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ON ALBANIAN IDENTITY IN THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

Matvey Lomonosov

Despite the findings of the academic researches on ethnicity and nationalism many scholars of Albanian history presume the existence of a solidary Albanian ethnic group and the presence of a naturally formed sense of Albanian ethnic identity among Albanian-speakers in the Balkans at least starting from the 18th century. In their view the leaders of the National Revival Movement, struggling against the Ottoman domination and territorial pretensions of other Balkan states, based their claims on the real wish of the Albanians for the national liberation. This primordialist approach, in my view, has many flaws. First of all, it reinforces the nationalist argument. Secondly, it presents Albanian ethno-history in a naturalist light veiling the contributions of the nationalists to its constructions. Thirdly, it takes the existence of an overarching national and/or ethnic Albanian identity spread among all Albanian-speakers in the 18–19th centuries (or even earlier) for granted. The present article aims to challenge the persistent view on Albanian-speakers in the Late Ottoman Empire as a relatively cohesive group, whose members (at least majority of them) categorized and/or understand themselves as Albanians (*shqiptarët*) in ethnic sense, i.e. as people sharing common ancestry and culture (see Anthony Smith's understanding of "ethnic groupings": SMITH A. *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. Oxford 1999, pp. 12–13). Instead I will argue that the Albanians at that period existed more as a category than as a group.

I will start my elaborations by presenting historiographical viewpoints on the topic. Then, I will address some theoretical questions related to communal identity. Finally, basing on the scholarship and accounts of European travelers I will investigate how "Albanian identity" played out on the ground and among the elites at the period before the country's independence.

1. The historians on Albanians in the Late Ottoman Empire

Assessing developments and specificities of national ideology, Ernest Gellner has shown that one of its major components is the idea of *dormission* of nations and nationalism. Nationalists are generally aware of the evidence that contests the ubiquity of national sentiments. In many societies and at

different historical junctures nationalism is simply absent. They therefore explain it by saying that people's belonging, allegiance and readiness to serve the nation should be *rediscovered*, and national sentiments *awakened*. Nations, whose existence is central for human fulfillment, constitute mankind. "But, though ever-present, nationality in all its cultural idiosyncrasy occasionally becomes dormant; it even goes into a kind of Occultation, into hiding." Man therefore needs to be awakened "to his national identity and the political imperative implicit in it."¹

Without paying due attention to this characteristic feature of nationalism Stavro Skendi, who authored a seminal work on Albanian nationalist

¹ GELLNER, E. *Nationalism*. London 1998, pp. 8–9.

movement, concluded that “the independence of Albania was achieved under precarious circumstances, after more than three decades of efforts in developing national consciousness.”² He did not question the existence of Albanians as an ethnic collectivity, when “the Albanians started on the road to national awakening.”³ The sense of identity (even if not developed enough) was in place resting upon common history, social organization, folk culture and language despite of religious cleavages: “The tribal society which existed in the past, and until recently, in the mountains of the north, must have given the Albanians, irrespective of religion, the feeling of common blood... Common folk culture served as another link... Language made the Albanians feel that they were distinct from the Turks and the Greeks, and for that matter from any other foreigner, and gave them a sense of belonging to one and the same nation... An incentive to the national awakening of the Albanians was the glorification of Skanderbeg and his times.”⁴

This assumption about existence of certain Albanian identity in the Late Ottoman Empire before 1912–1913 is still widely shared in academia both in Albania and abroad. The prominent Russian scholar Irina Ivanova in her latest book on Albanian anthropology devoted one section assessing “the emergence of the Albanian ethnos.” She dates Albanian “ethno-genesis” back to the Ancient times, when Illyrian tribes occupied the Western Balkans and even before arrival of the Slavs constituted an “established community” vested with distinct material and spiritual culture, through medieval Arbers to modern Albanians. For her, the presence of the territorial (*Arberia*, *Arbanon*) and “ethnic” (*Arbanoi*, *Arbanites*) names in Byzantine sources, starting from the 11th century, testifies the “internal unification” and the existence of the “ethnic community,” and that the Schism, which cut across Albanian lands, did not “destroy the awareness of the unity of the ethnos,” which by that time had been already formed. The Resistance of Skanderbeg against the Ottoman troops (15th century) and the League of Prizren are seen as manifestations of Albanian identity. The later allegedly has shown “the conscious strive to unification of all forces regardless religious division within the people” (in sense of ethnic group). On the eve of Albanian independence the

Albanians possessed hierarchal self-consciousness, including ethnic (*shqiptar* – Albanian), local and kin self-understandings, even though all of those were dependent on given circumstances and the second could prevail⁵.

