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**THE INFLUENCE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCH ON THE CHRISTIAN
ALBANIANS' NATIONAL ORIENTATION IN THE PERIOD BEFORE 1912 –
THE LOCAL ASPECT**

ABSTRACT

The interaction between the ethnic-national elements in Macedonia is susceptible to various interpretations. As is often the case these interpretations are to a large degree dependent on subsequent developments. For this reason the interpretations have often been linked to the national rivalry in the late Ottoman Empire and the national building projects of the Balkan states. I do believe that this focus has to a certain degree obscured other patterns of coexistence between the various population elements and their way of interacting. We should not underestimate the significance of traditional patterns of coexistence and keep in mind that during the late 19th and early 20th century the situation was very dynamic and in a state of flux between old and new.

In the case of Macedonia, which in the period from the Berlin treaty (1878) to the Balkan wars (1912-1913) became the main area of national rivalry among the Balkan nations, the Albanian national movement is generally acknowledged to have been a late bloomer. There are several reasons for this. One important reason is their religious division into Muslims (sunni and bektashi), Orthodox Christians, and Catholics. This should be seen in connection with the socio-political organization of the Ottoman Empire where the various communities were organised on a religious basis. The role of the Christian Albanians has attracted less scholarly attention than the Muslims, since they were secondary from both a numerical and political point of view. The Orthodox Christians had their own socio-political institutions within the Ottoman system centred on the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople. The Albanians were, however, only one of many nationalities that belonged to the Eastern (or Greek) Orthodox millet. Unlike the Bulgarians who had obtained an institutional basis with the Exarchate in 1870, the Albanians, Vlachs and Serbs were subjected to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Attempts by certain Albanians and Vlachs to promote their nationality met with strong opposition from both the Patriarchate and the Greek state (Binark 1995, 51, 95; Bridge 1976, 75). One

important reason was that the ethnic Greek element in Macedonia was weak in many areas and relied on the religious adherence to the Ecumenical Patriarchate in order to keep up a credible numerical population base for its national claims. In Bitola, for example, the Greek national movement supported itself mainly on the strong urban Vlach element that identified with the Patriarchate and Hellenism (Weigand 1924: 76, 94).

What was then the situation with the Albanians? We are here confronted with many of the same issues as we can see with the other nationalities. The Patriarchate would naturally oppose a separate Albanian church organisation since it would weaken its own jurisdiction. We have several examples of this, and Orthodox Christian priests who espoused the Albanian cause could risk being excommunicated (Binark 1995, 95). While the Patriarchate was not a Greek but an Ottoman institution, certain aspects of its role favoured the Greek cause. In spite of this we should not forget that as an Ottoman institution it had in many cases opposing interests to the Greek state. The role of the church as a vehicle for Hellenisation is often mentioned. I do believe, however, that the ability of the church and schools to assimilate the population is often overestimated.

What can we say about the role of language in promoting the Greek cause? The Patriarchate's insistence on Greek as liturgical language belongs partly to a pre-national order. In the extension of this traditional education, which was religious education, would also use Greek. While this can explain the greater number of schools which used Greek as the language of education for the Orthodox Christian population, the ability to assimilate foreign language agrarian population is another matter. I would argue that the ability of Hellenism to assimilate other population groups was just as much related to social structures as it was to the language of education. The next question is related to the use of religion by the Greek state to further its cause in the areas it laid claim to. Greek diplomats too argued that the church language should be Greek, much in the same way as Arabic is the liturgical language for the Muslims (Kondis 1976, 70-71). In this case Greek diplomacy attempted to nationalize a formerly pre-national institution. As mentioned previously we have to insist on the different roles played by the Patriarchate and the Greek state. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why there were significant points of common interests. Since the main church struggle took place between the Bulgarians and the Greeks, the Greek state and the Patriarchate were both opposing the Bulgarian threat. However, while the main concern of the Patriarchate was to defend its institutional position within the Ottoman Empire, the Greek state was involved in preparing the ground for its national project. Although the ultimate goal was assimilation, the Greek policy makers had a

clear understanding that Greek national sentiment only existed in a superficial and little developed manner among the peasant population. We can see several references in the source material to that the first goal was to prepare the ground for a “Greek party,” and not to “create” Greeks per se. The process is often obscured by the state actors’ device of insisting on national categories in their propaganda, although being well aware of that national sentiments were only in a formative phase.

What can we then say about the national dynamics in relations among the peasant population? In this context I find it interesting to take recourse to ethnographic descriptions of the situation in Macedonia during the period under consideration. Assimilation was not a new phenomenon related to the emergence of national movements in the late 19th century. There are many examples of various patterns of assimilation in the pre-national order. We can take a closer look at a specific area that is now in Greece. The statistics of the Bulgarian ethnographer Vasil Kŭnchov employ mother tongue as the main criterion. This gives us an indication of the number of Albanian speakers, although this criterion does not necessarily display national orientation. According to Kŭnchov the Bulgarians made up almost 2/3 (37,781) of the total population of 60,025 in the *kaza* of Florina at the turn of the 19th century. The Turks were in second place with almost 1/5 of the population (11,410). The Albanians were not an insignificant element, but ranked clearly behind the two aforementioned population groups (Кŭнчов 1900: 249-251). The Albanian population takes on a greater significance, however, since the area is close to the present borders of Albania with compact Albanian population.

