

THE ONSET OF ALBANIAN NATIONHOOD

CSABA-BARNABÁS HORVÁTH

In what did and does the Albanian society differ from the other societies of the Balkans? Why did the Albanian nation formation come late compared to the Greek, Serbian or Bulgarian? How did the regional power plays affect the formation of Albania?

Keywords: Islam, Christianity, Ottoman Empire, eastern question

Krisztián Csaplár-Dregovics: *Az albán nemzetté válás kezdetei* (1878-1913). The book is the improved edition of the doctoral dissertation made at *Eotvos Lorand University* Doctoral School of History, Budapest.

*

This supplementary writing is focusing on one of the most exciting periods of the Balkans, from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 till the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, from the aspect of the formation of the modern Albanian nation. This was a key period in the history of the peninsula. With the settlement after the war of 1877-1878 it was clear that the days of the Ottoman Empire in Europe were drawing to a close. At the same time the future of the remaining Balkan parts of the empire (Thrace, historical Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo) was uncertain. Would an autonomous Macedonia and Albania cover most of these territories? Or would the countries stabilized by 1878 (Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece) divide it up among themselves leaving no place for new nations? If so, where would the borders be? Where the later Bulgarian-Turkish borderline would be drawn in Thrace and the historical Macedonia? Would Serbia ask a piece from the historical Macedonia or would Kosovo be enough for them? Would Serbia reach the Adriatic or Bulgaria the Aegean? And if an independent Albania would be established, where would its boundaries be? Would Kosovo, the western parts of historical Macedonia and Epirus be a part of it?

The question is interesting from the aspect of the concert of the great powers, since it was neither in the interest of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy nor of Russia that the pro-Russian Slavic states gain power through annexing Albanian territories. Thus both wanted Albania not to fall into the hands of Serbia. However, under these circumstances the Bosnian way, i.e. Albania would go under the protection of the Monarchy or Italy, would not be the right one, because for both Rome and Vienna it would be unacceptable if Albania would be under the sole influence of the other.

But how did Albania get into this vulnerable position so that its modern nation formation started decades after that of Bulgaria, Greek and Serbia, and thus its later statehood became uncertain with the backing out of the Turkish government? The answer lies in the history of the Albanian society, in the detailed study of which this book is also supplementary. The Albanian society is one of the most interesting in this region. For one, the Albanian language beside the Greek is the only one of the peninsula whose presence precedes the spreading of the Slavic languages and even the Roman era, thus becoming one of the ancient languages in Europe, a survivor of the Iron Age in fact. On the other hand, its isolated geographical position made the Albanian society for centuries relatively underdeveloped compared to the region, e.g. up until the 20th century a tribal society was present here. In the Middle Ages, the centuries before the Ottoman Turk conquer, no Albanian state with such significance was formed like the empire of the Bulgarian czars or Stephen Dušan's Serbia. The reason for this besides the relative underdevelopment might have been that at that time the Albanian territories were split by the borderline of Roman and Byzantine Christianity. The northern Albanians were mostly Roman Catholic, culturally favoring Italy, while the southerners were Byzantine connected Greek Orthodox, making it hard for a medieval state to become unified under these circumstances in this era. During the Turkish period the majority of the Albanians converted to the religion of Islam. This was beneficial amid the flourishing of the empire but was a definitive disadvantage compared to the Bulgarians, Greeks and Serbians who had their own national church when the empire fell. First, the Albanian elite working in the service of the sultan was reluctant in the question of the secession until it was

almost too late and Albania just nearly managed to avoid the Serbian-Greek division. Second, the high number of the Islam believers among the Albanians made them suspicious in the eyes of their Greek Orthodox neighbors. Thirdly, when the nation formation in its 19th-century sense finally started, three religions, being rather aloof up until that time, had to collaborate.

To understand the situation we have to take into consideration the millet system, i.e. the system of the cultural autonomies of the Ottoman Empire, since this was that element from which the main disadvantage of the Albanians originated. Unlike the Christian feudal countries of Europe, the Ottoman Empire rarely gave provincial autonomy while insured a wide cultural autonomy based on denomination to the peoples within its territory. Therefore, through centuries the Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek national churches without territorial autonomy were the transmitters of the Serbian, Bulgarian and Greek collective conscience. We could call these a kind of premodern culture nations but these were not geographically demarcated territorial units, unlike those European provinces of some feudal nations with their own government, these were geographically indistinct communities. According to these concepts, one was a member of the Greek community if they belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church independently of their mother tongue and of whether they lived in central Greek territories or in some far dispersed settlement at the Danube Delta, Caucasus or even in Egypt. While for the Serbians, Greeks and Bulgarians this system assured a form of the premodern type of the political national consciousness, it divided up the Albanians. The Muslims of the Balkans by the millet system were members of the Ottoman-Turk “political nation” regardless of their mother tongue. So in this system the Islamic Albanians were counted as Turks. The Greek Orthodox Albanians, unlike the Bulgarians, Serbians and Greeks, had no national church but belonged to the Greek church since they lived mainly on the South, next to the Greek language area. So as the Muslim Albanians were “Turkish” from the view of the millet system, the Greek Orthodox Albanians were considered usually “Greek”. Thus these two biggest Albanian denominational groups had more to do with the Greeks and the Turks than with each other. The third Albanian group, the Roman Catholics, however, did not belong to neither of the neighboring national churches but had the fewest members and despite the fact that out of these three religions Catholicism is the most “western”, it was the most underdeveloped economically. (This could be explained by the fact that in the previously Catholic North-Albania the more developed, open territories, lowlands and wider valleys converted to the Islam, and Catholicism remained only among the wildest, most isolated tribes.)

So while the millet system meant organic grounds for the Serbians, Greeks and Bulgarians to create their nation states and the role of the national churches is still significant even today, the situation was just the opposite in case of Albania. Only through a radical break from the millet system was that paradigm shift possible which saw the two bigger Albanian denominations as one community separate from the Greeks and Turks and not as linguistically different Greek or Turk aggregations.

The reasons mentioned above led to the late development of the modern Albanian nation consciousness compared to the Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian, and this lateness together with the characteristics of the millet system raised the phantom of the total division of the Albanian territories in 1912.

As in the millet system the “national” communities had no geographical boundaries, the system carried the possibility of bloody border wars from the beginning. Every cultural community saw territories where its congregation was present in a significant number as its own. Moreover, the old-new Christian countries trying to expel the Muslim Turks out of Europe thought of the Muslim territories as no man’s land waiting to be divided up or as an unreliable region that needs to be strictly controlled. Thus the Greek nation builders saw southern Albania as theirs, and the northern part was claimed by the Serbians as for in these Muslim territories the Christians lived close to the Serbians. So deriving from the logic of the old-new Balkan Christian countries which is rooted in millet system a Greek-Serbian division was in order for the Albanian territories. In 1912-1913 this almost happened, only the interference of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Italy and Great-Britain prevented it.

So the book analyses a really complex and exciting play of the great powers, the knowledge of which has a key-importance in understanding the history of the region.

© DKE 2012

<http://www.southeast-europe.org>
[dke\[at\]southeast-europe.org](mailto:dke[at]southeast-europe.org)

Note: *Respected Researchers*, If you make a reference to this article or quote part of it, please send us an email at [dke\[at\]southeast-europe.org](mailto:dke[at]southeast-europe.org) to let us know that. *Please cite the article as follows:*

Csaba-Barnabás Horváth: The onset of Albanian nationhood. (*Translated by Flóra Mikonya*) *International Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 3. No.2. (Summer 2012) 2 p.

Thank you for your kind collaboration. *Editor-in-Chief*