If not primordialist, a collectivist perspective is upheld in a book of George Gawrych on the role of the Islam and Ottomanism in Albanian national movement. He portrays the League of Prizren as a common Albanian endeavor: “As the Ottoman state stood essentially defenseless while the Great Powers gathered in Berlin to determine its fate, Albanians began organizing at the local level to prevent the loss of Albanian lands.”⁶ It needs to be noted here that when speaking of the Albanians, not simply about Albanian-speaking population at that time, we should bear in mind that the ethnic group, as well as the nation, is at the end an imagined community, since the life of its their fellow-members flows beyond direct face-to-face relationship⁷. Therefore, speaking of the Albanians in the Late Ottoman Empire, one should be convinced of existence of a certain Albanian identity. And Gawrych is rather inclined to acknowledge the presence of the later. As the Ottoman officials frequently mentioned, “Albanian land” (*Arnavudluk*), “Albanians” (*Arnavudlar*) or “the Albanian people” (*Arnavud kavmi*), Albanians, “regardless of personal loyalties and identities,” perceived their distinctiveness living in an ethnically, religiously and linguistically diverse empire. While *Arnavudluk* served as a geographical designation, *kavim* bore the meaning of a people in an ethnic sense⁸.

A collectivist stance is also characteristic for the prominent Albanian scholar Piro Misha, who authored a book on historical identity, where he seemingly acknowledges that national identity is constructed⁹. He, however, notes that the Albanian people (in ethnic sense) in the 19th century represented a distinct linguistic and ethnographic community, whose existence was contested by its neighbors. The Albanians had distinct self-identification based on ethnicity, language and culture. They continuously “defended their collective identity during

⁵ IVANOVA, I. *Albantsy i ih sosedi [The Albanians and their neighbours]*. Moskva 2006, pp. 54, 60–73, 110, 120–121.

⁶ GAWRYCH, G. *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and Albanians, 1874–1913*. London 2006, p. 38.

⁷ ANDERSON, B. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London 1991, p. 6–7.

⁸ GAWRYCH, G. Op. cit., pp. 8, 22.

⁹ MISHA, P. *Arrtisia nga burgjet e historise. [The Break out of the Prisons of the History]*. Tirane 2008, f. 31.

² SKENDI, S. *The Albanian National Awakening 1878–1912*. Princeton 1967, p. 463.

³ Ibidem, p. 27.

⁴ Ibidem, pp. 470–471.

the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, in the first place, in opposition to neighboring nations.”¹⁰ Similarly the Albanians in the late 17th and early 18th century (collectively?) changed their ethnic name from “*arbër*” to “*shqiptar*” in face of Islamization, when the signifier “*Arbër*” started to acquire religious meaning¹¹.

The appearance of the ethnic name “*shqiptar*” at the historical scene is dealt with in the recent work of Bardhyl Demiraj. The scholar maintains that in the 18th century the whole Albanian ethnic community, or at least the majority of it, consciously refrained from mentioned religious identifications and embraced the new ethnic name based on commonly shared language¹².

Thus, the works, which I am referring to, assume the existence in the Late Ottoman Empire of an *overarching* Albanian identity that was shared by the *majority* of Albanian population. In so doing the students of Albanian history bring much water on the mill of nationalism, implying that the Albanian nationalist leaders spoke on behalf of *really existing* Albanian ethnic group, which collectively perceived their distinctiveness and was imperiled. In Rogers Brubaker’s terms many authors hardly distinguish between categories of *practice* and those of *analysis*¹³.

