



a.i.e.s.e.e.

11th INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
OF SOUTH EAST EUROPEAN STUDIES
SOFIA, 31 AUGUST – 4 SEPTEMBER 2015



THE POSITION OF ALBANIANS AND ALBANIAN IN THE PRESHEVA VALLEY – A LINGUISTIC AND GEO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE REGION

Lindita Sejdiu - Rugova & Arsim Ejupi

(University of Prishtina)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to bring up the status and the position of the Albanians and Albanian language from the perspective of linguistic, cultural, social and geo-political studies. The whole analysis will be focused on three main pillars: the geo-spatial background of the region, the current linguistic status of Albanian and the geo-political context of Presheva Valley as a region within the administrative borders of Serbia. In order to reflect the status of Albanian in this region more precisely, linguistic research has been conducted in two municipalities of the southwestern part of Serbia – Preshevo and Bujanovac, where the majority of population is Albanian. In these municipalities, Albanian and Serbian are both official languages.

Key words: *Presheva Valley, Albanian, Serbian, geo-political, linguistic factors*

GEOSPATIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PRESHEVA VALLEY

Presheva Valley is located in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula, more precisely in the contact area between Morava Valley in the north and Vardar Valley in the south. These two valleys form the most important natural corridor which connects Europe with South East Europe, Middle East and North Africa. The most important part of Presheva Valley is the watershed that divides the catchment area of the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea. However, the small altitude of

this watershed (460m) " unites " more than it " divides ", so as a result it represents an important natural corridor which is known as the “Primary meridional axis of Balkans”. The geopolitical position of Presheva Valley is very complex and sensitive as a result of the communicative and strategic importance of this territory. Corridor X is one of the most important transport corridors in Southeastern Europe and the shortest route to the Aegean Sea . Therefore, Serbia's efforts to maintain a privileged position in the Balkan geopolitical framework were directed towards the advantages offered by the central position of Presheva in the Balkan Peninsula and Corridor X, which passes through its territory. The idea for the construction of the Danube-Morava-Vardar channel confirms the geostrategic importance of Presheva Valley.

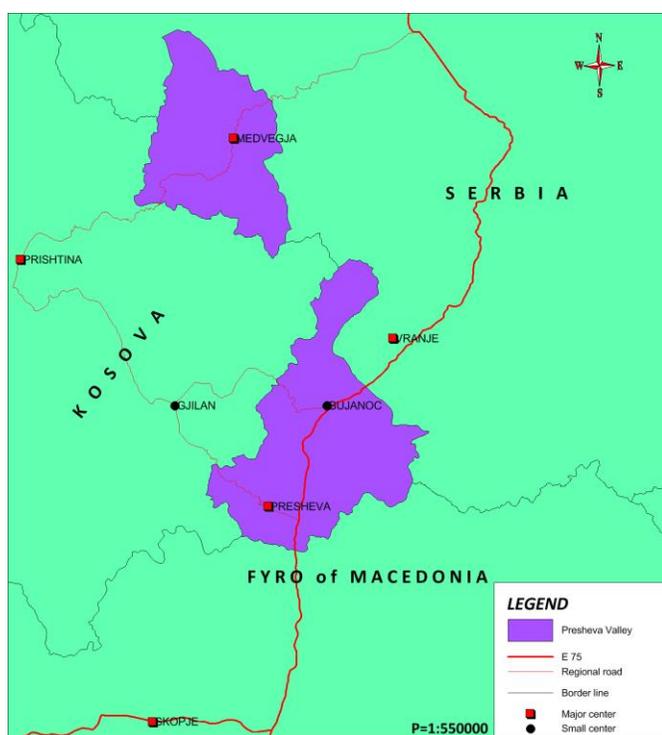


Figure 1. *Geographical position of Presheva Valley*

The Territory of Presheva Valley is approximately 1,250 km². It is inhabited by around 100,000 Albanians, who currently make up about 80% of the region’s total population. Out of 136 settlements in this territory, 67 are populated by Albanians. 64 of the settlements are rural whereas 3 are urban (the municipalities of Presheva, Bujanovac, and Medvegja). Albanians make an absolute majority in 41 settlements. However, the population in the three municipal centres as well as in some rural

