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THE ALBANIAN FACTOR IN THE SERBIAN /YUGOSLAV/-ALBANIAN RELATIONS (XIX-XX CENTURY)

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Abstract:

The formation of Albanian identity and the development of an independent Albania in 1912 onwards was preceded by the Albanian national movement from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. It was at this time that the maximum program of the Albanian National Revival was born, which from the 1870s propagandized the unification of all Albanians in one state. This status quo of the Balkans, reached by the Versailles peace system, was destroyed in the course of the Second World War, when created “Greater Albania” was a wartime creature. After the end of the Paris peace conference and the establishment of the new post-war order in Europe and the Balkans, the Albanian issue in Yugoslavia and the albanian factor in the Yugoslav-albanian relations had a difficult development.

Keywords: Albania, Serbia, Yugoslavia, unitarism, irredentism, separatism, Prizren League, Pec League, Yugoslav federation, Balkan federation.

The formation of Albanian identity and the backwardness in the development of an independent Albania from 1912 onwards, in comparison with other states on the Balkans was preceded by the Albanian national movement from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. It was at this time that the program maximum of the Albanian National Revival was born, which from the 1870s propagandized the unification of all Albanians in one state.

An important role for the further formation of Albanian identity was played by the so-called Prizren League, which was created during preparation for the Berlin Congress in the summer of 1878. The leaders of the League – Abdul Frasherî and Pasko Vaso insisted the territory of the future state should include South Albania with Epir and Yanina, North and Central Albania with Shkodra, Tirana and Elbasan, Macedonia with Debar, Skopje, Gostivar, Prilep, Veles, Manastir (Bitola) and Ohrid, and Kosovo with Pec, Djakovica, Prizren, Mitrovica, Preshevo and Novi Pazar¹.

The program of the Prizren League from 1878 was developed at the end of the 19th century. This time the subject was not vilayets, but autonomy. In January 1899, in Pec 500 representatives of the Kosovo, Ioaninna and Bitola vilayets established a new Albanian League, known also as the Pec League². It advocated the idea of the autonomy of Albania no matter whether it was within or outside the borders of the Ottoman Empire. But only after the success of the Balkan Union in 1912 was the independence of Albania promulgated on November 28th in Vlora from Ismail Kemali, the leader of the Albanian national movement³. But Kosovo, Western Macedonia, parts of Montenegro, Sandzak, and Northern Epir were not incorporated into the new state⁴.

The status quo of the Balkans, reached by the Versailles system of peace treaties, was destroyed in the course of the Second World War. From all the Balkan states Albania was the first to experience the “new order” of Hitler and Mussolini and with their help accomplished its national program, precisely – the unification of the Albanian people and establishment of an Albanian identity in the Balkans⁵.

What Albania could not accomplish as an independent state, namely unification of the entire Albanian nation in one state, was in fact finalised with Benito Mussolini's decree of June 29, 1941 which provided for the establishment of a “territorially and ethnically united Albania” under an Italian protectorate. After the military defeat of Yugoslavia and Greece Kosovo,

¹ М. Стамова, *Албанският проблем на Балканите: исторически корени и съвременни измерения*, В: *Етнонационални проблеми в Югоизточна Европа през 90-те години на XX век и евроатлантическата интеграция на България*, София, 2001, с. 106.

² М. Стамова, *Албанският въпрос на Балканите (1945–1981)*. Велико Търново, Фабер, 2005, с. 13.

³ Albania: A Short Summary of its History and its Political and Territorial Problems. Madrid, 1968, p. 6–7. Вж. и М. Стамова, *Na drodze do narodowego zjednoczenia narodu albańskiego (1878–1944)*, In: *Integracja I tożsamość narodowa w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej na przestrzeni dziejów. Z prac Polsko-Bułgarskiej Komisji Historycznej*, Instytut Historii PAN, Warszawa, 2007, p. 83–94.

⁴ Ђ. Борозан, *Велика Албанија: порјекло – идеје – пракса*. Београд, 1995, с. 316–317.

⁵ Кр. Манчев, *Националният въпрос на Балканите*. София, 1999, с. 280–281.