Their thoughts resonate with the claims of well-known figures of the Albanian National Revival (Alb. *Rilindja Kombetare*). For example, Ismail Kemal Bey Vlora (Alb. *Ismail Qemali*), who was one of the chief nationalists and served as the first prime-minister of newborn Albanian state (1912–1914), wrote in his memoirs: “As ancient and *distinct a race* as any by whom *they* are surrounded, *they* [the Albanians] *have seen the nationality* of these neighboring states taken under the protection of various European Powers and gratified in their aspirations for a more independent existence... Meanwhile, *they see that they themselves do not receive similar treatment. Their nationality is ignored.*”¹⁴

¹⁰ MISHA, P. Op. cit., f. 24.

¹¹ Ibidem, f. 25.

¹² DEMIRAJ, B. *Shqiptar [Albanian]*. Tirane 2010, f. 54. It is crucial to note that Bardhyl Demiraj speak of “shqiptar” as an ethnic identification, not simply linguistic one.

¹³ BRUBAKER, R. – COOPER, F. Beyond “Identity,” in BRUBAKER, R. *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge 2004, pp. 31–32.

¹⁴ *The Memoirs of Ismail Kemal Vlora and his Work for the Independence of Albania*, ed. Renzo Falaschi. Tirana 1997, pp. 353–354. The emphasis added.

Similar view on Albanian National Revival was shared by Faik Bey Konitza (Alb. *Faik Konica*), one of its greatest figures and further Albanian ambassador to Washington. “Remembering” the beginnings of the Albanian linguistic enlightenment he described: “At this period an Albanian called Tahsin [Hoxha Hasan Tahsin (1812–1881)] lived in Janina. He was a very erudite man, who had lived for a long time in the company of scholars and men of letters in Paris: it was his affectation always to wear a turban. In 1877 he found himself in Janina and, having had an Albanian alphabet printed in Turkish script, he distributed it widely throughout Albania... Tahsin’s initiative was significant: it corresponded to a feeling of disquiet that *Albanians as a whole* began to experience. There was talk of the cession of Southern Albania to Greece; and as this rumor persisted, several intelligent Albanians realized that they had a language and *national* interests to defend.”¹⁵

To go beyond the established categories of practice one should do not take the notions of nation, people/ethnic group and national/ethnic identity for granted and make problem of them. Therefore, I need some methodological clarifications.

2. The theoretical framework

Nowadays the term “*identity*” is expanded on and extensively, even misleadingly used across all humanities and social sciences. Siniša Malešević notes that “identity” coming originally from mathematics usually is deemed to designate both absolute zero difference or self-similarity and relative non-zero difference or external other-difference¹⁶. Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper harshly criticize the term “identity”, as overburdened by meanings. They hold that an “idiom of identity” equips the scholars with a “blunt, flat, undifferentiated vocabulary.” “Identity” “tends to mean too much (when understood in a strong sense), too little (when understood in a weak sense) and nothing at all (because of its sheer ambiguity).” When assessing and writing on “identity,” the sociologists offer to distinguish identification and categorization, self-understanding and social location, commonality, connectedness, and groupness. Self-understanding means “one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how

¹⁵ KONITZA, F. *Memoir on the Albanian National Movement* (1899). http://www.albanianhistory.net/texts19_2/AH1899_2.html 30. 30.06.2012. The emphasis added.

¹⁶ MALEŠEVIĆ, S. *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism*. New York 2006, pp. 15–16.

(given the first two) one is prepared to act.” Commonality denotes the sharing of some common attribute; connectedness signifies the relation ties that link people, and groupness – the sense of belonging to distinctive, bounded, solidary group¹⁷. In the present article, referring to Albanian (ethnic) identity I imply individuals’ self-identification, self-categorization and self-understanding.

Nationalistic attitude to national and ethnic (cultural) identity, which was and still is particularly spread in the modern world, suggests that the later constitutes what can be called as “fundamental identity,” i.e. “the identity which is believed to apply to more spheres of social life at once than any other identity, and to which other identities are, in consequence, considered secondary.” Such view effectively downplays the fact that, as Leah Greenfield argues, national identity appears and finds expression “among many, often coexisting and overlapping, identities – occupational, religious, tribal, linguistic, territorial, class, gender, and more.”¹⁸ The people, who possess this sort of identity are supposed to form a clearly distinct and solidary group.

