

The role of media in the shaping of the Albanian national identity in the period between 1925-1944

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Introduction

The period after 1925 is characterized by a certain political stability that produced a favourable situation for the Albanian press which took full advantage of the moment. We can say this on account of the great number of newspapers and especially periodicals that proliferated during this period. It seems like the press found the "proper language" with the power whom it stang from time to time, but also flattered too, according to the ideological position of the medium.

The common feature of the press between 1925-1944 was the consolidation of the Albanian national identity, as the state institutions were consolidating too. The press of this time seems to have responded to an internal national need for emphasizing those qualities that unified Albanians and oriented their integration within the Albanian state structures, although they might be part a culture beyond Albania's state boundaries. Here I have in mind the dissociation of the Muslim Community from the Turkey-centered Caliphate, as well as the efforts of the Orthodox Community for gaining autocephality from the Istanbul Patriarchate.

The press of this period has employed various forms and tools to raise national awareness, each medium as it deemed proper. The

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distinction in these forms from a medium to another has from time to time led to sharp debates between publishers that have appeared in the press.

The methodology employed

For this study I have examined some of the main press organs of the period, focusing more on the religious ones due to the special interest of their publications regarding the object of this study. I have also referred to some publications directed by prominent intellectuals of the time who have conveyed their ideas about the Albanian national culture and identity in the press organs they directed, as we shall see.

Different approaches for the same objectives

If we look carefully at the writings of this period, which display love for the motherland, the preservation of the national unity and the cultivation of the features that distinguish us from our neighbours, as their main subject, from time to time we will find a revocation of the discourse that was typical for the authors of the National Renaissance. They were often cited directly, in order to be brought nearer and to sound more convincing for the Albanian reader.

Vaso Pasha's verses "The Albanian's religion is Albanianhood" sound like having been written at the beginning of this century and not a hundred years ago. Without analysing its content, I can say that the exclusivist logic of the last two verses of the poem "O Albania" is clear. It seems like the author wants Albanians to replace the religion they practice, as much as they do, with a new "religion" which is "Albanianhood". This exclusivist logic seems to have inspired many intellectuals who have written in the press during the period I am examining. So we find articles that emphasize the need to give up elements of cultures of international character in order to shape a pure Albanian culture without residues from other "old" cultures.

The debate goes on about what culture and of what period is typically ours, as well as what we should or shouldn't loan from other Eastern or Western cultures.

Branko Merxhani was one of the main ideologues of the “neo-Albanianism”, along with Petro Marko, Tajar Zavalani, Lasgush Poradeci, etc. They advocated the development and progress of the country with the West as a model to be carefully followed in order to avoid individualistic ideas that were spreading in Europe during that time. They considered such as trend as harmful to our national unity, still in its infancy.

Their ideas appeared on the weekly *Illyria* and later on *Përpyjekja Shqiptare* which was a continuation of *Illyria*, in terms of its contributors, as well as of the topics covered.¹

Merxhani would write: “Whether we want or not, we have no choice but to walk on the path of Occident. But this should never be understood as imitation. ...we shall take from the Occident only the methods of working and only the civilisation, but never the culture.”²

In contrast to the francophonian approach to civilisation, the latter, according to Merxhani, implies the technological innovations and not the popular culture.

When Branko Merxhani advocates the “internalization of the Western civilisation by the Albanian culture,” he uses the metaphor of the foreign words that become a part of the Albanian language.

This line of thought seemed to be in unison with Vaso Pasha’s for the making of a new religion, namely “Albanianhood”.

Another Renaissance author and thinker, had different ideas about the religion-motherland dualism. He didn’t follow an exclusivist logic about one or the other. Advocating that Albanian can be an independent state with many religions, he proposes the example of Crete: “Religion can be attached to a nation without changing the later’s ethnic character. The converted Greeks of Crete are a proof of this. Although Muslims, nobody calls them Turks.”³

The same idea is expressed by the contemporary author Amin Malouf, who says: “One’s identity is determined by many other elements, such as: nationality, belonging to a religion, an ethnic or

¹ Prof. Dr. Hamit Boriçi, Dr. Mark Marku, *Histori e Shtypit Shqiptar, Nga Fillimet Deri në Ditët Tona*, p. 207.

