



ORIGINAL PAPER

The Status and Role of Albanians in the Western Balkans during Transition

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Abstract

The Western Balkans has always been in the attention of the world politics due to its geostrategic position, multiethnic and multi-religious composition, and because of the clashes between east and west which left serious consequences. Often these historical contexts have led to the emergence of political crisis with consequences in inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, which have endangered the existence of the states and the cohesion between nations. In this scientific paper we will treat the status of Albanians in the western Balkans before and after the fall of communism, taking into account their impact on the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the creation of new states in the Western Balkans, especially after the independence of Macedonia and the Europe's newest country, independent Kosovo. Moreover, we will emphasize the role of Albanians in maintaining the stability of the western Balkans, given the recent events on global security, without neglecting the role of Albanian political leaders in certain periods. In order to achieve the desired results in this scientific research, we will use various scientific methods such as comparative method, text and document analysis, as well as content and historic analysis. Through these methods we will try to give a special approach to the role of Albanians in the Western Balkans during these turmoils and the challenges that await them in the future.

Keywords: *Albanians, Balkans, communism, transition, stability*

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The Western Balkans has always been an important geostrategic location, mainly because of the interests of major powers from East and West. It is a place with many religions, nations and heritage, where the clashes from the past have had a negative impact on mutual relations. Until now, many researchers have tried to give their thoughts on the social and political developments as well as their reflection on the modern society and integration processes in the globalization era. Albanians, as one of the oldest nations in the region have been also an object of many studies which put a light over the past and explain the historical moments and developments that had an effect on today's relations and problems among neighbors. Therefore, we think that the status and the role of Albanians in the Balkans should be taken seriously into consideration in order to get the complete picture of the past and nowadays, which can be an important tool to predict and prepare for the future developments that await the region.

Through the history, Balkan regions were divided by different empires and religions. An interesting approach on this matter was published in a study by Galtung, who among other states that "the Balkan integration process within, and the global framework without, are both parts of the story of empires that come, leave deep and bloody faultiness within and without, and then decline and fall" (Galtung, 2013). These divisions have left many marks on relations between different nations in Balkans. Some of these marks still remain and from time to time they create sparks and wars that drastically increase the pressure over the multiethnic and multi-religious countries, like is the case with the majority of the western Balkan countries.

As stated in the 2005 Regional cooperation in the western Balkans European Union publication, "Following the last EU enlargement, the situation in the western Balkan countries, their progress on the road to European integration and their present and future relations with the EU really turned into an immediate concern to the EU itself. When Bulgaria and Romania became EU members, the entire western Balkan region got surrounded by Member States of the European Union. This had important repercussions for both the countries of the region and the EU in a number of areas, in particular where the free circulation of goods, services and persons are concerned" (European Commission, 2006). Since the region is an important route and has a specific position, the interest of the Euro-Atlantic organizations has been to impose their influence by including the Balkan countries under their umbrella. In align to this, some countries did well to conclude their commitments and obligations towards the international structures and joined NATO alliance, such as Croatia and Albania, as well as Montenegro, who is expected to join the alliance during 2016, by establishing the required political stability. However, the other Balkan countries are falling behind and could not reach the minimum of the requirements in order to join these organizations. In this context, we refer to Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia, and Serbia.

The many attempts of the European Union diplomacy in the Western Balkans during the last two decades did not give the desired results, mainly because the concerned countries could not forget the past and were not ready to give up their way of governance, which in the majority of cases is characterized by autocratic rule, combined with criminal activities and widespread corruption. As mentioned in a previous research, "the crisis in the system of governance is a signal for existence of state problems, which later reflect international positions and relations. In the case of Macedonia, the consecutive early elections that are repeatedly organized do not produce solutions to the many problems the country faces, nationally and internationally. This "disease" is widespread throughout the region, so now we can see early elections in Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, as well

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as in Greece. On the other hand, deterioration of inter-ethnic relations produces extra pressure on finding solutions and reducing tensions” (Abdullai and Tresì, 2014).

Bulgaria and Greece, as European Union members, can count on the aid from other European Union member states and benefit from the union. This is not the case with the other countries, whose governments are struggling in trying to find a way to stay in power and to carry out their commitments in front of the citizens and the international community. What they have really done so far is buying time, in order to use their rule for backing their leading position, as well as playing “big politics” with international community by using peace and stability as their strongest bid. How further can their economies follow their play, it remains to see, but for sure they will not go too far. The region is covered with crisis, such as the negotiation problems between Kosovo and Serbia, the Greek economic collapse, political crisis in Macedonia with international involvement, clashes between opposition and government in Montenegro regarding NATO entrance, etc.