In a non-nationalist milieu, however, various identities operate differently. The respected scholar of European Middle Ages, Patrick Geary points out that in the times before nationalism “nation” – alongside with religion, kindred, lordship, and social stratum – provided one of the overlapping ways by which *politically active elites* identified themselves and organized collaborative action. However, a sense of belonging to a nation did not constitute the most important of these bonds. Nor did a common national identity unite the high and low, lord and peasant, into a deeply felt community of interest¹⁹. Furthermore, the application of any identity was situational and highly dependent on social and political context.

In the late 19th – early 20th century Balkans personal self-identifications, self-categorizations and self-understandings of Albanian-speakers could hardly the shape of an ethnic Albanian identity thus rendering them as a more or less cohesive ethnic community, even though “imagined,” with common will and interests. I will try, however, to trace how self-identifications and self-categorizations as “Albanian” played out and what place they occupied in comparison with other forms of identity. An ethnic group can be considered as established, when majority of its members share common identity, recognize each other as fellows, and the boundary with out-groups is constantly maintained²⁰. Nationalist view, however, imply that the upper class and particularly those its members, who strive to establish independent nationhood epitomized by respective state (“en-



Paul Jovanovich's picture

¹⁷ BRUBAKER, R. – COOPER, F. Op.cit., pp. 41–48.

¹⁸ GREENFIELD, L. Etymology, Definitions, Types. *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*. Vol. 1, ed. Alexander J. Motyl. San Diego 2000, p. 251.

¹⁹ GEARY, P. *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval origins of Europe*. Princeton 2002, p. 19. The emphasis added. It also should be borne in mind that in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period the word “nation” had very different meaning than it did and does in the age of nationalism: GREENFIELD, L. Op. cit, pp. 252–253; KIDD, C. Identity before Identities: Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Historian. *History and Nation*, ed. Julia Rudolph. Cranbury 2006, pp. 9–44.

²⁰ BARTH, F. Introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The social organization of cultural difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth. Bergen 1969, pp. 9–37.

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lighteners,” “awakeners”) is more aware and knowledgeable of “true” identity. Therefore, I will look at identities of both ordinary Albanian-speakers and representatives of “Albanian” elites.

3. Identities on the ground

Elaborating on self-identifications and categorizations of the bulk of Balkan population in the 19th and early 20th century Mark Mazower emphasizes that “the hesitant and ambivalent voices of the peasants” have been screened out in the historiography written by the descendents of the nationalist patriots and awakeners. Nevertheless, “the persistence of the habits of mind which predate the triumph of ethnic politics” can be detected. The Sultan’s subjects were indifferent to nationalist categories, since their belonging to a community defined by religion mattered more than linguistic differences²¹. Božidar Jezernik explains that the Ottoman society was “organized into ecclesiastical communities (millets), to one of which every subject had to belong.” Only religion served as a basis for these divisions, whereas language and culture (ethnographic distinctions) did not mean much. “A Bulgarian could become a Turk any time that he pleased by embracing Islam, just as a Greek could become a Bulgarian by joining the Exarchate and one of two brothers might enter the Romanian fold and the other the Serbian. Consequently, many people simply could not understand the question of nationality”²².

Even though contemporary scholarship reveals that assessing the role of the *millet* system in the development of national and ethnic identities in the Ottoman Empire one should bear in mind that the former did not emerge until the 19th century, *millets* did exist before in sense of “institutionalized corporations built around different religions.”²³ As Mark Mazower argues the Orthodox Church “in looser fashion” became the part of the system of Ottoman government from the time of Sultan Mehmed II²⁴.

²¹ MAZOWER, M. *The Balkans*. London 2001, p. 46. One of the most ubiquitous constructions of Balkan nationalist historiography, applying current visions of political developments back into history, is that of “Turkish yoke” and “catastrophic” Ottoman conquest: KIEL, M. *The Nature of the Turkish Conquest and its Impact on the Balkans: Destroyer or bearer of culture*, in KIEL, M. *Art and Society of Bulgaria in the Turkish Period*. Maastricht 1985, pp. 33–55.

²² JEZERNIK, B. [“Comments on Robert M. Hayden, ‘Antagonistic Tolerance’”]. *Current Anthropology*, 2002, 43:2, p. 221.

