new ones, though the latter do not extend beyond their immediate purpose (c.f. du Boulay, 1974:213). A woman in Gjirokastër referred to the woman who kept her company as a “*shoqe në farmacia*”, a farmacia friend, no more. Between the women there are small acts of co-operation, such as helping one another with change, keeping money or watching milk for a woman who had an errand elsewhere, but they do not work together (c.f. Horn, 1994:94). The people who sell at *farmacia* are not a “fixed group” (Engelberg, Amin & Boening, 1995:130). There is a steady turnover, some coming, some leaving, and different people selling on different days. Women (though not men) gravitate to *farmacia* when they finish delivering to customers, though some only stop by to collect their empty bottles, exchange a few words, or to wait for a friend to finish. Each person sells for herself, and they eagerly try to persuade anyone who passes to buy from them (men hold back more). They will only sell another woman’s milk if she is not there, and someone they know to be a regular customer approaches them, but even then they try to persuade the customer to buy some off them too.

The number of people who sell at *farmacia* and the length of time they sell have both declined, as has the amount of milk bought. Now there are rarely more than 10 there at any one time, often there are fewer, and then only before about 9am, and they might not all be selling. Sellers have grown more shrewd, they keep all but a few bottles concealed in bags so potential customers will think they have almost sold out (and so hurry to buy). Very few still stay till midday, but rather they give up and go home. On some

days there are none left by mid-morning.

Prices

The prices charged to domestic customers are set by the producers, and vary from town to town. In towns adjacent to the Myzeqe plain, where supplies are plentiful, it is 60 *lekë* for a 1 ½-liter bottle, in Tiranë 80 *lekë* and in Gjirokastër and elsewhere in the southwest, 100 *lekë*. [12] Businesses that buy larger quantities negotiate a slightly lower price. These prices have been constant since 2000, in some cases longer. Within each town producers operate an informal cartel; they do not compete against one another by lowering prices (c.f. Engelberg, Amin & Boening, 1995:130). When the price is raised, they agree beforehand through a bush telegraph that invariably operates, and they all do it on the same day. At times the street price may differ from the price for milk that is delivered, but rarely for long. Prices in one town have little influence on those in another, though producers are quite well informed about them, as they are due to local conditions. In Gjirokastër during the 1997 rebellion, when money was scarce, [13] cows’ milk sold for 50 or 60 *lekë*. In 1998 a 1½-liter bottle cost 80 *lekë* in the street and 100 *lekë* when delivered or bought from a shop (personal communications). The perception of the producers was that other prices had risen more than milk, which was probably accurate. [14] In 1998 the street price rose to 100 *lekë* in high summer, but by summer 1999 had reverted to its former level, only to rise again, and to stay at that high level. Other prices also tend to be high in the southwest, which is attributed by some to the effect of emigrants’ remittances.

What next?

The men and women who engage in the informal milk trade demonstrate considerable practical ability and managerial skill. It is a major achievement that, by their own initiative, they have ensured that urban dwellers have been supplied with an important basic food (Nicholson, 2001). The marketing structure they have built up has also been an important factor in enabling the growth in agricultural output. Milk production is now the dominant enterprise in Albanian agriculture, and accounts for half the total agricultural output (Kodderitzsch, 1999:4, 17). The income from selling milk is an important component of the budget of many rural families. Where prices are highest, families that engage milk production, if they have a further source of income, are reasonably well off [15]. Some

individuals have even used selling milk as a means to raise small amounts of capital to finance another enterprise. The milk sellers also contribute to the livelihoods of others in the countryside by paying for transport as well as by their personal consumption.

However, the various authorities and international organizations show disapproval of the milk trade, avoid recognizing its achievements and show little awareness of its true significance (See World Bank, 1992:3, 61). They refer wistfully to the “regular supply” and “standard quality” under the communist system (World Bank 1995:18), though the “standard quality” was poor, because there was widespread theft of milk, so it was diluted with water, and the “regular supply” was insufficient. There are also complaints that the women who sell in Tirana are “unfair competition” for the processing plants (Albanian Daily News 9 February 2000; Molldrem, unpublished: 7; c.f. Furre, 1971:45, 69) [16].

Producers too are aware that they produce under less than ideal conditions, though most do their best to ensure that both milk and bottles are clean. They would tell me how they used to buy their milk from the shop, and they regard their present arrangements outdated. For them selling milk is a necessary expedient, which they do *faute de mieux*. Given a choice, they would prefer work that was clean, and for them transporting and selling milk is an onerous chore that takes up time and energy. They do not contemplate transforming their micro-activity into a more formalized way of selling milk. Nor does the prospect of some form of producers’ association, the current universal solution of the development establishment, elicit an interested response. There are also sound economic reasons for each household, and hence each producer, to maintain their autonomy. Though they are serious about selling in an efficient and business-like way, it is a job, one they would gladly exchange for another. What they claim they would like to happen would be for a “big investor” (c.f. Engelberg, Amin & Boening, 1995:133) to set up a dairy and collect their milk from a nearby corner, even though they would get a lower price. In practice, it might not be so simple. They may give up selling milk altogether if they have another source of income. For example a family that also kept sheep replaced their income from milk by selling more sheep’s milk, which fetches a higher price and does not have to be transported so far, to a small dairy. On the other hand, women from one village who sell in Gjirokastër continued

to sell in the town after a dairy opened nearby because it paid so much less than consumers, only 25 *lekë* a liter. [17] One producer complained it was less than the price of a bottle of water, implying that she thought milk was worth more.