Albanians in the Florina Kaza	Christians	Muslims
	2344	2000

On the other hand, Kŭnchov maintained that the Albanians were not a political factor in Macedonia. They lacked literacy, national sentiment, and political unity. In order to trace the diachronic population developments he looks back to the period before national sentiment became a major factor in the classification of the population. Many Christian Albanians migrated eastward into what he terms Bulgarian areas in the late 18th and early 19th century due to hostilities in their core region. After moving they would be assimilated into the dominating community they took up residence in and lose their language. In the period before the Balkan Wars the Christian Albanians in Florina, Bitola and Thessaloniki recognized the Greek church authorities and attended Greek schools. Further north (Reka) they recognized the Bulgarian church

authorities and attended Bulgarian schools. The Muslims Albanians attended Turkish schools only in the cities, since Muslims education was less developed (КЃНЧОВ 1900: 83-100). The Albanian nationalists were not able to make much progress in the south and most of the Orthodox Albanians (Korçë and Kastoria regions) remained faithful to the Greek party (Βλάχος 1935, 202-206; Skendi 1967, 469).

Returning to the *kaza* of Florina the rural Christian Albanian population was situated in specific villages together with Christian Bulgarians and Vlachs.

Villages in Florina Kaza	Bulgarians	Albanians	Vlachs
Kato Kotori (Υδρούσα)	600	174	
Ano Kotori	168	60	
Bel Kamen (Δροσοπηγή)		560	100
Elovo ¹		40	
Lehovo (Ελατιά)		750	90
Negovan (Φλάμπουρο)		620	100

Kǔnchov has the following to say about their situation: In Ano and Kato Kotori they were Christian Albanians mixed with Bulgarians and liable to be assimilated to the latter. In Bel Kamen and Negovan they were Christian Albanians and some Vlachs. These two villages had relocated from the Konitsa *kaza* in Ipirus. They came to Bel Kamen around 1840 and to Negovan around 1860. There were also smaller groups of migrants to other villages, who had lost their language (КЃНЧОВ 1900: 88). Although we are now on the eve of the period that is known in Greek as “the Macedonian Struggle,” Kǔnchov describes social processes that remind us more of traditional patterns of assimilation in Ottoman Macedonia. After the rivalry over Macedonia takes on a national flavour, we can observe that the Christian Albanians to a large degree still follow traditional alignments. The villages Ano and Kato Kotori came under the control of the Bulgarian organization (Καραβήτας 1994, 362). The village Negovan, on the other hand, withstood Bulgarian pressures to participate in preparations for the Ilinden uprising in 1903. Greek diplomats felt the village was relatively safe from the Bulgarians, but had greater apprehension of the Romanian propaganda (Δραγούμης 2000, 78, 180, 372). The villages Belkamen,

¹According to Kǔnchov Elovo was the chiftlik of a bey residing in Florina. The population was steadily decreasing since the bey behaved very badly to the villagers. At the time he wrote his book there were only 4 households left. The others had migrated to Bel Kamen, Negovan and Florina.

Negovan and Lehovo became heavily involved on the Greek side in the Macedonian Struggle. The memoirs of the prominent *Makedonomachoi* Karavitas and Vardas abound with references to these villages (Καραβήτας 1994, 147; Τσόντας-Βαρδάς 2003, 127-129, 190-193, 199-200). Ottoman and Austrian sources also refer to the involvement of Albanians on the Greek side. An Ottoman report from 1905 portray a Greek band to be made up of Cretans and Christian Albanians (Binark 1995: 73; Bridge 1976, 167-168).

Although the aforementioned villages became Greek strongholds, they were not unaffected by the developments of the Albanian and Vlach national movements. Various attempts to introduce Albanian and Vlach language in church and school were met with strong resistance from church authorities and violent repression from the Greek bands (Bridge 1976, 167-172; Peyfuss 1974, 97-104). Several times the Albanians would attempt to cooperate with the Vlachs and make a common front against pressures from Greek bands (Bridge 1976, 415-19). In the wake of the Young Turk revolution a new self-assertion could be traced among the Christian Albanians and the Greek clergy struggled to contain the nationalist Albanians in Korçë and Bitola (Bridge 1976, 401-2). This condition also extended into the kaza of Florina. Albanian and Vlach nationalists also challenged the Greek supremacy in the villages Bel Kamen, Negovan and Lehovo. In the village Negovan the Albanians were able to secure the use of the Patriarchist church by force (Bridge 1976, 418-9, 451-2). As the Balkan Wars approached there were several attempts to reach an Albanian Greek understanding, but the conflicting territorial aspirations in the south prevented a mutual acceptable agreement (Kondis 1976, 48-50, 70-1; Bridge 1976, 465-9). We can only speculate about possible developments if the demise of Ottoman rule after the Balkan Wars had not changed the whole dynamics of inter-ethnic relations and initiated a new chapter in the coexistence of the various population elements.

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