²³ MENTZEL, P. *Millets, States, and National identity*. *Nationalities Papers*, 2009, 28:1, p. 201.

²⁴ MAZOWER, M. *Op. cit.*, pp. 53–54.

These religious and communal affiliations particularly characteristic for the Ottoman society powerfully influenced the identity of Albanian-speakers in the 19th century. Mary Edith Durham, the famous British publicist, writer and self-made anthropologist, who spent around 20 years traveling in the Balkans, heard such opinions from Kastrati tribesman in Northern Albania (Malësi i Madhe region): “Then he [the “Turk” in the past] read us the Sheriat (Turkish Law)... But we answered, ‘Christians are we, and Christians have we ever been! We cannot take Turkish law. Neither can we wear Turkish garb...’”²⁵ The telling fact is that even today the denominator “Turk” is used by Christian Albanians in the city of Shkodër to call their Muslim co-nationals.

The British traveler discovered even more overtly religious understandings of Turkishness, and Albanianess in the district of Antivari (the city of Bar in today’s Montenegro): “Antivari was Venetian till 1479, and the flock must then have been a large one; now it is reduced to some six hundred souls, all Albanian. At least, so they call themselves. But just as every Mohammedan tells you he is a ‘Turk,’ and every one of the Orthodox that he is a Montenegrin, so does every Roman Catholic say that he is an Albanian; and three men who in feature, complexion, and build are as alike as three individuals can well be, will all swear, and really believe, that they all belong to different races.”²⁶

Durham also tells us indicative stories of the “conversion” from Serb into Albanian and *vice versa*. In a monastery near to the village of Kopilich (Alb. *Koplik*) in Northern Albania she had a chance to know the Archimandrite or Hagi: “The Hagi himself visited me, as soon as he had concluded service in the church. He was a tall, fair, handsome man, very friendly, and much relieved to find I understood Serb. Marko [an “Albanian” fellow-traveler of Durham, bearing, however, the Slavic name], who knows but little, asked him if he understood Albanian. He laughed heartedly, and replied, ‘I am an Albanian.’ Born of Albanian parents he explained he had spoken Albanian only as a child. But having joined the Orthodox Church, he was now a Servian [Serbian], and Servian was more familiar to him than his mother tongue.” Durham then elaborates on the issue: “So it is in the Debatable Lands [today’s Kosovo and parts of Northern Albania]. The

²⁵ DURHAM, E. *High Albania*. London 1985, p. 42.

²⁶ DURHAM, E. *Through the Lands of the Serb*. London 1904. <http://njegos.org/durham/chapter6.htm> 30. 06. 2012.

Serbs have a converted Albanian as head of their monastery, and conversely, one of the most patriotic Albanian priests at Djakova [Gjakova/ Djakovica in today's Kosovo] was a Serb by birth – had spoken Serb only as a child, and now had almost forgotten it.²⁷ As the ethnographer tells the “conversions” of Christian Albanian-speaking women into “Turks” occurred in Kosovan Peja/ Peć: “Recently a Christian woman – married into a Christian tribe – who lived most unhappily with her husband, ran away from him, meaning to go to a Moslem at Ipek and turn Turk”²⁸.

The power of religious belonging as a sort of fundamental identity, including its importance for Albanian-speakers in the 19th century, is revealed by the fact that at this time the leaders of Albanian nationalist movement in the case of Albanians, identifying themselves as Bektashis and following the common pattern of other Balkan nationalists, were laying efforts to promote Bektashism as national religion²⁹. Particularly, as Natalie Clayer reveals portraying the ruler of allegedly semi-independent Pashalik of Yanina Ali Pasha as a promoter of Bektashism at the beginning of the 19th century, some distinguished leaders of Albanian nationalist movement aimed “to present Bektashism as a (or the) potential power in the creation of an “Albanian identity” and an “Albanian state” independent of the “Turks.”³⁰

Other important forms of identity of Albanian-speakers were local and clannish/tribal. The scholars point to geographic fragmentation of the country, explaining the “tardiness of national awakening among the Albanians.” Misha maintains that the mountainous relief, which complicated continuous communication and trade between various regions, certainly should be considered as one of the chief factors that have determined the developments of the Albanian nationhood³¹. Ivanova comments on various regional (Alb. *krahinë*, i.e. historically formed territorial unit, and Alb. *Gegëria/Toskëria* or Turk. *Gegalik/Toskalkik*, i.e. two dialectally

and to certain extent culturally distinct areas of Albania) and clannish/tribal (Alb. *fis*, i.e. clan) forms of self-consciousness³². Gawrych writes that the designations of Toskalkik and Gegalik alongside with Arnavudluk quite frequently appear at the Ottoman documents³³.