When the informal milk trade started, many people, producers and consumers alike, regarded it as a stopgap, and continued to do so for a considerable time. Now it has evolved into the way they are accustomed to doing things. It is assumed it will continue into the foreseeable future, but no one knows for how long. Neither do they seem to have plans for what they will do. In recent years manufactured yogurt (of poor quality compared with homemade yogurt) has begun to be on sale in several towns, which might presage further change, but it is happening slowly. Women who sell milk express confidence that their customers will remain loyal because they prefer a good quality product. Most likely, as has happened elsewhere, the informal trade will eventually be supplanted by dairies (c.f. Halpern, 1968:305). What cannot be foreseen is when, or how, this will happen. It will probably take us all by surprise.

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1. Information was obtained in Ballsh, Lushnjë, Fier, Vlorë, Kavajë, Memeliaj, Kelcyrë, Pogradec, Berat, Shkodër and Tiranë. In spite of early assertions that informal sales had ceased in the last named (Lerin, 1997:9), a large proportion of the city's milk supply was still sold informally in 2002, even though it is one of the few places with functioning milk processing plants.
 2. By "informal" I mean trade that is carried on without an organized structure.
 3. Building skills are widespread in Albania; many people build their own houses. A claim that people had no housing for animals (World Bank, 1992:61) was not true in the areas covered by this study. The international literature has consistently underestimated the capabilities of private farmers in Albania (e.g. FAO, 1994:8; Jaehne & Segré, 1994:25, 32, 98; Engelberg, Amin & Boening 1995:143). As elsewhere in Eastern Europe (c.f. Streith, 1997:191), they had much relevant experience.
 4. The true proportion might be even higher. I know of three or four families who were selling in 1998, but were not recorded in the census.
 5. In 1998 there were about 150 *lekë* (singular *lek*) to the dollar. By mid-2002 it bought only 135 *lekë*.
 6. One source claimed that women scavenged rubbish tips for bottles (Post, 1998:16). I have never known this happen. Nor are this author's other comments about milk production consistent with my observations. The use of recycled (if hardly suitable) containers reduces pressure on the inadequate rubbish disposal system. By contrast non-returnable beer bottles used by multi-national breweries caused a litter problem for several years. Albanian breweries use returnable bottles.
 7. To test for freshness women sometimes gently squeeze the bottles before buying. If milk from the previous day is put in a refrigerator overnight the cream separates from the water. The test is supposed to find out if this has been disguised by shaking the bottles.
 8. During the 1997 rebellion in south Albania, women still came to town to sell milk each day, except when the shooting was at its height, though it was dangerous to travel and there were occasional outbursts of shooting in the street while they were selling (Nicholson, 1999b:548).
 9. Data from informal interviews of 28 people selling milk in Gjirokastër on two days of fieldwork in 1997, supplemented by observations over the whole fieldwork period.
 10. Reports, such as that by Deslondes & Sivignon (1995:150), of villagers who supposedly, sold in the market in Fier, are based on a misunderstanding. As elsewhere, most of the milk sold in Fier is ordered. That left over is sold at certain street corners, not in the market. In some other towns, notably Tiranë, milk is sold in markets, but it too is just the surplus. The World Bank appears to be under the same misconception about the milk trade in general (World Bank, 1995:18; c.f. World Bank 2002:17).
 11. This may be related to the fact that it is actually illegal to sell untreated milk, though the law is impossible to enforce. Early in 2001 the police cleared the milk sellers from *farmacia* a few times, but this appears only to have been a token gesture, and, so far, has not had a permanent effect. Prices in 2000-2002 were: in Lushnjë, Berat, Fier and Patos 60 *lekë*, in Ballsh, Vlorë and Shkodër 70 *lekë*, in Pogradec, in 1999, 70 *lekë*, (100 *lekë* with no water in it), in Tiranë and Durrës 80 *lekë*, in Gjirokastër, Tepelenë,

Sarandë and Memeliaj 100 *lekë*. In villages close to these towns prices are similar or slightly lower. In those further away, fresh milk fetches only 25 or 30 *lekë* a liter, 40 or 50 *lekë* if bought by traders to sell in a town.

In South Albania banks did not function and state employees and pensioners were not paid for several months (Nicholson, 1999a:546).

14. According to Albanian television, inflation in the year to mid-1998 was 47 percent (tvsh 27 June 1998). A survey by European Union monitors of prices of food and everyday items in Gjirokastër suggested an increase of 40 percent in the first half of 1998 (Personal communication).

The highest retail price, 100 *lekë*, is about the same as the author pays in a British supermarket (but Albanian milk tastes better).

16. The retail price for packaged pasteurised milk in Tiranë is 60 *lekë* a liter, equivalent to 90 *lekë* for a 1 ½ liter bottle, 10 *lekë* more than producers charge. Shops also sell imported UHT milk for between 130 and 150 *lekë* a liter, so the competition thesis is a red herring.

17. This is not far short of EU price levels. In October 2000 the price to farmers in the UK was 16p (33 *lekë*) a liter. Some dairies pay as little as 18 *lekë*.

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Photos



Photo 1: Woman delivering milk in Gjirokastër.



Photo 2. Selling milk at *farmacia*, Gjirokastrë.



Photo 3. Producers who have delivered to customers selling milk in Fier.