settlements is ethnically mixed, with Albanians outnumbering other communities. The rest of the settlements in the territory of Presheva valley are populated by Serbs.. The Valley was and remains the most underdeveloped region in Serbia and in the Balkans. Areas inhabited by Albanians are more than 7 times less developed than the average scale of economic development in Serbia. Until recently, revenues of the Albanian population derived exclusively from extensive and natural agriculture, namely tobacco cultivation. Nowadays, the income derives from remittances sent by migrants who live and work in Western European countries and overseas.

It is obvious that the number of Albanians there is dramatically being reduced, especially in the municipality of Medvegja, where the Albanian population, once formed one third of the total population. At present that number may only be symbolic, since all surveys show that there are no more than a few hundred Albanians living in Medvegja¹.

On the other hand, in recent years, due to the deliberate economic underdevelopment by the Serbian government, the Valley is intensively being emptied of Albanians. Many villages have no inhabitants. As a result of the intensive emigration process and overall demographic regression, the number of students in primary schools is decreasing drastically. In many areas of the Valley in the last two decades, emigration has swallowed up the demographic rate once present, which is the least favorable phenomenon in the populous development of an ethnic territory or community.

Consequently, such an underdevelopment affects other ethnic groups living in Presheva Valley too.

The Albanians of the Valley have remained without substantial and concrete support from Albania and Kosova. Even international mechanisms engaged on the issue of the Valley do not provide effective signs of interest, except when they have to repatriate groups of immigrants from Europe. Albanian population cannot solve even the basic life problems because, inter alia, borders have become barriers: they are seriously hindering economic development, isolating this community into a special “island” of its kind. After the armed conflict in 2000, a large number of Albanians did not return to their homes. Settlements in the municipality of Medvegja, the Karadag part of Presheva, and Bujanovac Highland have been almost completely abandoned by Albanians.

¹ H.Islami, A.Ejupi, *Popullsia dhe vendbanimet shqiptare në Luginën e Preshevës*, ASHAK, Prishtinë, 2015, p.14.

About the name “Presheva Valley”

The name *Presheva Valley* is relatively new, introduced only in recent years. Presheva Valley is nowhere to be found as a name in the limited scientific contributions about this region done mainly by Serbian authors. M. Kostić mentions names like Moravica Valley and Bujanoc Field². He used the name Moravica Valley to refer to the area from the lower watershed of Presheva to Levosova locality. According to this author, Moravica Valley presents a special entity, and Bujanoc Field is a part of Vranje and Bujanoc Valleys. J. Trifunoski states that areas along the upper flow of the river of Tabanoc and Moravica in Presheva are part of the so-called Kumanova and Presheva Valley, as well as the lower watershed between Morava and Vardar rivers.

The name "Valley" in geo-morphological terms is contested because areas around Presheva are created by geotectonic processes, since there is no major water leak which would have created a valley as a special morphotectonic unit. However, ethno-demographic features, which are expressed with the presence of the Albanian population as a majority, the stagnation in economic development, the historic past, as well as the perception on the same regional affiliation, are some of the dominant elements that give this area the attributes of a geographic entity or region, embraced in the scientific literature and public life as the *Presheva Valley*.

Following circumstances created in Kosova and the region, as well as the outbreak of the armed conflict which aimed at raising greater political, diplomatic, and media awareness about the position of Albanians in these areas, a necessity for a unique name for this region emerged. The name was intended to primarily express the close cohesion of the historic, political, social and demographic region and then to enable the identification of people and territory.

The name Presheva Valley started to be used more intensively during the outbreak of the armed conflict in Kosova, primarily by American and European political, diplomatic, and media circles and later by the Albanian ones as well. Presheva Valley today is generally embraced as a name by Albanians and foreigners in terms of a separate ethnic and territorial-political entity.