The members of Albanian clan and those of kindred clans traced their origins back to alleged common ancestors and could not intermarry. In so doing they effectively downplayed other kinds of commonalities and ignored any sort of alleged ethnic, linguistic or even religious identity. Durham describes that the members of Albanian-speaking (“Albanophone”) Catholic Kastrati clan, all of whom bore Slavic (“Serb”) names, traced their origins to Drekalovich of Kuchi, Serbophone and Orthodox, which in turn derives from Berisha, “by tradition one of the oldest of all Albanian tribes.”³⁴ From a respected tribesman of Hoti she heard the following story: “The tribe of Hoti has many relations. Thirteen generations ago, one Gheg Lazar came to this land with his four sons, and it is from these that we of Hoti descend... Gheg was one of four brothers. The other three were Piper, Vaso, and Krasni. From these descend the Piperi and Vasojevichi in Montenegro and the Krasnichi of North Albania. So we are four - all related – the Lazakechi (we of Hoti), the Piperkechi, the Vasokechi, and the Kraskechi”. Trying to grasp the reality of Balkan tribal relations in familiar terms Durham explains: “Of these four large tribes, of common origin, Piperi and Vasojevich are now Serbophone and Orthodox... Vasojevich considers itself wholly Serb, and is bitter foe to the Albanophone tribes on its borders. Krasnich is Albanophone and fanatically Moslem; Hoti is Albanophone and Roman Catholic.”³⁵

Demiraj and Ivanova argue that the presence of “ethnic name” *shqiptar*, which spread in Albanian lands in the late 18th and throughout the 19th century, proves the existence of Albanian ethnic group and respective identity³⁶. The former recognizes that many “ethnic names” in the Balkans in that period, including old Albanian one – “Arbër”, were blurred and had also religious connotations³⁷. However, in contrast to them - he holds, – the new denominator “shqiptar”, deriving from Albanian verb

²⁷ DURHAM, E. *High Albania*, 254.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, 126.

²⁹ DUIJIZINGS, G. Naim Frasher's Qerbalaja: Religion and Nationalism Among Albanians, in DUIJIZINGS, G. *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*. New York 2000, pp. 157–175.

³⁰ CLAYER, N. The Myth of Ali Pasha and the Bektashis: The Construction of an “Albanian Bektashi National History,” in *Albanian Identities. Myth and History*, ed. Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers et al. Bloomington 2002, pp. 131–132.

³¹ MISHA, P. *Op.cit.*, f. 29.

³² IVANOVA, I. *Op. cit.*, pp. 120–121.

³³ GAWRYCH, G. *Op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁴ DURHAM, E. *High Albania*, pp. 43–44.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 68.

³⁶ DEMIRAJ, B. *Op. cit.*, p. 57; IVANOVA, I. *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

³⁷ DEMIRAJ, B. *Op. cit.*, pp. 53–54.

shqipoj/ shqiptoj – to speak comprehensibly, was used to designate ethnic Albanians (*shqiptarët*) irrespectively of their religious and local affiliations³⁸. While it is difficult to assess with a high degree of preciseness how popular was the self-identification *shqiptar* among Albanian-speakers in the Late Ottoman Empire, and the assumptions about its ethnic rendering seem ungrounded, one can agree that *shqiptar* could operate as a linguistic identifier and categorizer. Even its usage and importance, however, were rather highly dependent on given circumstances. In case of the Orthodox archimandrite from Koplík, described afore, self-identifying as “Albanian” evoked smiling. Equally I can hardly establish, if a bilingual person from Montenegrin-Albanian borderland has identified himself as a *shiptar* and what he has understood by it: “Our driver was a Serb... He, as indeed did my traveling companions, spoke a mixture of Serb and Albanian, even to each other, and when I questioned him in Serb replied sometimes wholly in Albanian”³⁹.