Metohia (in Albanian – Dukadin), the Eastern districts of Montenegro, parts of the Sandzak, Western Macedonia and Northern Epirus were joined to the territory of Albania. The territories of Kosovo and Metohia and Western Macedonia with the towns of Kicevo, Debar, Tetovo, Gostivar and Struga which were joined to “Greater Albania” (one of the many greater state theories of the Balkan states as an addition to “Dusanis Serbia”, the “Megali Idea”, etc.), encompassed a territory of 11 780 sq. km and a population of 820 000 people. Together with the eastern districts of Montenegro the territory included in the Albanian state was about 12 000 sq. km and its population was about 1 000 000 people. However, in these years it was a wartime quasistate, not recognized internationally and disputed, including by the separate Albanian political parties and movements⁶.

In these years “Greater Albania” was a wartime creature, which did not get international recognition. The end of the war also put to rest the idea of a national unification of the Albanian people. The Albanian state again had its boundaries established after the end of the World War I; a large part of the Albanian population was left outside of these borders.

It was particularly at that time that in the Albanian Communist Party (ACP) which was the most important faction in the national liberation struggle during WWII visions were also formed about the future of Albania and the Albanian regions in the neighbouring states, in this case the Yugoslav one. The ACP rejected the unification of Albania through the projects of “Bali Kombetar”, “Legaliteti” and the Second League of Prizren which envisioned the unification of all Albanian lands into a unified ethnically pure territory⁷.

The Albanian question was not a subject of discussion at the initial state level contacts held after the war between Albania and Yugoslavia where a significant number of the Albanian population remained. A dominant line the successful end to the war, while Yugoslavia flatly imposed its visions regarding the federation and Kosovo. Albania accepted that, because her main concern at that time was the expulsion of the occupiers and the establishment of the new regime. Thus, in the first post-war years the Albanian question as a whole was mainly a Yugoslav one.

The Albanian issue in Yugoslavia has two main aspects: home policy aspect – as a part of the minority policy of the Yugoslav Communist Party and the structure of the Yugoslav

⁶ М. Стамова, *Албанският проблем на Балканите ...*, с. 108; вж. и Ђ. Борозан, *Велика Албанија: порјекло – идеје – пракса*, 1995.

⁷ Ђ. Борозан, *Западна Македонија, Косово и Метохија у концептима териториалне и етничке Албаније, Војно дело (Београд)*, 1998, бр. 3, с. 55; М. Стамова, *Албанският проблем на Балканите ...*, с. 108.

federation; and international – as a factor, influencing the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship. As a result of the investigation of the Albanian issue in Yugoslavia on the basis of archive and other sources in Bulgarian and foreign languages, some general conclusions can be made.

In the first post-war years (1945–1948) the main issue was the numerous Albanian population left inside the borders of the Yugoslav federation. This problem was investigated in its two aspects – as inner for Yugoslavia, and as a part of the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship.

For the inner aspect, characteristic is that Albanians were divided between three republics in which they had different status – in Kosovo they were majority, but in Macedonia and Montenegro they were a minority group⁸. The policy toward that population at the beginning was a copy of the national policy introduced in the USSR. Despite the similar ideology, aiming at the elimination of the “class enemy”, a martial law was introduced in Kosovo, which continued until the beginning of 1946. Thus, even though Albanians were granted by the constitution equal rights with the other nations in Yugoslavia, they were deprived of them in reality. But they did not accept that situation uncomplainingly and expressed their discord by different forms of resistance.

As the international aspect of the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship is concerned, yet at the Bujan’s conference that took place at the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944, Albanians declared that their national problem can be solved only by their unification⁹. But the right of nations of self-determination, including separation and unification, was never introduced in Yugoslavia in practice. In the new circumstances, under the government of the Communist party, the state interests were put on agenda. Yugoslavian ruling circles defined the desire for unification as “irredentist”, and every attempt for separation – as “separatist”. But that did not stop the Albanians from championing their right of self-determination and unification. Thus at the very beginning two contradictive standpoints were taking a place, which shaped the following theoretical works, political lines and practical actions for resolving of that problem.