The role of Albanians in maintaining the peace, stability and global security has been very important for the entire region of western Balkans. Albanian leaders continuously have shown willingness for cooperation with the international community regarding issues of global interest. Maybe this is due to the fact that they have benefited most during the last two decades because of NATO intervention in Kosovo and the many EU peace missions conducted in the region for increasing democratic values and standards. Another possibility is that they see the EU and NATO integration processes as the only way to get their dispersed people together, which has been apart for centuries due to the many historical, political and geostrategic injustices that have drawn their fate blank. Since Albanians are part of every western Balkan country, we consider this is a very important issue to be addressed, especially when the instability of the region grows because of further divisions between the political agenda of the great powers and because of the new threats that are erupting throughout the new century.

After the World War II, the Soviet Union expanded its sphere of influence over neighboring East-European countries. The “Iron Curtain” was drawn upon Europe, dividing it into two parts: East and West, and thus starting the Cold War. The Soviet Union reached a major impact on political and economic Eastern European States. The impact was so great that in some cases it has carried out military intervention in each country featuring various liberal movements, as was the case with Czechoslovakia. The division of the European population and the restoration of the borders that existed before the Second World War were only an initial stage of a tensed situation and an outbreak of vigor, popularly called volcano. From the accumulated wrath and displeasure on the years and decades during the communist past, massive riots erupted on the streets of Prague, Sofia, Warsaw, Temishvar, Budapest, and other cities in central and Eastern Europe, and as a result, the displeasure of the population and the mistrust towards the democratic government institutions constantly grew (Abdullai, 2008: 23). With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fall of communism began, and as a result, many new countries were created in the Balkans, mainly because of the dissolution of ex Yugoslavia. The American historian and diplomat George Kennan initially described “the malignant nationalism” in the introduction of the *Carnegie report* (Kennan, 1993), for the causes and the course of the Balkan wars of the first half of XX century. In the part about the disintegration of Yugoslavia, he says that these nations won and re-gained a lot in a short time and do not know where to stop (Malevska, 2002: 154). “The presence of the U.S. and Russia, as an extended arm for defense and military assistance, economic benefits and social care for

the Balkan countries is actually another attempt to ensure global military and economic supremacy. A region where safety is not affected is an excellent target for further provocations between the U.S. and Russia, in terms of strengthening their military presence, where great powers have an interest” (Veljanoska, Andonov and Shibakovski, 2014).

The situation of Albanians before and after the fall of communism has been very difficult with many uncertainties. Albanians are very specific as a nation, since they have their own language which totally differs from the other languages used in the region, they consist of many religions and they are spread in many countries. Throughout the history, Albanians have always been at risk from their neighbors, and in the same time they remained an interest of major powers for extending their influence through them as allies. After World War II, most of the parts populated with Albanians fell under Yugoslavia. Albania embraced a communist ideology headed by Enver Hoxha. This period in Albanian history is called as the communist dictatorship. Initially, Albania had good relations with Yugoslavia, although, latter any breach of relations between the two countries has made more difficult the life of Albanians under Tito's Yugoslavia, since any violation of these relations between the two countries had an impact over the Albanians in Yugoslavia and filled the Yugoslav prisons with ethnic Albanian political prisoners. The cooperation between the two countries continued to be weak and tensed, until the 1990's when the transition and shifting in government brought different approaches towards the diplomacy and international relations, especially when it comes to Albania. The collapse of communism was seen from Albanians as a historic opportunity to realize their equal rights compared to other nations. The modern Albania managed to become a member of NATO, primarily as a result of a serious and conscientious approach of the politicians of the country, which aided by the western partners, broke away from the communist past and tuned towards democratic values and social development.