Anyway if one is wondering whether the conscience of some linguistic communality could turn the Albanian-speakers of the time into a solidary group, Faik Konica in his memoirs gives us an unequivocal answer: “In brief, until 1877 a taste for the national language existed only in embryo and, above all, among people of a certain distinction.”⁴⁰

4. Identities among the “awakeners”

In the 1960s, Stavro Skendi came up with the concept of “divided loyalties” of Albanian Muslims on the eve of the movement for independence: “As to the Moslem Albanians, it was natural that they would play the principal role. They constituted the majority, and without them there could be no Albania. Although feeling as Albanians, it was not easy for them to detach themselves from Turkey, toward which they felt loyalty as Moslems... Islamic culture, with its identification of *din* (religion) and *millet* (nation), had served to blur to a certain extent the national distinctiveness of the Moslem Albanians”⁴¹. Skendi as well as later Misha have used the concept in order to explain the tardiness of Albanian national awakening and establishment of statehood⁴².

Ismail Qemali tells about his double belonging at the very beginning of the memoirs: “[T]he truth is, our ancestor Sinan Pasha was a pure Albanian; and we are proud to fill that during the Ottoman domination, in spite of much unjust treatment from the Turkish rulers, we served the Empire faithfully, while at the same time preserving pure and undefiled our Albanian patriotism.”⁴³ He then renders the behavior of all Albanian-speaking servants of the Ottoman Empire in the same terms: “Abd-ul-Hamid... had appreciated the faithful character of the Albanians from his youth up... The person of the Sultan, his palace, and even his harem, were entrusted to Albanians. In the Ministries and in the civil and military services, Albanians occupied the highest and most distinguished positions. Despite these favors, my countrymen never renounced their national sentiments or their legitimate aspirations, although they religiously observed the oath of fidelity to the Ottoman dynasty which their ancestors had taken.”⁴⁴ The Albanians for Ismail Qemali have always been sincerely loyal to the Ottoman Empire until the later began to decay: “[T]hey have been the only Balkan people attached to the Ottoman Empire, always ready to support it, always happy to strengthen it and to profit by its strength. But whenever the Albanians have become aware that, instead of growing stronger, Turkey had weakened herself and hurried to her ruins, they have risen in an effort of self-preservation...”⁴⁵ Even on the eve of the independence he personally did not cease to lay all efforts to show the attachment of the Albanians to the Ottoman authorities and persuade them to compromise: “I in my capacity as leader with my Albanian colleagues, made every possible effort, both in the public sittings of Parliament and at private meetings with Ministers, to bring the Turkish Government and chamber back to reason and to a sense of patriotic duty by showing the true sentiments which animated the Albanians in general towards the Sultan and his Empire...”⁴⁶

Similar sentiments permeate the letters of Şemseddin Bey Frashëri (Alb. Sami Frashëri), considered today as both Turkish and Albanian national enlightener, writer, linguist, and philosopher. In the years of the Prizren League (1878–1881), he authored an article on the Albanian Question published in December 1878. There Sami Frashëri

³⁸ Ibidem, pp. 35, 54–57.

³⁹ DURHAM, E. *High Albania*, p. 250.

⁴⁰ KONITZA, F. Op. cit.

⁴¹ SKENDI, S. Op. cit., pp. 69, 71.

⁴² Ibidem, Op. cit., pp. 69–72; MISHA, P. Op.cit., f. 31–41.

⁴³ *The Memoirs of Ismail Kemal Vlora*, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, p. 365.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, pp. 361–362.

⁴⁶ Ibidem, pp. 67–68.

identified himself as someone, who possessed two *vatan*-s (motherlands) simultaneously: “Albania [is] my special *vatan*... For human being, nothing is more sacred than religion (*milliyet*) and race (*cinsiyet*)”. He then offered an interpretation of the relationship between the two: “If the human being loves his general *vatan* at the level one, then he will certainly love his special *vatan* at the level two”⁴⁷.

