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THE BULGARIAN COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIA AND KOSOVO. SOCIO-POLITICAL PROCESSES AND DEMOGRAPHIC CONSEQUENCES (1913-2023)

SUMMARY

For the purpose of this research, dedicated to the Bulgarians in Albania and Kosovo, various documents were traced, classified, processed, and analyzed. The documents used are of Bulgarian, Ottoman, Albanian, Serbian, French, Austro-Hungarian, Italian and other origin and contain information about the changes in the numbers of Bulgarians since 1913 in the towns and villages in Albania and Kosovo that they have inhabited.

Structurally the research consists of introduction, three chapters and conclusion, in which the changes in numbers of the Bulgarian population in Albania and Kosovo in the light of dynamic political events on the Balkans between the second half of the 19th century and the start of the 21st century were examined.

Chapter one offers information about Bulgarian presence in Albanian lands through the Middle Ages, when a considerable part of the territory of present-day Albania and Kosovo was under the control of the Bulgarian state for an extended period of time and the local population of Slavonic-Bulgarian descent actively participated in the process of forming the Bulgarian nationality. However at the end of the 13th century the pushing out of Bulgarian population to the East started under Albanian pressure – a process that increased its intensity in the period 15th – 18th century during the time when the Ottomans ruled over the Balkans. Despite that, in the middle and the second half of the 13th century Bulgarians still inhabited numerous regions in the Eastern parts of present-day Albania and Southern parts of present-day Kosovo.

Based on the available original documents, a conclusion is reached that on the eve of the First Balkan War the total number of Bulgarians in the villages, that after 1913 became a part of the Albanian state, exceeded 17 000 people of whom 40.9% were Christians and 59.1% were Muslims. There was also a large Bulgarian community in Kosovo, but most of the Christian Bulgarians are Serbized and primarily Muslim Bulgarians retain their identity. The author follows the complex conditions in the area during WWI when Albania and Kosovo descended into chaos and their territory were occupied by the armies of the opposing countries in that global conflict. The presence of a Bulgarian population in the eastern parts of Albania and in southern parts of Kosovo is evidenced by Austro-Hungarian and French occupational authorities and is recorded in the census conducted by the military powers of the two great nations in the Albanian and Kosovar territories they administered at the time.

In chapter two the fate of the Bulgarians in Albania and Kosovo during the period between the two world wars is examined, when the neighboring countries of Yugoslavia and Greece had strong claims for the provinces inhabited by Bulgarians. In an attempt to avert those claims, the Albanian authorities treated the Bulgarian population in their country with great tolerance. Unfortunately, despite the undergoing initiatives by the local Bulgarians, the IMRO, and the Bulgarian state during the interwar period no official recognition of a Bulgarian minority in Albania was achieved.

It is determined that by 1930 the total count of the Bulgarian population in Albania exceeded 27 000 people – both Muslims and Christians, a large portion of whom were concentrated in over 40 villages in the regions of Kukës Gora, Poleto, Gollobordë, Mala Prespa and Korçë. During the following decade certain changes occurred mostly due to active migration processes towards the larger Albanian cities and the gradual Albanisation of Bulgarians who found themselves in foreign language surroundings.

In this chapter three the dramatic fate of Bulgarians in Albania and Kosovo during WWII and the establishment of the communist regime in the country afterwards is followed. During the war, the local Bulgarians fell under the threat of the Italian occupational regime and the Albanian nationalist formations linked to it, but also by the growing Yugoslavian Macedonianism, which became notably arrogant during the 1944–1948 period when, under a strong pressure by Yugoslavia, in numerous Bulgarian villages in Albania were assigned teachers from the formed under Yugoslavian control Socialist Republic of Macedonia, who started a forceful process of education being conducted in Skopje's recently accepted writing norm. The situation drastically changed after relations between the Yugoslavian communist government and Stalin declined in the summer of 1948. This put an end to the risk of Albania being annexed by Yugoslavia.

After 1948 the regime of Enver Hoxha conducted a differentiated policy regarding Albanian residents of Bulgarian descent. This policy followed the turns in the relations between the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the USSR and respectively – between the Yugoslavian and Albanian communist governments. Despite Albania and Yugoslavia being gradually brought closer together after the death of Stalin, the regime of Enver Hoxha tried to ward off the Yugoslavian influence over the Bulgarian population in Albania by supporting the introduction of teaching in the local Bulgarian dialect in schools in Mala Prespa, written according to the orthographic rules of the Bulgarian alphabet. At the same time the population in this area was officially considered by the Albanian government to be "Macedonian", while the residents of Gollobordë and Kukës Gora were brought before the wide audience simply as bilingual.

Chapter three is dedicated to the modern aspects of the problems of Bulgarians in Albania and Kosovo. It takes into account the fact that the beginning of the democratic changes in the both countries in the 1990s presented an opportunity for a wider expression of non-Albanian ethnic communities, but also allowed the government in Skopje to significantly push their propaganda among the so called Macedonian population within Albania and Kosovo. However the activities of the Macedonist formations did not receive the expected support from the local population of Bulgarian descent, especially in the regions of Kukës Gora and Gollobordë.

The improvement of Bulgarian-Albanian relations at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century allowed the Bulgarian government to raise the questions of the Bulgarians in Albania and making their status official. Bulgaria brought the topic forward in front of international institutions, especially after 2007, when it became a member state of the European Union. The Albanian parliament passed the Law for the Protection of Minorities, in which, for the first time in the history of Albania, the Bulgarian ethnic community was granted the official status of a national minority, on 13th October, 2017.

The deteriorating economic situation in Albania and Kosovo in the 1990s heavily affected the regions with a concentrated population of Bulgarian descent. Migration increased significantly to the larger cities in the inner parts of the countries, as well as abroad to the USA, Canada and EU countries. The migration losses caused some of the Bulgarian villages to become almost completely deserted. There was a sharp decrease in the population of pupils and people of working age. Despite the fact that migrating people usually settle concentrated in homogeneous neighborhoods of Albanian cities, they find themselves in a foreign language environment and among them the processes of assimilation happen at a much larger scale compared to the towns and villages in their own historical areas.

The organizations created by the local Bulgarians have put a lot of effort into the preservation of Bulgarian self-consciousness among the population of Kukës Gora, Gollobordë, and Mala Prespa in Albania and Gora Župa and Podgora in Kosovo. Organizations like the Cultural Association "Ivan Vazov", the Bulgarian Society in Albania "Prosperitet Gollobordë", etc. They also contribute to a great extent for the increase of the exposure of Albanian Bulgarians to the country of Bulgaria, and at the end of the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century more and more Bulgarians from Albania display an interest in staying in Bulgaria for education in Bulgarian universities or for obtaining Bulgarian citizenship on the claim of their Bulgarian origin.

The most significant problem presented before the Bulgarian community in Albania and Kosovo nowadays is the danger of language attrition among the people that have moved to big cities in the inner parts of the both countries. Because of this, there is a strategic necessity for support by the Bulgarian state towards the initiatives of the local Bulgarians for the foundation of a Bulgarian college in Albania, establishing a Bulgarian cultural information center in Tirana, and the separation of Kukës Gora and Gollobordë into self-dependent administrative units, like the example of Mala Prespa and other regions. Bulgaria has to encourage seasonal and other types of work migration of Albanian and Kosovar Bulgarians, of which will benefit not only the Bulgarian economy, but also those people, allowing them to find professional realization without having to leave their historical residences forever.