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Relations Between Albanian Muslims and Christians at the End of the 19th and Beginning of the 20th Century According to Bulgarian Sources

SUMMARY

At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, some of the most prominent Bulgarian researchers became interested in Albanian culture, religion and other features. They made a valuable contribution by conducting a lot of field research in regions inhabited by Albanians. One of the most impressive results of their work is the description of religious tolerance between the Islam majority and the Christian minority in Albania. This brief text analyzes the main conclusions of their studies.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to outline the religious situation in Albanian-inhabited areas in the late 19th and early 20th century. Bulgarian

ian diplomats, scientists, writers etc. made numerous observations about the religious situation among Albanians. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, interest in Albanians living in Bulgaria increased. Scholars like Vasil Kynchov, Nedjalko Kulushev (N. Marenin), Vasil Zlatarski, Stefan Dimitrov, L. Miletich, Jordan Ivanov, Dimitar Gadzanov and many others were among the most prominent Bulgarian professors who made multiple valuable contributions to various fields like history, geography, archeology, ethnography and linguistics, and publications (several books and a lot of articles) regarding the different aspects of the life of Albanians. A large amount of empirical data were collected about Albanians in Bulgaria and enabled further sound investigations. This is only a brief survey, with focus on the analysis of the religious situation in Albanian-inhabited areas, of the relationship between various religious communities among the Albanians, and of their main religious characteristics

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according to Bulgarian researchers. An important source of the religious status of the Albanian population is the activity of the Albanian diaspora in Sofia. In the last decades of the 19th century, an Albanian was established community in the capital city of Bulgaria, which was determined to make a considerable impact on the development of Albanian culture and education. The Albanian newspapers and magazines dedicated numerous pages to religious matters and relevant events.

STATISTICS

There are statistical data about the number of Muslims and Christians in the Albanian lands. To avoid speculations about the objectivity of these evaluations in areas inhabited by Albanians, information from diverse other statistics is also quoted. They are arranged in the chronological order of publication.

Statistics by Marenin:

The first Bulgarian statistical investigation of the number of the adherents of different denominations was compiled by the Bulgarian diplomat and historian N. Marenin. According to Marenin, the majority of the Albanians were Muslims, making this denomination the most influential one in the country. The majority of the Albanian Muslims was represented by secular Sunnis along with a significant Bektashi Shia minority. Christianity was present in two forms: Catholic and Orthodox, practiced by a significant ratio of the population, making it the 2nd largest religion in the country. Muslims were found throughout the country, while Orthodox believers lived in the south and Catholics in the north. However, this division was not strict, and many areas had several denominations. Marenin estimated, based on different official Muslim and consular statistics, that at the end of the 19th century, approximately 300,000 Catholics, 212,000 Orthodox Christians and 703,000 Muslims (Marenin, 1902:26)

lived in a compact ethnic territory, totalling (Ghegs and Tosks together) 1,215,000. This number excludes the Albanians living outside this ethnic domain (in other areas of the Ottoman Empire) as well as those who had lost their native language (in Epirus and Thessaly) (Marenin, 1902:25).

Other important Bulgarian statistics about the Albanian population include one compiled by Vasil Kynchov (1901) for the Bulgarian Ekzarhat (1902, 1908–1912), and another one by Atanas Shopov (1908–1909) and Dimitar Gadzanov (1916). These authors focused on describing the Eastern Albanian territories in Macedonia.

Bulgarian statistics about the population of Kosovo in the period of World War I are also of interest. In this paper only the key statistical facts are presented.

Statistics by Gadzanov:

Poduevo: 24,973 Muslims

Gjilan: 40,518 Muslims and 1760 Catholics

Prishtina: 40,646 Muslims and 2420 Catholics

Ferizaj: 22,545 Muslims and 144 Catholics.

Total headcount in Prishtina county: 128,682 Muslims and 4324 Catholics.

Prizren: 80,000 Muslims and 5300 Catholics.

Other important statistics include works by Stefan Mladenov, by Stefan Dimitrov and by Anastas Ishirkov. For further details about the extension of the current Islamic religion, see József Varga, Balázs Cseh et al.

OBSERVATIONS AND FOREIGN PROPAGANDA

Every Bulgarian scientist shared the opinion that religious practice was generally lax compared to other countries, fewer Albanians considered religion to be a predominant factor in their lives. According to Marenin, Albanians were not truly dedicated to religion, rather their tribal identity

was of key significance (Marenin, 1902:28). In this period Albanians were under Ottoman rule and belonged to the Ottoman Empire based on the doctrines of Islam, and they provided good examples of peaceful coexistence of peoples of different religions (Falus, 2018).