This issue is tightly connected with the situation on the Balkans until the Paris Peace conference and with the different positions of Yugoslavia and Albania at it. As an attempt for its solving, even though only in propaganda aspect, the vicissitudes around the creation of a Balkan federation took place. The Albanian population was assumed as a bridge for friendship between

⁸ М. Стамова, *Албанският въпрос на Балканите*, с. 60.

⁹ A. Lalaj, On the Bujan Conference, In: *The Truth on Kosova*. Tirana, 1993, p. 206–215.

both countries. Yugoslavia wanted a federation on the Balkans to be created – South Slav or Balkan¹⁰, i.e. some other states to join the already created Yugoslav federation on equal basis and only after that the problems to be discussed. Similar character had also the relationship Yugoslavia-Bulgaria but with contradictory starting positions¹¹.

After the expulsion of Yugoslavia from Cominformburo in 1948 the contradictions between Yugoslavia and Albania rose, which put an end to the hopes of Albanians Kosovo to be united with Albania. The Albanian problem in Yugoslavia was put in the background after 1948¹². It became a part of the mutual enemy propaganda of both states in the following years. The Albanian party and state leadership tried to draw political and economical dividends, transferring itself into the “megaphone” of the Informburo, and mainly of the USSR in its campaign against Yugoslavia. With the deterioration of the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship, the leadership in Tirana put again on daily agenda the issue of the situation of the Albanian minority in the Yugoslav federation. Together with the accusations in revisionism, nationalism and hegemony, Tirana attacked the Yugoslav leadership because of its policy of denationalization and terror upon the Albanian population. Aside from the appeals for the removing “Tito and his clique” from power, in these years, the main slogan of Albanian propaganda among the Albanian population in Yugoslavia became the accomplishment of the historical ideal for unification of the Albanian nation through annexation of Kosovo and the regions with an Albanian population in Macedonia, Montenegro and South Serbia to Albania¹³.

In this period of a drastic deterioration of the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship, a regime of repressions and persecutions of Albanians was introduced in Kosovo and the other Albanian regions in Yugoslavia, who were accused of being a “fifth column” of Informburo¹⁴. As a result of this policy a Serbian domination and terror were enforced in Kosovo. An action for a confiscation of the weapons of the Albanians was started, and some trials took place. That policy

¹⁰ As a result of his role in the Second World War, Tito had the ambition to establish himself as an absolute leader not only in Yugoslavia but also in the Balkans. For him the idea for the creation of a Balkan Federation in which he and Yugoslavia would have a dominant position seemed acceptable. Within these structures he took into consideration also the role of the Albanian factor in Yugoslavia which was not to be underestimated.

¹¹ S. Pavlović, 28 Juna 1948. Raskol i njegove posledice za Istočnu Evropu, *Tokovi Istorije (Beograd, INIS)*, 1999, br. 1–4, s. 71. Вж. и Д. Батаковић, *Косово и Метохија. Историја и идеологија*. Београд, 1998, с. 173.

¹² М. Стамова, *Албанският въпрос на Балканите*, с. 137.

¹³ P. Prifti, *Confrontation in Kosova. The Albanian-Serb Struggle 1969–1999*. Boulder, East European Monographs, 1999, p. 37.

¹⁴ Ђ. Borozan, *Albanija u Kampaniji Kominforma Protiv Jugoslavije 1948–1950*, In: *Jugoslovensko-Sovjetski Sukob 1948 godine*. Beograd, ISI, 1997, s. 54.

continued until the end of the 1950s, when under the pressure of the realities in Yugoslavia, the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) was forced to conduct a special plenum for a new defining of the minority policy in the federation, including the Albanians.

This new policy towards the minorities in Yugoslavia was introduced after the middle of the 1960s. Its expression became the new constitutional definition of “Yugoslav peoples and ethnoses”, which had to substitute the term “national minorities”. That led to changes into the rights of Albanians in Yugoslavia, and as a result their socio-political activity drastically aroused. The Yugoslav party leadership started again to look for a solution of the Albanian issue. Significant Yugoslav financial aid and investments were directed towards Kosovo, aiming at a closer incorporation of the Albanians in the Yugoslav federation and an interruption of their connection with Albania. The turning point for the development of the national relationships in the Yugoslav federation became the Brioni plenum of the Central Committee of the LCY in 1966, when the nationalistic and unitarian policy of Alexander Rankovic and his Serbian adherents suffered a tremendous blow¹⁵. This plenum and its decisions led to a liberalization of the national relationships in Yugoslavia, thus to the outburst of the Albanian problem, which was severely suppressed to this moment.

