



The historical context of the birth of neo-Albanianism, a reformist tendency

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Abstract

This article aims to concisely point toward an approach marginally delivered by scholars known otherwise as, Neo-Albanianism or Neo-Albanian movement of the '30s in the early 20th century. This is a period in which the already realized historical need of establishing the Albanian state, necessarily protected the inspiration towards the making of Albanians. As Aurel Plasari says in "Counter-World of Branko Merxhani", Merxhani appears as one of the most representative configurators and galvanizers of the social and philosophical thought of the Albanian intelligence of the '30s. Merxhani's merit lies in the fact that he tried to orient Albanian social and political thought towards the western way in general and towards positivism in particular, precisely at the period when the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the Marxist ideology was rapidly spreading in the international spiritual environment. This article provides a brief overview of Branko Merxhani's ideas and his positivist approach to many social phenomena in Albania in the 1930s, such as the idea of the change of Albanian society, the role of philosophy and science as a promoter of transformations, the role and the interrelations between the individual and society and so on.

Keywords: Neo-Albanianism, Positivism, Albanianism, Collective feeling, Social change, Reform movement

1. Introduction

Was Albania 'made'? An analysis of the historical conditions and the situation in which Albania was in the period between the two world wars is important to understand the spiritual constitution of Albanians in general and the place and role of social elites and in particular Neo-Albanianism. Are we still living in the period of Albanianism or neo-Albanianism? Neo-Albanianism as a mental and intellectual movement is preceded by a period which, from the point of view of many authors, is considered the period of triumph and failure of nation-states (History of the Balkans Georges Castellan p. 418).

The people of the Balkans generally emerged from the long seven-year period of World War I exhausted. Economically weak, politically perturbed, and disappointed by the so-called Treaty of Versailles, according to which, certain territories were cut and attached together according to the appetite of the former sovereigns. The Balkans, in their greed for expansion and territory, nourished nationalism instead of orientation based on the free self-determination of Anglo-Saxon-type peoples and democracies. George Castellan describes this situation quite clearly in his book "History of the Balkans" when he says: "*Old ethnic contradictions had already been transformed into hatred and the affirmation of national identity had taken aggressive and xenophobic forms.*" George Castellan, "History of the Balkans", p. 418. It was precisely these contradictions that in some cases made state structures weak and consequently strengthened authoritarian and dictatorial tendencies, and in some others, such as the case of Albania, questioned their existence and even risked dissolution. The Balkans served as the last resort to satisfy the parties in conflict, although not everyone's appetites were satisfied.

But, as George Castellan writes,

when the moment of savage division between the victors and the defeated came, only a few voices were heard, the "good ones": on the one hand, those of the Allied camp - Serbs, Romanians, Greeks; against those who fought alongside Germany and Austria-Hungary - the Bulgarians and the Turks." George Castellan. "History of the Balkans." p. 420

2. Instability of the Balkan Peninsula

Let's take a brief look at the situation on the Balkan Peninsula, which also reflected the post-World War I crisis. Although in 1918 it was more of a program than a reality, the Yugoslav union had triumphed, the "Greater Unitary Romania" had to be ratified, Greece, traumatized after the catastrophe of Asia Minor in 1922, plunged into the epidemic that had hit Europe and in 1936 recognizes the dictatorship of General Metaxas, Bulgaria in the twenty years between the two wars will be dominated by coups and riots and although a more egalitarian society than its Greek and Romanian neighbours, the fragile foundation of power and irredentism make it quite weak. This is generally the panorama of the Balkans in the period between the two world wars. The question naturally arises: what about Albania?

2.1 Giving Birth to a New Albania

Seen in the Balkan context, Albania is insecure. Albania starts its journey with the efforts of the Renaissance patriots who thought that by moderating Turkey they would achieve the dream of the Albanians, being liberated from the yoke of the Ottoman Empire. One of the paths that the Renaissance patriots wanted to follow to achieve autonomy and then the complete liberation of the country was the political struggle within the empire to overthrow the sultan's absolutism and establish a constitutional regime, which would recognize the rights to the autonomy of non-Turkish peoples. Many Albanians had served with glory in high leadership positions of the Ottoman government, some others had become famous leaders in other countries such as Greece, Romania, Egypt, Bulgaria, etc. Mit'hat Frashëri writes in this regard: "Until now, Albanians have lived very little for themselves: their deeds, blood, and gifts have gone in the interest of others. They are devoted in the flesh and spirit to the good of others. Now they have to live and work for themselves, for their Albania." *Skëndo 1919, 27*

It should be noted that unlike other people of the Balkans, Albanians have begun the effort to build Albania, after a long period of savage and corrupt Turkish rule, which left no room for the development of local leadership or institutions necessary for self-government and brought, even later in the period from 1912 to 1925, fourteen ineffective governments.

