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The idea of a ‘Greater Albania’, then and now (I)

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6/14/2015



The Albanian factor, an integral part of which involves the formation of a ‘Greater Albania’ in the region – a state uniting every area with an Albanian population – is playing an increasingly active role in developments in the Balkans and surrounding areas.

According to a poll by the Gallup Balkan Monitor, at least 75 per cent of respondents in Kosovo and 70 per cent in Albania support the idea of a ‘Greater Albania’, although in 2006 just 2.5 per cent of Kosovo Albanians considered unification with Albania the best way of solving Kosovo’s problems (1).

International institutions and influential global powers are ignoring the threat posed by the

intensification of the Albanian factor in the Balkans and in Europe as a whole. They are trying to present the actions of Kosovo separatists, the anti-government uprising of Macedonian Albanians, the extremism of Albanians in south Serbia's Presevo Valley and the underground activities of Albanian nationalists in Montenegro and Greece as isolated events caused by specific social and economic or cultural and ethnic reasons.

The Albanian elite prefer not to use the terms 'Greater Albania' and 'Pan-Albanianism', using instead the term «Albanian national question», interpreted as «the movement for the liberation of the Albanian lands from foreign occupation and their unification into one single national state» (2). According to prominent Albanian intellectual Fatos Lubonja, «the Albanians' dream of being united one day has been a part of their collective consciousness» without becoming a political programme because «Albanians have always been very weak» (3).

On maps of 'Greater Albania' widely circulated in Albania, Kosovo and other Balkan regions, this entity, with Skopje in present-day Macedonia as its capital, is labelled as 'Ethnic Albania'. It includes within its borders Albania itself, Kosovo, the south Serbian municipalities of Presevo, Medvedja and Bujanovac with mixed Serbian-Albanian populations, significant parts of Macedonia and Montenegro, including its capital Podgorica, and the Greek region of Epirus.

The idea of forming a 'Greater Albania' was first developed by delegates of the Albanian League, which gathered in the Kosovo town of Prizren in 1878. They adopted a programme that contained items such as «fighting to the last drop of blood against any annexation of Albanian territories» and «the unification of all territories populated by Albanians into a single province» (4). One of the ideologists of the Albanian movement, Pashko Vasa Shkodrani (a Catholic who served as the governor of Lebanon in the Ottoman Empire), stated back in the 19th century that «the religion of Albanians is Albanianism».



At a meeting of the League of Prizren in July 1879, the then leader of the Albanian national movement's radical wing, Abdyl Frashëri, published a manifesto on the formation of a provisional government of autonomous Albania, the territory of which was to include Albania,

Kosovo, the Macedonian regions of Debar and Skopje, and the Greek city of Ioannina. «Let us all be Albanians and create Albania», Abdyl Frashëri stated (5).

The suppression of the Prizren League by the Ottoman authorities in 1881 moved the fight for a 'Greater Albania' into the mainstream of cultural and ethnic propaganda for a time, but at the turn of the 20th century, the Albanian movement received a fresh impetus. Its leaders regarded all the vilayets of the Ottoman Empire inhabited by Albanians as its base. In June 1911 in Podgorica, members of a local Albanian committee prepared a memorandum called 'The Red Book', which provided for the establishment of an autonomous Albania within the Balkans made up of every region inhabited by Albanians. At that time, one of Albania's leaders, Ismail Qemali, openly called for Albanians to drive out «Christian Slavs» using rifles. Later, when he was head of the provisional Albanian government proclaimed in 1912, he demanded that the great powers cleanse «Albanian land» of Slavs and Greeks. (6)

Russian diplomatic representatives in the Balkans confirmed the growing influence of the Albanian factor and warned of the threat it posed. As the Russian consul in Vlorë, Alexander Petryaev, reported in 1912, «the Albanian people, who have never before played a political role, are acquiring such force under Turkish rule that they are leaving their region, expanding their borders, and taking up a different national character with a glorious historical past» (7).