Visible changes happened in Kosovo in the years following the Brioni plenum. After the removal of Rankovic the Albanian elite in Kosovo recovered. Albanian party leaders started to criticize sharply the lawlessness of the Yugoslav, in particular the Serbian organs of the State Security Services to the Albanians and insisted for an abandonment of all forms of discrimination towards the Albanians in the whole Yugoslav federation. According to Albanian leaders Kosovo events led to the worsening of the national relationship in the federation, and they accused the followers of the “Great Serbian chauvinism and unitarism” of Alexander Rankovic for the tense atmosphere in Kosovo, but also in Serbia and Yugoslavia as a whole. The Great Serbian tendencies among the leadership of the Serbian Communists, which became potential stimulus for the “Great Albanian separatism”, led to a reconsideration of the whole national policy at the end of the 1960s.¹⁶ Albanian leaders insisted on the widening of the political and cultural-

¹⁵ V. Lukic, *Secanja i saznanja: Aleksandar Rankovic i Brionski plenum*. Titograd, 1989, s. 4.

¹⁶ P. Prifti, *Minority Politics: The Albanians in Yugoslavia, Balkanistica: Occasional Papers in Southern European Studies*. Cambridge, II, 1975.

national autonomy of Kosovo, on the improvement of the situation of the Albanian nation in Yugoslavia and an acceleration of the economic development of the regions with a majority of Albanian population. As a result Kosovo got serious subsidies from the federal fund for the weak-developed republics and regions.

Processes of democratization in Yugoslav society which started in the 1960s gave a serious impulse to the discussions for the constitution changes in 1968–1971 and for the regulation of the situation of the minorities. According to the constitutional reforms, the federation became a commonwealth of equal in rights peoples and ethnoses, putting an emphasis on the issue of the status of the outlying parts in the borders of the republics and the federation. The representatives of the Albanian intelligencia and the political elite in Kosovo requested the region to obtain a status of a federal unit, i.e. “Yugoslav socialist republic”. They required a principle of self-determination of the Albanian population to be included in the constitution as a basis for the transformation of Kosovo into an equal in rights federal unit¹⁷. The leadership of the federation and the LCY did not accept the idea of Kosovo Albanians for the republican status of the Socialist Autonomous Region of Kosovo. But the constitutional changes led to wider competences of the republics and regions. Both autonomous regions – Vojvodina and Kosovo, acquired equal rights in the frame of the Serbian republic and a representation in the higher organs of the Yugoslav federation.

After the demonstrations of the Albanian population in Kosovo and Macedonia at the end of 1968, a “creeping Albanization” started in Kosovo. The Albanian political elite and intelligencia played the most important role in the imposition of the “Albanization” as a political line at the end of the 1960s¹⁸. Albanians hold all important posts in administration, culture, education and political life of Kosovo. That led to an increasing mistrust between the Albanian population and the Serbian-Montenegrin minority, and the last was forced to leave its homes and to migrate in other republics and regions. The political leadership in Prishtina insisted the autonomous region to get equal rights with the republics as a federal unit¹⁹. That is how at the beginning of the 1970s Kosovo issue transferred into a problem of the whole Yugoslav

¹⁷ M. Marović, *Albanija i Albanci: Balkanski Džoker. Istorijska hronika nastajanja i razvoja Albanskog Pitanje*. Bar, 1995, s. 622.

¹⁸ A. Babuna, The Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia: Ethnic Identity Superseding Religion, *Nationalities Papers (Northern Illinois University)*, March 2000, p. 71.