Yugoslavia was formed in 1945 after the Second World War with a federal regulation and consisted of six republics and two autonomous provinces, where one was that of Kosovo. Even though it seemed at first that all people were equal in this federation, we can say that the only people most despicable and maltreated were the Albanians. The conference of Bujan was an attempt for unification of the Albanian territories, but the same was annulled by the Yugoslavian authorities. The position of the Albanian population in Yugoslavia began to change positively during 1974, when the new constitution guaranteed the autonomy of Kosovo and Albanians in Republic of Macedonia reached to become constituent nation. But, only short time after, Kosovo's autonomy was removed, and the constitutional changes in 1989 made Albanians in the Republic of Macedonia a minority, even though they consisted a quarter of the total population of the Republic. Later on, what seemed to be a strong and unified country, suddenly collapsed under the rage of nationalism that was hidden deeply inside in the foundations of the country. The question of whether the Yugoslav conflict was an ethnic conflict is closely related to the causes which started it. As stated by Ahrens, “it is obvious that a conflict starts because of economic reasons, but develops further following ethnic lines”, (Ahrens, 2010: 4). The Yugoslavian conflict was one of the bloodiest in the recent history, taking hundreds of thousands of lives and destroying the cohabitation and the mutual cooperation in the region between the different nations for a longer period of time. It also brought into a serious test the unity and the readiness of the international bodies and structures who failed to prevent and to stop the bloodshed between parts in the conflict. Albanians were a part of this conflict too, mainly as victims during the Kosovo conflict.

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Montenegro was the smallest republic in Yugoslavia. The Albanians there generally populate the border area, and even though they had been there for many centuries, again, they were not treated as equal citizens in their country in the past. Yet again, Albanians were one of the main factors for the success of the referendum for independence of Montenegro (Nohlen and Stöver, 2010) from Yugoslavia, which was held on 21 May 2006, and which was approved by 55,5% of the voters. This did not change a lot in reaching equal rights, but it started to have positive effects towards democratization and normalization of the relations within the country. Moreover, the independent Montenegro started to build more relaxed relations with Kosovo and Albania, thus leaving aside the past and the differences. But, despite the fact that the protections of national minorities has been a high-profile item on the agendas of international organizations, NGOs, and national governments, progress in many cases has been incremental at best. Albanians in Montenegro, for example, have seen much political change in the Western Balkans over the past two decades but little improvement in their own group's situation. They are worse off in certain aspects than they were during the communist regime in former Yugoslavia. This situation is best described by Boga and Wolf, where they stated that "having been subjected to discrimination for almost a century in the various incarnations of Yugoslavia, Albanians welcomed the democratization process and hoped it would usher in a new dawn. They expected to work with Montenegrins and other communities as partners in building a new democratic and multi-ethnic state, and thus voted overwhelmingly for their nation's independence. The reality of what has since transpired has fallen far short of their expectations; most Albanians now find themselves disillusioned about their future" (Boga and Wolff, 2011).

This throws a different perspective on the status of the Albanians in Montenegro, and proves to be aligning with our paper regarding the status of the Albanians in the region. Again, if Montenegro turns toward the politics of good neighboring and improves the status of other ethnicities in the country, including the status of Albanians, it will result positively for Montenegro, which is soon expected to become a NATO member and will be committed to a full partnership with other NATO members, including neighboring Albania. In this regard comes and the speech of NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, given in December 2015, who publicly thanked the role of Albania in keeping peace and fulfilling mutual obligations for stability in the Western Balkans, for the open-door policy, and for the decision to invite Montenegro to become member of the Alliance.

Kosovo became a formal part of the territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) in 1918. Constitutionally, it is considered a constituent province of Serbia, one of the six republics that made up the original Yugoslav federation along with Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Slovenia. It had its own administrative autonomy, but it was taken away after a while. The best days within the autonomous period, were from 1974 up to 1989.

But with the rise of Slobodan Milosevic, a previously obscure Communist party official who skillfully manipulated the nationalist symbols to assume leadership in Serbia in the late 1980s, Kosovo's autonomy came to an end. "Under Milosevic's direction, the provincial assembly in the regional capital, Prishtina, was dissolved and power returned to the Serbian parliament in Belgrade" (Peake, Heenan and Fitzduff, 2004).

After the abrogation of the constitution, there were protests that started on March 1981, with the request for Kosovo to become a republic (Buxhovi, 2014: 227) and its citizens to enjoy all the rights that other nations had in Yugoslavia. This resentment was suppressed with violence and police terror, mass dismissals from work and prosecution of

Albanians for anti-state behavior. This serious situation further continued and culminated with the armed resistance of the Albanians in 1997-98 and the intervention of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) in 1999 for ending the Serbian repression. Since then, Kosovo has been apart from Serbia, even though officially has declared its independence in 2008. Moreover, Kosovo signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in October, a first step towards membership. The agreement was contingent on normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia, following an EU-brokered deal between the two in 2013. The agreement also paved the way for Serbia becoming an official candidate for EU membership, negotiations for which began in December.

