
PROF.DR. KRISTAQ PRIFTI (Tirana)

ETHNIC AND HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE NATIONAL UNIFICATION OF THE ALBANIANS

The Albanians inherited the national question from the historical past; in Albania, as in other Balkan and European countries, it was the period of the National Revival, when our people freed themselves from the Ottoman occupier, that set the task of uniting all the historically Albanian-inhabited territories into a single state.

The Balkan Wars and the unjust decisions of the conference of the ambassadors of the six great powers in London in 1912-1913 were a serious blow to Albanian unification, blighting the normal development of Albanian society and hampering a final solution of the national question.

A large Albanian population remained beyond the borders of the independent Albanian state proclaimed on 28 November 1912. On the basis of Ottoman statistics, this population amounted to about 1 200 000 over an area of 48 000 square kilometers, or two-thirds of the Albanian population and about 62 percent of the area of the Albanian-inhabited territories. In the vilayet of Kosova alone, which at that time included the sancak of Shkup, the kaza of Tetove, and the nahiye of Gostivar, about 746 000 Albanians were left outside the state borders¹ as well as about 300 000 in the vilayet of Manastir². The remaining territories were composed of the region of Cameria in the vilayet of Janina, with its Muslim and Orthodox Albanian population, which was annexed to Greece.

National unification was therefore left to future generations as a task that remains uncompleted even today, and not only an historical but a political issue.

The Albanian national question, like the very existence of the Albanian people, cannot be understood without a proper understanding of the Albanian territories that must be united in a single and independent state. The history of the formation of independent nation-states in Europe and the unravelling of multinational empires in the last 80 years (including most recently the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the years 1985-1992) show that the natural borders of states are those defined by language and mutual sympathy.

On the basis of the principle of nationality, according to which other Balkan and European states have generally been formed, the protagonists of the National Revival demanded the unification in a single state of the lands of Albania that in the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century were divided into the four vilayets of Shkoder, Kosova, Manastir, and Janina, in which the Albanians had lived for centuries as a compact and indigenous population. Ottoman statistics that were also known to the writers of the National Revival show that in 1910, two years before independence, the Albanian population amounted to 2 million and made up a two-thirds majority of the inhabitants of the four vilayets³ alongside minorities of Serbs, Macedonians, Greeks, etc., who mainly inhabited the peripheral sancaks.

As in period of the National Revival, the question of national unification is still a complex web of ethnic and historical issues. The historical past is valuable not

only of academic interest, but in order to provide the academic and general public with evidence for the historical rights of the Albanians and their right to sovereignty over their own home territories.

In all cases, Albanian researchers and political forces in Albania today, and especially those in Kosova, Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, claim these rights only over those territories in which the Albanian evolved as a people and lived uninterruptedly from ancient times down to the declaration of independence in 1912, and where, despite all the upheavals of the last 80 years, they still live today.

M. Sufflay rightly states that, although the majority of the Albanian territories were in the Middle Ages included in the Byzantine Empire, with a part (Kosova) under the Serbian Empire, Albania under the name of Arberia or Albania constituted a stable political entity (if not for the entire period) and a clearly-defined ethnogeographical concept in comparison with the notions of Bulgaria and Serbia⁴.

The occupation of all the Albanian lands by the Ottomans and their inclusion in a single empire, even though the Turkish sultans did not agree to their formation into a single administrative unit, led to the use in all official documents of the term "Albania" (Turkish: "Arnavutluk") for the country of the Albanians, covering its entire ethnic and territorial expanse. The Turks recognized the ethnic reality of the notion of Arberia and the Arbers that had arisen in the early Middle Ages, and which emerged in historical sources under Ottoman rule as a general "national" term for all the inhabitants of the Albanian-speaking areas. The "Land Register of the Albanian Sancak" of 1431 uses ethnic Albanian terminology for the territories of this sancak: Arnavit vilayeti and Vilayeti arnavit, i.e. "Albanian vilayet" and "Vilayeti Arnaviya"⁵. Under the name Arberia (Arnavutluk), the Ottoman administration included in this register, implicitly on the basis of the ethnic composition of the population, the Albanian lands from Mat in the north to Cameria in the south. Data from other 15th century land registers from Villku, Diber, Shkoder, Dukagjin, etc. show that the Turks also called the inhabitants of other regions of Albania such as Shkoder, Dukagjin, Kosova, Diber, and Konica by the common name of Arnavut (Albanian).

Venetian data about Albania also shed light on the ethnic Albanian borders in the 15th century. In 1479, Venetian documents describe Ulqin, alongside Shkoder and Lezhe, as a city in Albania, and Tivar as an Albanian place. A report of 1500 describes the Albanians in Tivar, as distinct from the Montenegrins, fighting the Turks in 1498⁶.