What is interesting, however, is that not only Muslim Albanian-speaking officials of the Ottoman Empire saw her as their own motherland. The prominent Albanian nationalist activist Pashko Vasa (Vasa Efendi), a Catholic from Shkodër, who made an illustrious career in the Empire finally being appointed as Governor General of the Lebanon, wrote in one of his celebrated work “The Truth on Albania and the Albanians” (1879): “All other races that were not related with the Albanians stood aside and did not want to deal with the Muslims... In this way those, who were not Albanians never had will to acknowledge and accept the obligation to defend common Motherland with arms at hands and all ended up engaging in trade, production or agriculture...”⁴⁸ Motherland here means the Ottoman Empire. Thus Pashko Vasa appears as an Ottoman. While he neither places himself into Muslim *millet*, nor celebrates the Islam (*din*) as his religion, he certainly expresses his attachment to the Ottoman state (*devlet*).

The aforementioned double loyalties, characteristic to the leaders of Albanian nationalist movement certainly destroy harmonic picture of an *overarching ethnic*, not to say *national* Albanian identity. The details rather reveal that in the Late Ottoman Empire the self-identifications and self-understandings of Albanian-speaking elites were subject to particular circumstances.

Even if one concedes that identification with particular cultural group can be controversial, I still am reluctant to say that the notion of *special vatan* in the eyes of “Albanian” leaders had predominantly ethnic, and not territorial meaning. Similarly, when Ismail Qemali writes his mother “was very anxious that [he] should become a perfect Albanian”, it remains unclear if the mother and her child were ready to include into the category of the Albanians (to be emulated?) the Albanian-speaking peasants or even middle-class “fellows.” But, at least we know that the bulk of the memoirs of the first Albanian

prime-minister are focused on the author’s career and happenings in the imperial capital, whereas only minor attention is paid to Albania.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout of the present article that while the existing scholarship on Albanian anthropology and nationalist movement maintain that the Albanian-speakers in the Later Ottoman Empire, i.e. before the country’s independence, clearly identified, categorized and understood themselves as members of particular ethno-cultural group, closer assessment reveals that the ethnic identity of externally categorized “Albanians” hardly appeared in the given historical period.

Often Albanian-speakers, be they constituents of the upper class or “ordinary people”, considered their belonging to the religious community or the Ottoman state as far more important than any sort of affiliation with a cultural group. In other circumstances “Albanians” could be much more attached to their clan or region, without paying attention to how the later were composed in terms of language and even religion. When certain cultural or linguistic identity, indeed, appeared, as in the case of “Albanian” elites striving to be “true Albanians” or Albanian-speakers distinguishing their linguistic fellows, it was rather situational and overburdened by cross-cutting social, territorial, tribal, religious and other meanings. Taken as a whole, this poses a question, whether one can speak about “the Albanians” in the Late Ottoman Empire or what we are dealing with is not an ethnic community, but mere ethnic category.

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⁴⁷ Quoted in: GAWRYCH, G. Op. cit., p. 54.

⁴⁸ VASA, P. *E vërteta për Shqipërinë dhe shqiptarët [The Truth on Albania and the Albanians]*. Tiranë 2010, f. 20.

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SUMMARY & KEYWORDS

The scholarship on Albanian anthropology and national(ist) movement maintains that the Albanian-speakers at the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th centuries clearly identified, categorized and understood themselves as the members of a particular ethno-cultural group (the Albanians – *shqiptarët*). Closer assessment reveals that the ethnic identity of externally categorized “Albanians” hardly appeared in the given historical period. Often Albanian-speakers considered their belonging to the religious community or the Ottoman state as far more important than any sort of affiliation with a cultural group. In other circumstances “Albanians” could be much more attached to their clan or region, without paying attention to how the latter were composed in terms of language and even religion. When certain cultural or linguistic identity, appeared, as in the case of “Albanian” elites striving to be “true Albanians” or Albanian-speakers distinguishing their linguistic fellows, it was rather situational and got overburdened by cross-cutting social, territorial, tribal, religious and other meanings.

- ▶ Albania, Identity, Albaniens, Etno-cultural group
- ▶ Albánie, identita, Albánci, etnokulturní skupina