The Albanian Declaration of Independence, prepared together with representatives from a number of great powers, was passed on 28 November 1912 at an Albanian national assembly in Vlorë. Beforehand, Ismail Qemali visited Vienna, where he discussed his plans with the leaders of Austro-Hungary and specified the borders of Albania, which included, along with Albania itself, the Macedonian cities of Bitola and Skopje, the Greek city of Ioannina, and the Kosovo cities of Pristina and Prizren. The Conference of Ambassadors of the great powers that opened in December 1912 in London did not recognise the Albanian Declaration of Independence and decided to hand over many of the territories being claimed by the leaders of the Albanian movement to neighbouring Balkan countries. In return, however, activists of the 'Greater Albanian' movement obtained grounds for demanding that «the will of all Albanians» be realised. Leaving the London conference in anger after its participants refused to unite Kosovo with Albania, one of the leaders of the Albanian national movement, Isa Boletini, promised: «When the spring comes, we will manure the plains of Kosovo with the bones of Serbs, for we Albanians have suffered too much to forget».

At the end of the First World War, the great powers as a whole kept the principles of Albania's division among its Balkan neighbours unchanged, allowing Albanian nationalists to maintain ever since that «nearly half» of those whose identities could be defined as «Albanian» remain outside the Albanian state.

The idea of a 'Greater Albania' experienced a renaissance during the Second World War when, in 1939, Germany and Italy united Italian-occupied Albania with the vast territory of its neighbouring Balkan states. In May 1941, the ruling Albanian Fascist Party triumphantly announced that nearly all Balkan lands inhabited by Albanians were now united with Albania (9). The only partial exception was the Greek region of Epirus ('Chameria' in Albanian toponymy). There, the Italian occupying authorities appointed an Albanian High Commissioner,

Xhemil Dino, but the region itself remained under the control of the Italian military command based in Athens. This situation continued right up until these territories were liberated first from Italian and then German occupation. As part of the post-war settlement, the anti-Hitler coalition decided to restore Albania to its former borders, which largely corresponded to the decisions of the 1912-1913 Conference of Ambassadors of the great powers in London.



After the end of the Second World War, ideas regarding a ‘Greater Albania’ were pushed to the background for a while, including in the priorities of Albania, which at that time was keen on the idea of creating a Balkan federation.

The idea of a Balkan federation was, in principle, shared by the leaders of the three main states concerned – Albania, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. One scenario envisaged the supranational union of Albania not just with Yugoslavia (and therefore Kosovo) and Bulgaria, but also Romania and even Greece (despite the complexity of Albanian-Greek relations). This large-scale project was primarily supported by Bulgaria’s communist leader, Georgi Dimitrov. In contrast, Yugoslavian leader Josip Broz Tito was in favour of creating the South Slavic Union (the Union of South Slavic People’s Republics) as the second phase of the unification. The first phase was to be the unification of Albania with Yugoslavia. Belgrade was convinced – and in this was met with understanding from Tirana – that an Albanian-Yugoslav union would not only become the core of the Balkan federation, but would also be the best possible solution to the Kosovo problem by including Kosovo «in an Albanian Federal unit».⁹

According to the memoirs of Milovan Djilas, an ally of Tito, Belgrade and Tirana were already, in the last few months of the Second World War, «more or less of the viewpoint that Albania should unite with Yugoslavia», which would resolve the Albanian question in Yugoslavia since «it would make it possible to unite a considerable and compact Albanian minority with Albania as a separate republic in the Yugoslavian-Albanian federation» (10). Commenting on a conversation with Enver Hoxha following his visit to Belgrade, the Soviet envoy to Albania, D.S. Chuvakhin, noted in his diary on 3 July 1946 that the Yugoslavian leader, according to Hoxha, «believes it necessary to make every effort to join the population of Kosovo and Metohija with the population of Albania» (11).

The 1948 Soviet-Yugoslav conflict buried the idea of a Balkan federation, but did not affect the development of the ‘Greater Albania’ idea. In the subsequent period of Hoxha’s rule, ‘Greater

Albanian' sentiment was actively disseminated among the population of Kosovo through publishing and propaganda activities, including through Pristina University. Participants of the National Conference of Ethnographic Sciences that took place in Tirana in 1976 pointedly noted that «nearly five million Albanians» continue to remain outside of Albania itself (12). And in 1981, when the situation in Kosovo intensified as a result of anti-government demonstrations by local Albanians, Albania's leaders developed plans for Albanian army units to be brought into the region.

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