The status of the Albanians in Kosovo was closely followed by Albanians in the entire region, including the Albanians in Macedonia. As mentioned in a study conducted by Pierre, the Kosovo conflict traumatized Macedonia. "Politically it led to a deep division. The Albanians of Macedonia fully supported NATO and the air strikes. They gave guarded support to the KLA and the aim of independence for Kosovo; wisely, however, they also took care to restrict KLA recruitment and activities in Macedonia itself so as not to destabilize the country. The Slavic Macedonians, on the other hand, were much less supportive of NATO and were generally cool if not directly opposed to the air strikes" (Pierre, 1999). This study shows that the efforts of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia were towards helping their fellows in Kosovo and not causing troubles in their country.

Macedonia as a relatively new country got its independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991. Macedonia was long regarded as an oasis of peace, because until 2001 it was the only country emerging from the former Yugoslav Federation that did not suffer directly from the war, persecution and civilian casualties. On the other hand, since the collapse of socialism and the establishment of an independent Republic of Macedonia, religion had become an increasingly important social factor. This was particularly true of the two major religious communities. Slavic Macedonians regarded the Orthodox Church as a symbol of their nationhood, which they saw threatened by Albanian insurrectionists. "The Albanian population was predominantly Muslim and frequently expressed itself by means of Islamic traditions" (Mojzes, 2006).

Till 2001, the Macedonian political elite behaved as if there were no internal problems other than those of economic and social nature and it was thus presented in the White Book of the Ministry of Defence, which emphasized that the biggest threat to the Macedonian stability was external, coming from the western borders (Albania) (Ruzhin, 2013). The adopted Constitution, even today is contested by the ethnic Albanian population, mainly due to the fact that up to 1989, Albanians were constitutive part of the state, while the new constitution of 1991 made them minority, which they never truly acknowledged. The many attempts for advancing the rights of Albanians by their political representatives did not yield results, due to the fact that the other side did not show readiness to hear the real demands of the Albanians and refused any request or initiative for constitutional amendments in terms of freedom and ethnic rights of Albanians in Macedonia. "The period between 1991 and 2001, had not resulted in any substantial inclusion of the Albanians in public administration, and the country acted mainly as a national state of the majority community" (Abdullai and Bajrami, 2012: 159).

Moreover, calling the Albanians land colonizers in Macedonia, heavily insults national feelings of all Albanians. The Macedonian historiography has permanently falsified historical facts, to the extent of naming the origin of Skanderbeg, Nobel Prize laureate Mother Teresa, as well as Alexander the Great as Macedonians (Stavileci, 2009: 14). Macedonian leaders have reluctantly set about implementing the Framework

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Agreement. They grudgingly accept the tenets of the peace accord but have no real desire to reward the Albanians for bringing their country to the brink of war. "Most Macedonian officials harbor two principal fears: first, that the Albanians' appetites for more political and economic advantages will never be satisfied, despite the concessions made under the Framework Agreement; and second, that the real goal of the Albanians is federalization of the country, essentially partitioning Macedonia between the overwhelmingly ethnic Albanian region in the west and the rest of the country. Most government officials have no confidence that such a scheme, would lead to the enduring preservation of Macedonia as a unitary state. Not all ethnic Albanians want to see Macedonia divided into ethnic enclaves through federalization. Some of the country's political leaders on both sides of the ethnic divide sincerely believe that complete implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement will bring lasting peace and preserve the territorial integrity of the state" (Perason, 2002).

These opinions are not so productive having in mind the nature and the complexity of the country itself. Ichak Adizes, who in the beginning of 90's served as a consultant of Macedonian government, in one of his books states that he doubts that Macedonia can survive long on this basis, whilst the number of Albanian population is constantly growing, and who do not even feel to be Macedonian. Furthermore, he states that if Macedonia does not join NATO and the EU, it will be in serious threat, both economically and politically. The financial crisis only can worsen the problems that were serious since the very beginning (Adizhes, 2012: 135). The view of Adizhes again highlights the importance of Euro-Atlantic integration processes for Macedonia and the other countries of Western Balkans, as the only way for heading towards the stability and economic development of the region, opinion that we addressed earlier in this paper.