² Branko Merxhani, *Vepra*, p. 237, Shtëpia Botuese Plejad, 2003.

³ Mid’hat Frashëri, *Shqiptarë dhe Sllavë*. Tirana, February 1998, p. 52.

linguistic group, profession, a social group, political convictions, preferences, etc... All these are important in themselves, but not by themselves. None of it does complete one's identity."⁴

Looking at Vaso Pasha's verse under this perspective towards identity, we can conclude that during the period when he wrote it, the national element of the identity prevailed over the religious one, but the latter did not obstruct the building of the nation, even though the Albanians "did not forget about churches and mosques".

This approach was maintained and upheld by intellectuals from the religious faiths too, whose ideas would appear on the period's press.

The religious press between 1925-1944

I will dwell on this part of the time's press due to its great role in strengthening the elements of national identity and the broad range of topic on the matter displayed on it.

a) The Catholic press

The Catholic press is represented with some press organs with a strong influence on their audience. The most prominent periodicals were *Hylli i Dritës*, *Leka* and *Ora e Maleve*.

Hylli i Dritës which was the official medium of Franciscans has given much space to topics for "the good of the nation", as stated in the foundation of the periodical: "...to care for the good of the Albanian nation as in times past..."⁵

Going through the issues of this periodical we find an article which praises the religious harmony and patriotism that characterises Albanians, encouraging them to preserve these two Albanian traits. In its report of the great manifestation for the independence day in 1913 in Shkodra, it is written: "A cable was tied between the belfry of Gjuhadol Church and the minaret of Fusha e Çelës Mosque and the national flag was hanged on it between the rows of black and red

⁴ Amin Maalouf, *Identitete Vrastare*, Botimet Onufri, 2-nd edition. Tirana, 2006, p. 16.

⁵ Revista *Hylli i Dritës*, No. 1, 1 October 1913. "Themelimi i Përkohshmes", p. 1.

lamps.”⁶ There are four important elements here: the church, the mosque, the national flag and the black and red colours.

An article titled “Are we Albanians or are we going to be?” handles the topics of the state, the people and the nation. It displays a nation-building logic with the examples of England, Germany and Spain, each of them as countries with different religions and cultures but united under one state.⁷

Another writing that the periodical uses to voice the love for the country, is a poem by P. Vinçenc Prenushi, “Albanian Mother” which relates the fight of the Albanian people for freedom.⁸ The same issue contains two other articles about history, one titled “On the history of the Albanian alphabet”, and the other “Twenty five years since the Manastir Congress”.⁹

Another Catholic organ of the press was the periodical *Leka*. It published an article titled “The instinctive feeling for the motherland” which is about the longing of the emigrants for their country.¹⁰

The rubric “Culture” features a study titled “Our language is being bastardised” about the problems challenging the Albanian language. It calls on intellectuals to contribute to the preservation of the national language.¹¹

These articles show the importance the periodical paid to some elements which distinguish the Albanian nation, such as its language.

b) The Muslim press

The Muslim press is represented with periodicals *Zani i Naltë*, *Kultura Islame* and *Njeriu*.

The Muslim press has also devoted much space to articles emphasizing the elements of the state and the nation. In the article “Wave, o Flag!” it is written that, “Any regional or religious

⁶ *Hylli i Dritës*, No. 11, 1 November 1937, “Flamuri kombëtar në krahinë të Shkodrës”, p. 535.

⁷ *Hylli i Dritës*, No. 12, 1 December 1930, pp. 650-656.

⁸ *Hylli i Dritës*, No. 11, 1 November 1933, p. 508.

⁹ *Hylli i Dritës*, No. 11, 1 November 1933, pp. 514-524.

¹⁰ *Leka*, No. 1, January 1930, Mr. Mark Harapi, “Ndjesia instiktive e atdheut”, p. 3.

¹¹ *Leka*, No. 6, November 1930, “Gjuha po na bastardohet”, pp. 161-168.

distinction disappears before this unity.”¹² It is clear that the flag here has been taken as a symbol of national unity.