¹⁹ F. B. Singleton, Albania and her Neighbours: The End of Isolation, *The World Today (London)*, 1975, № 9, p. 386; вж. и M. Pavlović, Osamostaljenje – konačni cilj Albanaca u SFRJ, *Istorija 20. Veka (Beograd)*, 1999, br. 1–2, s. 28.

federation, not only a Serbian one. The Albanians in Prishtina were involved into the confrontation Zagreb-Belgrade and acquired a support from the Croatian side, as well as the Slovenian one in the efforts to take their problem out of Serbia and to put it on a federal level at the LCY and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

The processes in the political life of the autonomous region Kosovo were not isolated and were connected with the events in the Yugoslav federation as a whole, and precisely in Croatia at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, which culmination was so-called “Zagreb Spring” in 1971. The Croatian crisis had an important influence on the national relationships in the federation and led to an inflammation of the national disputes. That had a direct impact on the political life of Kosovo. Searching for allies against Serbian hegemony and unitarism, which were the main danger for the Croatian republic, Zagreb’s political leadership supported Kosovo pretensions for the extension of the autonomous rights and the rights and freedoms of the Albanian population.

The status of Kosovo was changed with the promulgation of the new SFRY constitution in 1974 – from republican its became federative. That gave a chance to the Kosovo elite to raise clearly the problems of the Albanian population to the Yugoslav state leadership and to insist on their solution. Although the new constitution gave a chance to the ethnic Albanians to take participation in the government of the region, the republic and the federation, and guaranteed them right of self-determination and even separation, the demands of Albanians were not completely satisfied – Kosovo did not get a status of republic²⁰. That is evident from the activity of the numerous illegal organizations and groups on Kosovo, Macedonian, Montenegrin and South Serbian territory. These Albanian activities clashed with the increasing discontent of the Serbian political circles. They sharply criticized the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, relying on the “non-constitutional self-dependence” of the region and the serious threat it created for the state. Yugoslavia was at the edge of a serious political crisis at the end of the 1970s as a result of the clash of the Albanian and Serbian interests in the federation.

At the same time strengthening of the cultural and educational propaganda of Albanians in SFRY had for a culmination the 100-anniversary of the creation of the Prizren league in 1878. That was an excuse for the state and party leaders in Albania openly to raise the “unsolved

²⁰ S. Repishti, *The Evolution of Kosovars: Autonomy within the Yugoslav Constitutional Framework*, In: *Studies on Kosovo*. New York, 1984.

problem” of the Albanians in Yugoslavia, as well as the issue of the great economic backwardness of Kosovo in comparison with the other republics and regions in the federation²¹. But Belgrade took that as an attempt for an open interference in its inner affairs, as well as for the internationalization of the Albanian question. Along with the increasing national problems, at the end of the 1970s – the beginning of the 1980s Yugoslavia was entering a deep economic and social crisis, which had a very negative effect on the economic development of Kosovo. As a result, the first symptoms of destabilization of Yugoslavia appeared exactly in this autonomous region. The death of the most popular Yugoslav leaders, such as the ideologist of the national question, E. Kardelj, but mostly of the J. B. Tito, opened the floodgates for the dissatisfaction of the Albanian population.

The Albanian turmoil in Kosovo in the spring of 1981 put the beginning of the end of the Yugoslav federation. The unrest in the region, which the Yugoslav ruling circles defined as an “open armed uprising” and “contra-revolution”, aimed at the territorial integrity of the federation, was suppressed by the organs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and with the help of the army. Blood was shed and that strengthened even more the national hatred and the mutual mistrust between Albanian, on one side, and Serbian and Montenegrin population, on the other. The numerous plenums and forums of the Yugoslav and Serbian political organs did not lead to the necessary calming of the atmosphere and to the solving of the existing political problems²².

Along with the situation of the Albanians in Kosovo, a region which became a political, economic, social, educational and cultural centre of the Albanians in the federation, specific place took the problems caused by the position of the Albanians in Macedonia²³. From one side, Albanian party leaders and intellectuals in Macedonia were constantly in connection with the party and regional leadership in Kosovo and the Albanian intellectuals in Prishtina. From other side, the illegal Albanian organizations, acting on the territory of the autonomous region Kosovo had their structures in the neighboring Macedonia. In contrast to Kosovo, Macedonian leaders even after the decisions of the Brioni plenum did not allow the penetration of Albanians in all spheres of the socio-political life of the republic. But after the changes in Kosovo and the

²¹ Државен Архив на Република Македонија (ДАРМ), ф. 159, 140 седница, 23 март 1978 г., л. 1–4.