Documents from the Venetian Archives put Albania's eastern border at the edge of the ethnic area, at Shkup. A report from Ragusa in 1481 describes the situation in Albania and especially in Shkup, as part of Albania, after the death of Sultan Mehmet II. Another report of 1 May 1500 states of Shkup that "there are few Turks [soldiers] in that place in Albania"⁷.

The name Arnavutluk (Albania) was consistently used in Turkish official and imperial documents from the 15th century, when the Albanian territories were occupied, down to their detachment from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. According to the administrative divisions established in the 19th century, the term Albania included the vilayets of Shkoder, Kosova, Manastir, and Janina. Turkish statistical year-books always describe these vilayets as parts of Albania, while their sancaks were without exception included under the two regions of Albania, Gegeria and Toskeria.

World War II, which brought major changes to the political and state organization of the peoples of the Balkans and Europe, created favorable conditions for the solution of the Albanian national question. Alongside the duty of liberating Albania from the invader and reestablishing its independence, the war set the task of achieving the national unification of the Albanians within their ethnic borders. Both Italy and Germany, motivated mostly by their own political interests and the need to divide their occupation zones, had made ethnic distinction within their empires. A large part of the Albanian territories of Kosova, together with Diber and the Plain of Pollog (Struge, Kercove, Gostivar, Tetove), with an area of about 11 780 square kilometers and a population of 820 000 was attached to Italian-occupied Albania in April-May 1941⁸. Even the partial unification of the Albanian territories, initially under Italian and after September 1943. German occupation, was an important development that cannot be ignored in the history of the Albanian national question. It had a dual importance: internally, it helped to form economic, social, and especially intellectual and cultural ties within the Albanian nation as a whole, while internationally it was a direct indication of the recognition by Italy and Germany of Kosova and the other territories of the former Yugoslavia as ethnically Albania. Britain and the United States were also compelled to recognize them as such in diplomatic documents of the time, although there was no decision to return these areas to Albania after the war.

During World War II, not only the Antifascist National Liberation Movement and especially the Bujan Conference of the National Liberation Council of Kosova and the Plain of Dukagjin held between 31 December 1943 and 2 January 1944, but also the quisling governments, other collaborationists, and nationalist forces favored Kosova's unification with Albania and an ethnic Albania. The Assembly of the Second League of Prizren held in September 1943 also raised a demand for an ethnic Albania⁹.

However, none of these political groups, neither those who joined the national liberation movement and supported the Anglo-American Soviet coalition, nor those who favored an alliance with the Italian and German invaders, succeeded in unifying the Albanian territories in a single state during World War II.

Following the disintegration of the Yugoslav federation, the national unification of the Albanian remains a uniquely unsolved question for the family of European peoples, a most acute political problem, and a preoccupation not only for the Albanian people but also the countries of Europe and the United States. Even though divided among four different states, Kosova and the other ethnic Albanian territories in the former Yugoslavia remain what they always have been down the centuries, inhabited by a compact Albanian population and a natural and seamless extension of the territory and population of the independent Albanian state. Nevertheless, the Albanian nation itself exercises sovereignty only over those territories included in the Republic of Albania.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia, instead of helping to solve the Albanian national question, has entangled it even further. The consolidation and diplomatic recognition by Europe of the new political map that is taking shape in place of the former Yugoslavia, without recognizing the Republic of Kosova and the national demands of the population of the other Albanian territories, would mean the *de facto* and *de jure* approval of a new annexation of the Albanian territories, as in the cases of

the Ambassadors Conference in London in 1913, the Versailles Conference of 1918-1920, and the Yugoslav decisions of 1945. Kosova, even with a "special status", would be annexed to Serbia, the northern Albanian territories to Montenegro, the eastern territories to Macedonia, and still others to Serbia proper.

Such political and diplomatic developments without the agreement of the Albanian population as equals of other nations and with their own right to self-determination would constitute a new national disaster identical to that of 1913, and an affront to the cause of the national unification of the Albanians. Self-determination is a legitimate right of the Albanians of the former Yugoslavia; as a non-Slav people with their own independent state, they have even more right than other nations to break away from the former Yugoslavia, to which they were forcibly annexed, and to unite in a single nation-state.

Treated in its full complexity and with all the positive and negative factors contributing toward it, the achievement of Albanian national unification must be considered today as a strategic if long-term goal for our people, demanding the commitment of our state authorities, our academic institutions, and our entire society. Among the domestic factors, the independent Republic of Albania plays a decisive role in the solution of the question. With the overthrow of the totalitarian communist dictatorship and the establishment of a democratic regime, the Republic of Albania has every opportunity to make its own irreplaceable contribution toward solving the question of Albanian national unification, making itself for the future, as today, a powerful support for the Albanians of Kosova and the other parts of our nation that have until today unjustly been left beyond the borders of the Albanian state.