The support of the Great Powers and the solidarity of the Albanian communities abroad was crucial at the time, it was embodied in the Congress of Trieste in which on March 1, 1913, 150 representatives gathered from the United States of America, Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey, Egypt, Turkey, Italy and of course Albania, and launched resolutions calling for the recognition of Albania's independence to the Conference of Ambassadors in London, which was underway. The provisional government of Vlora rose and worked under the constant pressure and heat of the siege of Shkodra by the Serbs, the occupation of northern Albania by the Serbo-Montenegrins. In the south, the bombing by the Greeks in December 1912 of defenseless and unfortified Vlora marks the beginning of the occupation of southern Albania, which was followed by a second phase of the so-called cultural aggression. The long odyssey of internal disputes and especially the disputes over the Albanian National Bank, the rivalry between the government of Vlora and that of Esat Pasha in Durrës, the plot of Beqir Grebene in the hopes that Turkey would regain the lost territories, the discussions between the International Control Commission and Esat Pasha Toptani to force him to resign from power in order to accept the placement of the Albanian Crown Prince Vid who would later abdicate the throne and on September 2nd would leave Albania to leave power to the government of Esat Pasha, riots and the Fan Noli government, preceded by a series of other governments in the intervening period, show the difficult situation and best portray the ground on which new ideas of neo-Albanianism would be nurtured.

The Albanian state will be born as a historical necessity but it would be impossible without the will of the Great Powers and the extraordinary contribution of the American President Woodrow Wilson. "In the world family," writes Edwin Jacques, "there have been very few countries born with such great poverty in preparation for governance." *Edwin Jacques Albanians, The history of the Albanian people from antiquity to the present day. Page 372.*

Albanians, unlike other peoples of the Balkans, have been governed, although in many cases by Albanians, they have never been able to have an Albanian state, state administration and Albanian cultural, educational, health, military, legal institutions and this has made them lack in fact what Edwin Jacques calls preparation for governance.

But how have Albanians been able to preserve their identity, not disappear and assimilate, to survive the invasions, wars, chauvinist and national chauvinist appetites of the Balkan neighbors and beyond, throughout their troubled history?

For some scholars, who should be viewed with skepticism, one way has been the ability of Albanians to take advantage of vassalage and, even these scholars, go so far as to claim, for example in the case of Turkey, that it is the Albanians who left the Ottoman Empire 500 years behind in development and not the other way around.

Meanwhile, we may refer to Krist Maloki's point of view when he says:

“... Tirana has a merit, for which the whole true Albanian intelligence should be envious, and that merit is called: state instinct. *Kija inat e folja hakun!* (Hate them but recognize their worth!). With a special genius, Tirana has been able to adopt the formalities of the nation-state and with a special genius, it has understood the importance of those three basic elements of the state.” Krist Maloki, *Reflections* pg. 127 Prishtina 2005.

Is the creation of the state the work of popular instincts? Or is it the aspiration of intellectual elites like those of our renaissance who, as Enis Sulstarova says in her book *Nationalist Discourse in Albania*, created a series of myths through which they sought to awaken the Albanians, that is, to make them aware of their origin and history? At the same time, they sought to prove to the European public that the Albanians were an ancient nation with a rich history and culture, and, as such, they deserved to have their independent state. Enis Sulstarova *Nationalist Discourse in Albania* (pg. 43) states are not made, they are born, they are internally moulded, they are shaped by history, even in the case when they are created as the will of the greats, as in the case of Yugoslavia, they are destined to disintegrate in Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia Macedonia, or nation-states.

2.2 Politics, Religion, Economy, and Culture in the Region

Politically Albania remains unstable with vulnerable territorial sovereignty, in the north it is divided, between the Italians in Shkodra and the Serbs who had reached as far as Shkumbin, in the south, the Greeks, Italians, and French along with the Austro-Hungarians competed for hegemony. Albania was divided, the Albanians, although strongly united under a spiritual constitution that stemmed from centuries of love for the homeland and the mother tongue, were divided in many directions.

First, feudalism had created great social divisions, a social gap between large families and peasants, and the lack of a middle class to bridge this divide made this gap deeper.

Second it came religious divisions. Albanians were divided into Muslims, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholics. Each group was oriented from its religion to the respective religious language, relevant religious rites, celebrations, customs, specific cultural traditions, and this triple religious identity further emphasized the social gaps, creating an unfavourable bed to the detriment of the great cause, of Albanianism.

Third is the great economic backwardness. Lack of roads and bridges made the territory impenetrable, means of transport were lacking, and movement was done almost exclusively with animals on footpaths and this further affected the deepening of the divisions between different areas and that is why in Albania there is so much cultural isobar and dialectal diversity.

The country's economy was in a state of closed natural economy, with no production, no trade, and the majority of the population made a living from what is produced in the small and backward family economy. Without production, exports, and very few imports, the Albanian economy was suffering.

Fourth, the great cultural backwardness, lack of health care and illiteracy. Severe economic conditions, lack of infrastructure, extreme poverty, lack of educational and health personnel, lack of state institutions and governance by the *bajraks*, (Ottoman military units) made 95% of Albanians in this period illiterate.