Maybe one of the most illustrative views on the fate of Balkan countries is the one given by Bugajski who thinks that any further deterioration in Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia will have a destabilizing effect throughout the west Balkans. While the worst-case-scenario is a spreading war, a more likely scenario is "insipid destabilization" characterized by deepening political instability, economic retardation, a freeze on foreign investment, and the further growth of illicit business and international criminal networks. "This will estrange the Balkans from the European process and the trans-Atlantic structures. It will also guarantee a costly and permanent security headache for the Alliance that can become a bounty for Russian interests, international criminals, rogue states, fundamentalist extremists, and other anti-NATO and anti-European elements." (Bugajski, 2002).

These predictions regarding the political and socioeconomic status of the Western Balkan countries have come to reality nowadays. The permanent regional crisis, the failure of European diplomacy in enforcing political stability and economic prosperity for the Western Balkan countries, and the infinite negotiation processes, have had a negative impact on the integration of the Western Balkan. Moreover, the imposed deals from the European diplomats for overcoming the political crises, such as the case in Macedonia, the prolonged negotiations and the permanent changes due to the lack of political culture and responsibility, have created "invincible" political leaders in the country that are putting the entire diplomacy on a totally different level.

It is very important to emphasize that the Euro integration process is incredibly essential for the stability of the entire region, especially when the entire Europe is facing the global refugee crisis and religious extremism. These processes can be supported and led only by responsible politicians who can take the role of a regional political leadership.

Having in mind that the Albanians are focused in maintaining the stability of the region, in building regional partnerships and cooperation, and their unique mixture of religions, we can expect Albanian politicians and leaders to be promoters of the new positive changes of the region. If we refer to Smock who says that religion in many parts of the world is contributing to violent conflict, although exaggerated in many cases. “This is well documented and broadly accepted. Usually disregarded, however, are opportunities to employ the assets of religious leaders and religious institutions to promote peace. Traditional diplomacy has been particularly remiss in its neglect of the religious approach to peacemaking” (Smock, 2006).

In this regard, Albanians can become a connection among bordering countries and can be seen as a model of interfaith coexistence. In numerous appearances, Albanian political and religious leaders have shown to the world their support they give to the interfaith harmony and the mutual understanding between religions. This shows a courage and determination to stand in front of the new challenges that are occupying the modern policymaking.

Additionally, referring to the political crisis in Macedonia, the country should seek more seriously true and essential participation of the Albanians political leaders in the policymaking for finding solutions for the many problems the country faces, starting from the political crisis, economic stagnation and international pressure for reaching the requirements for European integration processes. Also, it has to be mentioned that Albanians in Macedonia did not contribute at all in creating the latest political crisis that lasts for several years now, which predominantly erupted among Macedonian governing party and main Macedonian opposition party, regarding the work of secret service agency and phone tapping scandal. Besides, for many years Albanians in Macedonia have been also victims of illegal persecution by the government agencies for what there is a need for further investigation from experts and the international community engaged in the country. Any different approach towards the problem, without involving the Albanian political factor in Macedonia, will not give credible and lasting results for the future of the country.

Finally, Albanians in the Balkans should be in the focus of the European politics and should be seen as a partner for overcoming the difficulties the region faces regarding the integration processes and the increased threat of extremism. As stated by Bugajski, “the Albanian population in the Balkans is overwhelmingly young and growing faster than that of any other ethnic group, even given the high rates of emigration. It is a dynamic population whose energies must be channelled toward constructive and productive causes such as economic development, entrepreneurship, education, political responsibility, and international integration. Otherwise, frustration and shrinking opportunities could encourage the growth of radical and armed groups or feed the scourge of organized criminality” (Bugajski, 2002).

The engagement and the determination of the European diplomacy in facilitating and guiding Albanian leaders can result with great political achievements in future towards integration and stability. This will also give a strong sign to any side that prefers nondemocratic means for reaching certain goals to retreat and to give up the politics of division and instability. It will also give a sign that the issue of “Great Albania” is just an imagination promoted by the opponents of Albanians in the region. In addition to this, as stated in an earlier paper (Vinca, 1992: 117), we will not have anymore an overall solution to the problem of the Albanians in the Balkans, but there will be partial solutions of the Albanian issue in the republics that will come out of Yugoslavia.

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Article Info

Received: July 12 2016

Accepted: August 22 2016