THE LINGUISTIC CONTEXT

² M. Kostić, *Preševska Kotlina – društveno-geografska studija*, Vranjski Glasnik, 1969, nr. 5, Vranje, p. 93.

In order to reflect the status of Albanian in this region more precisely, a linguistic research was conducted in two municipalities of the southwestern part of Serbia – Preshevo and Bujanovac, where the majority of population is Albanian, and where Albanian language, together with the Serbian is the official language on the territory of these two municipalities³.

Other data, mainly deriving from a conducted survey with Albanian citizens from the two municipalities as well as from anonymous questionnaires with the high (secondary) school students from these two municipalities (random questionnaires) were used, too. Consequently, two different linguistic processes are going on with the Albanian of this region: the standard Albanian is becoming more or less more influential language on administrative and institutional level, especially with the respondents' aged from 20-30, whereas spoken Albanian population is still bilingual in regards to their age: 40 and above. It is interesting to emphasise a fact that the results of the survey differ between two municipalities, too: Bujanovac being more bilingual than Preshevo.

The questionnaires were conducted in the secondary schools in Bujanovac and Preshevo, and mainly tested and proved our hypothesis that Serbian is not taught and learned at school at the level it used to be taught and learned in the former YU federation (20 years ago): Albanian students hesitate speaking in Serbian eventhough they understand most of it, their written and oral mistakes are evident, whereas the random questionnaire conducted with the Albanian citizens in the two municipalities of this region shows that spoken Albanian has been largely influenced by Serbian in all linguistic levels.

So, the status of Albanian was treated by giving evidence of legal sanctions and describing the practical situation, based on application of the laws in force. Therefore, the research is based on the data extracted from the official documents of the Republic of Serbia⁴, then on the official records of the census taken from the Republic Statistics Office from the year 2002 and related to the national and ethnic affiliation of the population of these two municipalities, as well as on other documents at municipal level, such as: *The Official Gazette of Pčinje District*, numerous municipal brochures that are compiled and funded by the Local

³ *Službeni Glasnik Pčinjskog Okruga*, , nr. 24, October, 7th 2008 (official printed document)

⁴ *The Law on National Councils and National Minorities, The law on national minority rights and freedom protection*, 2012 and *The Law on the official usage of languages at the republic level*, 2005; retrieved at [<http://www.seio.gov.rs>];

Economic Development Office for Bujanovac and Preshevo⁵, and it is also based on other official brochures that aim to attract economic investments in this region.

The questionnaire did not include the Municipality of Medvedja because of the lack of facilities to visit mountainous Albanian-populated villages, and because of the generally small number of the population, as a result of their temporary displacement in the Republic of Kosovo.

The official usage of the Albanian language is mainly related to locality (residence) names, geographical names, names of streets and squares, institutional, company or official inscriptions and signs, as well as the announcement of official publications.

According to *the Law on the protection of minority right*⁶, the language of the minorities that traditionally live in local government units or in a particular region can be used equally with the official language of the State. Under this law, Albanians are allowed to get educated in their mother tongue at the primary and secondary school, because over 15% of the territory is inhabited by this ethnic minority, while article 14 of the same Law allows the preparation and qualification of teachers of Albanian as educators, classroom teachers and teachers of a minority language, thus the Albanian language. The use of national symbols is also allowed, but they should not be identical with those of neighbouring countries⁷.

The minorities have the right to be informed in their own language, to establish media in their language, the *Official Gazette* of Pčinje District (2008) supports the use of Albanian as a second language, alongside with Serbian, in the inscriptions and public information. The Serbian / Albanian version of the Municipality Statute can be found as one document⁸, in concord with the Law that allows both languages to be used equally⁹ (Article 2). The municipal stamp must be in two languages and in two scripts, in Serbian Cyrillic and in the Albanian language.