²² M. Stamova, Kosovo in the Period between Tito and Miloshević in the Official Yugoslav Documents (1981–1987), *Etudes Balkaniques* (Sofia), 2007, N 3, p. 3–15.

²³ M. Stamova, *Албанският фактор в Социалистическа република Македонија (1945–1981)*. Кюстендил, 2012, 168 с. (Вж. и M. Stamova, *Faktori Shqiptar në Republikën Socialiste të Maqedonisë (1945–1981)*. Sofia, 2014, 220 f.)

broadening of the rights of the local Albanians, the Macedonian leadership was forced to take into account the new realities in the Yugoslav federation on the national issue. Unlike Kosovo, Macedonians succeeded at the beginning to keep Albanian pretensions in the framework of the rights of minorities in the republic and to prevent activates towards autonomy and unification with Kosovo. To accomplish its goals Macedonian leadership applied a policy of economy pressure towards the local Albanians. It also underlined their rights as “Yugoslav nation” and introduced elements of cultural-educational autonomy. But direct contacts with Tirana were not allowed and everything was centralized through the particular Macedonian institutions²⁴.

The Albanian issue took very important place in the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship. From one side, it was a problem of the Yugoslav federation, related to the ethnic and minority issues in Yugoslavia. Its solving was delayed for a long time. In the whole complex of minority problems in the period 1945–1991, the Albanian one became number one in the minority policy of the Yugoslav federation. From other side, the Albanian problem was decisive for the development of the bilateral Yugoslav-Albanian relationships. The unsolved Albanian issue in Yugoslavia appeared yet with the creation of Albania and Yugoslavia. During the 1940s and the 1950s in the framework of the idea of Balkan federation and Informburo, this problem was used by both states to realize their national interests. But after the rupture of Yugoslavian relationship with Informburo and the abrupt deterioration of the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship, the hopes of both states to find solution to the Albanian problem in the framework of a Balkan federation swept away. The events in Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1960s led to a relative improvement of the Yugoslav-Albanian relationships and gave a green light to the Tirana-Prishtina contacts, which went out of Belgrade’s control. But nevertheless the relatively good relationships on state level, in political and ideological aspect the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship remained hostile. Albania went out of “the big socialist family” in the 1970s and tried to internationalize the Albanian problem. With the development of the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship, this issue either was put on daily agenda, or was suppressed, but remained basic for the both states. Albania raised it to expose its position and looked for its solution in the unification. Yugoslavia planned to liquidate it in the framework of a future Balkan federation, but subsequently “shut” it, defining it as an intervention in its inner affairs.

²⁴ С. Милосавлевски, М. Томовски, *Албанците во Република Македонија 1945–1995. Легислатива, политичка документација, статистика*. Скопје: НИП Студентски збор, 1997.

From 1945 till the break-up of the multi-national Yugoslav federation at the beginning of the 1990s the Albanian problem in Yugoslavia led to great changes in the Yugoslav-Albanian relationship: from declarations for sincere friendship, and ideas for creation of a huge Balkan state; to disruption of the relationship and its usage in a mutually hostile propaganda campaigns; quiet “Albanisation” of Kosovo, its transformation in a subject of the federation and establishment of direct connections and contacts between Pristine and Tirana.

The unsolved Albanian problem in Yugoslavia in 1945–1991 put its imprint on the developments both in Albania and Yugoslavia. When the Yugoslav federal system collapsed at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s and in Albania, like in all other East European countries, the Communist regime collapsed, the Albanian issue was activated in completely new circumstances. They were marked by the fact that there was no more a bi-polar system, Yugoslavia, or the socialist community and totalitarian regimes. Albania came out of isolation. The Yugo-crisis was on daily agenda. There were new developments and new solutions of the minority problems on the Balkans. The Albanian issue not only came out of the Yugoslav boundaries and its Balkan parameters but also became a problem of the international community.