The demand for the Republic of Kosova, like the options proposed by the Albanian political parties for solving the question of the Albanians in Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, has been conditioned by the situation that Serbia has created in the former Yugoslavia, with the outbreak of a war of extermination in Bosnia and an unprecedented genocide in Kosova, as well as by the fact that Europe today is not well-disposed toward border changes in the Balkans (although the borders of the Yugoslav federation have been swept away). These demands of the Albanians must be considered as provisional solutions and intermediate stages in the general process of national unification and of that overall strategy whose ultimate aims is the unification in a single state of all the Albanian territories and populations in the Balkans.

All these options are based on the legitimate desire of the Albanian population of Kosova and the former Yugoslavia to free themselves from the military and police violence to which they are subjected, to put an end to their extreme discrimination, and to secure full political equality with the other peoples, respect for the national identity of the Albanians, their language, culture, traditions, and spiritual ties with the Albanian state.

These are imperative demands on which the Albanians today rightly insist, without waiting for the opportunities for solving the Albanian national question that the future creation of a united Europe might offer.

- 1 *Shpërnguljet e shqiptarëve gjatë shekujve*, Prishtina, 1992, p.93-96; see also: A.Baldacci, *Statistikë turke e vitit 1910*, in: "L'Albania", Roma, 1929, p.200.
- 2 A.Baldacci, *op.cit.*, p.210.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp.199-201.
- 4 M.Sufflay, *The Illyrians, the Albanians, and the Slavs: Problems of Continuity and Symbiosis*, in ed. Prifti et al., "The Truth on Kosova", Tirana, 1993, p.72.
- 5 H.Inalcik, *Hicri 835 tarih suret-i defter-i Arnavid*, Ankara, 1954, p.24a, 30a, 36a.
- 6 *Dokumente të shek.XV për historinë e Shqipërisë*, Vol.IV, Pjesa I (1479-1499), Tirana, 1967, dok.252, p.175; *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë (1479-1506)*, Pjesa II (1499- 1506), Tirana, 1979, dok.24, p.45.
- 7 *Dokumente të shek.XV për historinë e Shqipërisë*, Vol.IV, Pjesa I (1479-1499), Tirana, 1967, dok.77, p.69; *Dokumente për historinë e Shqipërisë (1479-1506)*, Pjesa II (1499- 1506), Tirana, 1979, dok.55, pp.155-156.
- 8 A.Hadri, *Lëvizja nacionalçlirimtare në Kosovë (1941-1945)*, Prishtina, 1971, pp.96-98, 100-104, 106.
- 9 *Resolution of the First Conference of the National Liberation Council for Kosova and the Dukagjin Plateau Held on December 31, 1944 and January 1-2, 1944*, in ed. Prifti et al., "The Truth on Kosova", Tirana, 1993, p.218; see also: A.Hadri, *op.cit.*, pp.100-101, 317-319, 321, 332-333.

1. The Albanian people have the right to self-determination and to the free choice of their political system.

2. The Albanian people have the right to live in peace and to be free from any form of external aggression, occupation, or interference.

3. The Albanian people have the right to live in a democratic society and to be free from any form of oppression or discrimination.

4. The Albanian people have the right to live in a united and independent state, free from any form of foreign domination or interference.

5. The Albanian people have the right to live in a state of mutual respect and cooperation with all other peoples.

6. The Albanian people have the right to live in a state of peace and stability, free from any form of war or conflict.

7. The Albanian people have the right to live in a state of freedom and justice, free from any form of oppression or discrimination.

8. The Albanian people have the right to live in a state of prosperity and well-being, free from any form of poverty or deprivation.

9. The Albanian people have the right to live in a state of cultural and spiritual richness, free from any form of ignorance or superstition.

10. The Albanian people have the right to live in a state of harmony and balance, free from any form of imbalance or disharmony.

These are the fundamental demands on which the Albanians today rightly insist. We are demanding for the Albanians the right to live in a free and democratic society, free from any form of external aggression, occupation, or interference. We are demanding for the Albanians the right to live in a state of peace and stability, free from any form of war or conflict. We are demanding for the Albanians the right to live in a state of freedom and justice, free from any form of oppression or discrimination. We are demanding for the Albanians the right to live in a state of prosperity and well-being, free from any form of poverty or deprivation. We are demanding for the Albanians the right to live in a state of cultural and spiritual richness, free from any form of ignorance or superstition. We are demanding for the Albanians the right to live in a state of harmony and balance, free from any form of imbalance or disharmony.