In his opinion Albanians were not particularly religious. Catholics, Orthodox believers and Muslims were all indifferent to religious rituals. Mixing the rituals of the different religions could often be observed among them. To confirm his assumption, Marenin gives examples of the practices seen in Debra and Gostivar: Muslims celebrated the holidays held in honour of Saint Ilia and Saint Nicola. The scientist adds that these Muslims also lit candles at monasteries, prayed to Saint Paraskev and visited Christian churches, while at the same time also respecting Mohamed and celebrating Bairam (Marenin, 1902:29). In these regions shared culture facilitated religious tolerance. Under Islamic law, in the Ottoman Empire Jews and Christians lived in safety. They were allowed to practice their religions and maintain their local institutions (Falus, 2018:238).

Marenin was of the opinion that Albanians were all indifferent to religion and it had no influence on their relationship to other Albanians (Marenin, 1902:32).

Another opinion on this matter, considered to be of a great interest, is the one expressed by Gadzanov. He talks about the spread of Muslim denominations among Albanians, especially of the Bektashi *teke* (order). Gadzanov conducted research in Tetovo and Elbasan and found that the most beautiful *teke* is the one in Tetovo (Gadzanov, 1993:235). He describes the marble temples of Rezhop Pasha in detail. He is said to have been amazed by this temple (Gadzanov, 1993:235). He also gave detailed descriptions of other Muslim denominations and religious schools in Macedonia. During his 1916 travels, Gadzov made some observations on their movement and

locations, mainly in Macedonia, but also in Eastern Albania (Gadzanov, 1993:236).

Bulgarian researchers recorded attempts by foreigners at inciting personal interests by religious institutions. Marenin informs about Greek influence, through the establishment of Greek schools and churches, which was strong enough to have power over 100,000 Orthodox Albanians during the 19th and 20th centuries (Marenin, 1902:28).

The same observation can be made about influence from Turkey. At the end of 19th century Vasil Kynchov wrote that half of the population in Skopje was under the influence of Turkey (Kynchov, 1970:30). According to Ishirkov, most of the Turks in Prizren influenced Albanians and religion was the principal basis of their identity (Ishirkov, 1993:109).

ALBANIAN DIASPORA IN SOFIA

The Albanians who lived in Sofia did not focus on religious matters, they rather ignored them. Several articles and public discussions address this issue. In the first edition of "Drita" discusses religious split: "Albanians are Albanians before taking any religion into account, whether Christian or Muslim. They are Albanians in the first place... Dervishes are supported by Albanian labour, but most of them are simply mean, and used by Athens" (Sokolova, 1979:116). The Albanians living in Sofia advocate the idea that religion is something that can be changed, while language is the essential factor, as it does not change for a nation. They criticize any foreign influence which uses religion as a power to serve personal interests. According to an opinion that expresses this concept: "Religion and faith in the hands of Turks and Greeks are nothing else, but an iron chain of control" (Sokolova, 1979:117). Prevent is of the opinion that the intrigues of Greek institutional religion were behind some serious crimes, like the murder of Pope Christo

Negovani and of Spiro Kosturi (Sokolova, 1979:117). The main thesis which the Albanians living in Sofia support via the media and newspapers is that religion is a means of foreign influence, serving personal and political interests, which is highly damaging and harmful to national identity and national progress. This clearly stated position about the role of the religion in political and social life results in building the impression in Bulgarians that there is a gap and a lack of importance in the role of religion among Albanians.

THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON ALBANIAN POLITICS IN THE REVIEWED PERIOD

On the one hand, religions had a significant role in political movements and processes in Albania at certain points. Catholic and Muslim political organizations and uprisings were also inspired by religious factors. The obstructive role of the Mirdita Catholic clan was well-known in establishing a stable Albanian state and institutions in the years after the declaration of independence in 1912. The Mirdita leaders pushed to oppose the central government also on religious motives. On the other hand, politicians of Muslim origin, like Esat Pasha Toptani, also used faith for their political ambitions.

According to some Bulgarian data, Esat Pasha's emissaries stimulated the Muslim revolt in the central parts of Albania (Georgiev, 2019:368). Finally, Esat Pasha was ousted from Albanian political life, but instead of reconciliation, he inspired an additional pro-Muslim political movement, started in the Debra region by Arif Hikmet's band. Even Austro-Hungarian military support and military instructors from the Netherlands were unable to enforce the detachments used against the rebels (Georgiev, 2019:368–369).

But these facts and events could not change the mainstream cultural, religious and political life among Albanians, which

was based on religious tolerance and on lay state-building processes.

CONCLUSIONS

All sources are engaged in the observation of and research into the period between the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century, and reveal that there is religious tolerance among Albanians, despite the fact that there are different denominations. Religious tolerance in Albania was born of national expediency and a general lack of religious convictions. Some arguments provided by Bulgarian researchers support this statement:

- 1) There are no reported cases of violence among Albanians based on religious differences and conflicts.
- 2) Religion is not a main factor in the processes of building national identity or a national state.
- 3) A great variety of religious practices can be observed, which leads to their syncretism.

In addition to this, some negative aspects of the role of religion are also highlighted. First of all, the emotional manipulation of certain large groups of Albanians subject to foreign influence exerted in political interest. This leads to the assimilation of Albanian culture into Turkish or Greek culture.

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