The answers relating to the official recognition of Albanian and the acquisition of standard Albanian in the Preševa Valley have been extracted from a broader survey, conducted for the needs of a more comprehensive study on Albanian standard language reception in this region.¹⁰

⁵ Municipality of Bujanovac, Local Economic Development Office 2010, Community Profile and UNDP, USAID, EA, Administrata komunale e Bujanocit, 2005, Udhëzues për komunën e Bujanocit, Bujanoc

⁶ *The Law on national minority rights and freedom protection*, 2012, Article 11, paragraph 1

⁷ *Ibid.*, article 16, paragraph 1 and 2;

⁸ Retrieved at: <http://www.pravamanjina.rs/attachments/Statut%20opstine%20Bujanovac.pdf>

⁹ *The Law on national minority rights and freedom protection*, 2012, article 2;

¹⁰ The results obtained in 2015 are part of a broader on-site survey which started in 2012, supported mainly by the

The present extracted survey included 100 Albanian respondents from the Preshevo Valley, of which 50 were from Preševo and its suburbs and 50 from Bujanovac and its suburbs. The survey was conducted by the co-authors, from May 1st to June 30th, 2015 with the help of two former students of the English Language at the Faculty of Philology in Prishtina. The research was designed on the basis of random sampling selection in multi-stages. Sampling included 100 respondents, 70% from urban areas versus 30% from rural ones. The survey included only respondents who declared the Albanian language to be their mother tongue.

In the survey conducted in Preševo and Bujanovac, the respondents were 16 to 55 years old, and the average age of respondents was 28. With respect to other languages than Albanian, 35% of the respondents said that they do not speak any foreign language, 25% of the respondents claimed they speak poor Serbian and 15% of them said they do not speak Serbian at all!

Regarding the Albanian speakers' attitude towards Serbian as a co-language of their municipality, 85% of the respondents in Preshevo and 90 % of the respondents in Bujanovac replied that they are neutral to this issue, they have no attitude towards it, whereas most of the respondents in both municipalities prefer speaking in Serbian to a Serbian citizen (75%), and only few of the respondents preferred Albanian instead, whereas 5% expressed their wish not to speak Serbian at all.

In general, the research results indicate a high degree of bilingualism, especially in the municipality of Bujanovac, where the Albanian population is smaller in number than in Preševo, with one specific exception: the decrease of bilingualism among young people aged under 21 and with a poor command of Serbian. The population under 21 of Presheva Valley faces problems in having a good command of spoken and written Serbian.

The results show a low mastery of standard Albanian, too, but also a high degree of usage of administrative discourse Serbian words, and a low degree of language identification of ordinary discourse words.

In a paragraph translation test, from Albanian into Serbian, out of 50 high school students' translations, 40% were very poorly translated (with basic grammar and vocabulary mistakes such as: subject-verb disagreement, wrong lexis, poor vocabulary), 35% were not translated completely, only half of the text, 10% of the respondents translated properly into Serbian whereas 15% of the paragraphs were not translated at all. "I can't translate it!"-was

written in one of the tests and *‘‘Ja znam srpski malo ali šta piše ovde ne razumem hič!’’ in the other one, or *‘‘ Ja ne znam srpski dobro ali hočem da učiim.’’.

Munishi¹¹ claims that the influence of EU standards and EU ideology on language policy has been reflected positively in the Albanian speaking territories Balkanwide – Albanians have a positive attitude towards the official usage of minorities’ languages.

Regardless the fact that Albanian language in Preshevo Valley is sanctioned as an official language at the local level, with equal use, especially in the formal domains of life, the practical need for using Serbian as a first language is obvious and becomes discriminatory in relation to Albanian. Other communities are not encouraged to learn Albanian at all. Consequently, such a legal structure creates the necessity for bilingualism in social life and therefore makes the status of Albanian the second one in a region where the majority of population have declared themselves to be Albanians.

GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE TERRITORY

Similar to the current linguistic and cultural disintegration of Albanians in Presheva Valley, the geopolitical position of the region in the context of the current political-geographic flow is very sensitive and complex, too. The situation as such has prevailed especially after the 90s, when wars and the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia turned Serbia into a continental country, without direct access to the sea. However, Serbia maintained its preferential position in the geopolitical scene of the Balkan Peninsula due to its central position in the peninsula and the passage of Corridor X through its territory. Roads and railways of international importance, part of *Corridor X*, within the Pan-European Transport Corridors System – (PE Tr C) pass through this important natural corridor. Many efficient connections in terms of time and distance have been made possible through this natural corridor. Connections have occurred between European regions and the Mediterranean spaces of Asia, Africa and worldwide¹².

Apart from physical-geographic elements, the demographic factor of Presheva Valley represents an important determinant of geopolitical context. Number, density and population structures, religious and ethnopsychic features represent an entity of quantitative and qualitative characteristics that influence both the geographic and political processes, as well as the state’s

¹¹ Sh. Munishi, 2015, *Shqipja në epokën e globalizmit*, Zeroprint, Prishtinë, p.126

¹² H. Islami A. Ejupi, *Popullsia dhe vendbanimet shqiptare të Luginës së Preshevës*, ASHAK, 2015, Prishtinë, p. 29.

geographic position¹³.

Out of the above-mentioned characteristics the following have to be pointed out: the factor of the population, not as a number, but as an ethnic structure with a high degree of homogeneity, with the predominance of the ethnic Albanian element, territorial continuity with other Albanian ethnic lands, the same religious and linguistic features, pan-Albanian integration processes in various fields, such as culture, education, science, health (which have started to intensify in recent years and decades) ¹⁴.

The geopolitical position of Presheva Valley in the present geopolitical circumstances within the ethnic Albanian territories is somewhat handicapped because of the peripheral position in relation to the geographic core of the Albanian geoethnic trunk. However, Corridor X passage, transverse communicative routes, the high homogeneity of the ethnic structure of population, uninterrupted natural continuity with other Albanian ethnic territories with Kosova in the west and Western Macedonia in the south may significantly improve its geopolitical position within the Albanian territories in the region.

Nevertheless, the political clash of different party interests in this region (being in the triangle between Kosova, Macedonia and other parts of Serbia mainly populated by the Serbian ethnic group) could result in a difficult political situation which could make the local population migrate and disperse. Such a geopolitical position creates the possibility for further integration of Albanians into other territories where Albanian population is dominant. This geopolitical position also closes its doors to the further integration of this region within the Republic of Serbia. Migration towards neighbouring Albanian territories for better inclusion and integration are evident among Albanians of Presheva Valley, especially for the purpose of education and better job opportunities.

Knowing the vital importance that infrastructural connections with other Albanian inhabited territories have in keeping alive the spirit of Albanian population of Presheva Valley, a stronger connection with Kosova and Albania, mainly through Konçul Gorge, must be intensified. This way, Kosova and other Albanian territories will gain direct access to Corridor X once these infrastructural connections are made. This will further increase the attractiveness of the geopolitical position of the Albanian territories in general and Kosovo in particular. The

¹³ D. Sekulović, L. Gigović, *Činioci geopolitičkog položaja Srbije*, Globus, 2009, Vol. 40, nr. 34, Beograd, p. 53.

¹⁴ A. Ejupi, *Dimensioni gjeopolitik i çështjes së Luginës së Preshevës dhe ideja për shkëmbimin e territoreve*, Studime, 2011, nr. 18, ASHAK, Prishtinë, p.88.

contact with Albanian lands in the Adriatic and Ionian Sea, , Corridor VIII, as well as direct access to Corridor X, through Presheva Valley, could result in stronger geopolitical and geostrategic positions of Albanian territories, transforming them into a very important factor in the geopolitical scene of the Balkan Peninsula.

However, such a favourable geopolitical position will go in favour of Serbia, too. Having in mind the Serbian population living in Kosovo, distributed in many enclaves and municipalities, it could become a linking bridge for future cultural and institutional integration of both minorities in respective countries within the umbrella of South-Eastern Europe.