2.3. Strength to Form a National Identity

Albania was in the conditions of existence and perhaps this has made the Albanians preserve and strengthen more and more their national identity. Here is what Edwin Jacques says about this period:

“...., In that country lived 2 million tough, hospitable, hardworking, brave, loyal, proud and independent people. How many times these Albanians, determined to have their own government, schools, language, newspapers and cultural society, were mercilessly oppressed. But in the end, they united to face the world and to rule the fate of the nation, which had nothing left but the common language, the red flag of Skanderbeg with the black double-headed Albanian and pride in ancient ethnic identity.” Edwin Jacques *Albanians, The history of the Albanian people from antiquity to the present day*. Page 373.

This is an age of founding, an age of great decisions. Albania in my view has not been ‘made’ yet. This period would be the period of Albanianism, and this is where our political history begins. Merxhani himself would say:

"This is the day that starts the full construction of political Albanianism. Until that day Albanianism presented a second-hand view; had only a familial and theoretical character. It still had an amorphous appearance, with no politics, no color, no soul, no conscience; a complex that had lost any homogeneity of its own; a melted chair lying inside it." Branko Merxhani, *Works*, Tirana: Plejad 2003 p.302.

2.4 Modernization of Ideas

Although Albania had become independent and recognized by the great powers, the difficult situation, both with neighbors and within the country, raised as an imperative of the moment Albanianism, i.e. the formation of the Albanian state, territorial integrity, linguistic unity, national spirit, the establishment of state institutions, the establishment of an education and health system that was almost non-existent, etc.

The mission of the Albanian intelligence would be firstly to understand this era and secondly to take over the fate of the country to bring about the metamorphosis towards the modernization, progress, and Europeanization of the Albanian society.

It is important to know where to start, success depends on this, says one of the contributors of Neo-Albanianism, Father Anton Harapi.

"A new life has put the Albanian ahead. He will be modernized. He could not escape this current and this change, but even if he could, he would not escape. The work is now so; in what way is the Albanian doing this metamorphosis, when life can be taken in many ways? ..."One will hold him by the tail and one will hold him by the head." Father Anton Harapi, *Spiritual Value, Contribution to the mental treatment of Albanians*, 2009, pg. 9.

From the analysis of the historical period of the 20s and 30s, a period in which the spirit of the tendency of Europeanism will come to life and grow, obviously, the great external and internal clashes, the great socio-political problems, the economic impossibility, and the stressed backwardness, illiteracy and great structural and super-structural deficiencies, prove the fact that Albania was at the crossroads of history, towards the east, in the lap of the cemeteries, as Merxhani himself puts it, towards Turkey and Orientalism or towards the west, towards Western civilization. This situation would significantly affect the dilemma of the spiritual life and the approaches of the intellectual elite of the time, which, as expressed by the representatives of Neo-Albanianism, in the war motto "Old" or "Young", where it is not the biological age that differs in old and young, but their worldview, morals, beliefs, way of living and thinking of the world and life, it is their orientation towards Orientalism or the past, and Occidentalism or the future.

That part of the intellectuals who were nostalgic for the past are characterized as individualistic, as people who in the name of the armchair or a share, were ready to become when needed, patriots, monarchists or Bolsheviks, progressives and reactionaries, all at the same time. Krist Maloki connects Orientalism with laziness, idleness, exaggeration, heartless greediness, and as he puts it:

"The Albanian Oriental expects all good things for himself - sponging from others; the world for him is an inexhaustible source of tools, pleasures, and delights which he uses in every way and method, without asking where he goes and what he kills", Krist Maloki, *Refleksione Prishtinë* 2005, p. 153

Between the "old" and the "young" would appear two or three other currents, those who were associated with the state administration or "neo-Albanians of Tirana", the rest of those who lined up in the pages of the magazine "Leka" who considered the debate between the old and the young as a debate between two groups who had different views because they were two different age groups. The third current Maloki, tells us

"was the only one, who approached more or less the essence of the problem, described the war between the Old and the Young as a war of mind-sets and worldviews, or better: as a war between Orientalism and Occidentalism in our country "Krist Maloki, *Reflections Prishtina* 2005, p. 152

It was precisely these thinkers of Neo-Albanianism, inspired by European philosophy, educated, some in the east and some in the west in the best universities of these countries, who would give their ideas, thoughts, approaches to the development of Albania and the path that it should follow both in terms of the state-building model that Albanians should follow towards a developed western Europe, and in terms of the political models to be followed, as well as the economic and socio-cultural models.

3. Conclusion

For Neo-Albanianism, Albania had already been 'made' in the sense of sovereignty. For it to be rightfully ranked where it belonged beside the countries of Europe, the imperative of the time was to become Albanians in terms of the evolutionary transformation that Albanian society had to make towards the European citizen in formation and mentality, in behavior and action, in moral and political, in ideas and philosophy. This remains imperative even today. These ideas of neo-Albanianism, when the social erosion, the spiritual decline, the

nihilization of Albanian values, the abandonment of the homeland, the underestimation of everything Albanian up to the idea that today is gaining more and more space in the collective thought, that Albania cannot be 'made' with Albanians, echo currently and make the formation of the collective feeling among Albanians, that Albanians should be 'made', imperative.

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