In another article the reader is reminded about the famous verses from the poem “Herds and Pastures”: “Albania, you give me honour, the name of Albanian; with fire and desire you wrought my heart.”¹³

Kultura Islame issues an article that revocates the time when the boundaries between Kosovo and Albania disappeared during the Fascist occupation. It says: “...we are sure and convinced that Albania will enjoy freedom and peace, engulfing the lands where Albanian is spoken and Albanians live, to become a great, strong and ideal Albania.”¹⁴

To emphasize how Albanians should love their country, it issues a historical article which relates the moment when the Prophet Muhammad says while migrating from Mecca: “You are the most beloved and preferred place for me on the face of earth. Had I not been expelled from you, I would never leave you.”¹⁵

A problem that existed during that period were the efforts to cause division among Albanians with different faiths. In the poem “You’re wrong” we read: “They were all Albanians, not different in Faith; for Faith to them was Freedom and Motherland.”¹⁶

The religious and regional hate they want to sow did not exist among the Albanian Renaissance intellectuals, “Çajupi from the South, Fishta from the North, why this bitter seed among them didn’t come forth? Like them many other we have, all children of this poor Albania were.”¹⁷

A periodical of the Bektashi order clergy was *Njeriu*. It features many articles about love of the country, Albanian language and the

¹² *Zani i Naltë*, No. 3, November 1931, p. 76.

¹³ *Zani i Naltë*, No. 11, November 1937, Neshet Çami, “Dy fjalë mbi 25 vjetorin”, pp. 321-328, November 1931.

¹⁴ *Kultura Islame*, II Year, No.15, November 1940, Refik H. Bezhani, “Përvjetori i Njëzetetë i Pamvarsis 28 Nëntor 1912” p.75.

¹⁵ *Kultura Islame*, III Year, No. 3-4, November-December 1941, “Përhapja e Islamizmës”, p. 85.

¹⁶ *Kultura Islame*, III Year, No. 3-4, November-December 1941, Nickname Kom., “Jeni të gabuar!”, p. 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

national culture. The fifth issue, November 1942, was dedicated totally to the flag in celebration of the 30-th anniversary of the independence.

c) The Orthodox press

The Orthodox press during this period published the pamphlet: *Gjergj Kastrioti, Scanderbeg, a spiritual periodical for the Orthodox of Albania*. The title is very significant, later changed as *Scanderbeg*. The periodical was published by the theologian Visar Xhuvani who explains that it was titled after the national hero of Albania. The pamphlet appeared in 23 issues until March 1925.¹⁸

The day and date chosen for the ceremony of the declaration of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, is a significant indicator of the nationalist sentiment that the community wanted to imbue Albanian Orthodox believers with. It was held "on the independence day, on November 28, 1921, at the Evangelizmos Church in Tirana where the decision for autocephality was made."¹⁹

Conclusions

If we would make a summary of the main ideas of the period between 1925-1944 as displayed in the press of the time, as inspired too by the ideas that circulated in Europe at that time, we would see that, "For the young people who supported the model of the illuminated dictatorship, the liberal Europe had come to an end; for the neo-Albanianists the European civilisation had to be crossbred with the Albanian culture in order not to allow individualistic tendencies to harm the national organic unity; for the 'democrats' the decayed bourgeois Europe was running towards another world war from which the Europe of workers and peasants was to be born; for the Catholic (as well as other religion's; G.L.) clergy the materialistic, individualistic, secularist and atheistic tendencies of the modern

¹⁸ The pamphlet *Gjergj Kastrioti*, later, *Skënderbeu, Organ Shpirtnuer për Orthodoxët e Shqipnisë*. 19 October 1924 - 2 March 1925.

¹⁹ Shyqyri Hysi, *Histori e Komuniteteve Fetare shqiptare*, Tirana, 2006, p.174.

European civilisation should not be allowed to penetrate into Albania.”²⁰

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- 11- Enis Sulstarova, *Jam Evropël!*, pp. 411-412.
- 12- *Njeriu*, July 1942 - September 1944.

²⁰ Enis Sulstarova, *Jam Evropël!*, pp. 411-412.