

The colonization of Kosovo

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WHY SERBIAN AND YUGOSLAV STATES FAILED IN COLONIZATION OF KOSOVO

Reconquista of Old Serbia

From all the phenomena which undermined the stability of the Yugoslav state during the 20th century, the greatest number was manifested in the form of the



minority issue, or indirectly concerned (the threatened) minority rights. After the end of the First World War, the attitude of a state towards national and religious minorities was promoted as the unit to measure the level of democracy in a society, and was the main precondition for signing the Treaty of *Saint-Germain-en-Laye* (1919). The Yugoslav authorities feared that, if they were to accept the Treaty on minorities, they would endanger their own independence. For this reason, they stonewalled the signing of the Treaty. However, bearing in mind the weak control mechanisms of the just formed League of Nations, minorities were still treated as “a necessary evil”, which needed to be economically and politically incapacitated, more so because minorities populated the bordering areas of the Yugoslav kingdom.

Muslims who were found on the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS) were somehow too easily identified with “the rulers” from the previous era, regardless of their social status, which created an atmosphere of revanchism, in which their expatriation was to be a measure of last resort. When feudalism was abolished, around 60% of Muslim landowners in Kosovo, Sanjak and Macedonia were left without the source of income, and were left with two possibilities: to turn to trade and craft, or to emigrate to Turkey. In 1918, Albanians had many reasons for dissatisfaction: Turkish (not Albanian) language public schools were opened in their neighborhoods, the doors of public services were closed to them, their religious offices were politicized, while the political Turkish-Albanian Party *Dzemijet* was outlawed in 1925.

Starting in 1936, a wave of expropriations of land belonging to Albanians bordering areas began, with only 0.4 hectares per member of household left to them. The undesired results of colonization made the government destroy the foundation of Albanian existence in such a way, and thus force them to emigrate. Such policy strengthened the anti-government atmosphere amongst the Albanians, who became more susceptible to Italian propaganda and the idea of Greater Albania.

If the results of Serbian historiography on the colonization of Kosovo are analyzed, it can be concluded that the colonization which took place between the two wars was an attempt to correct “the historical injustice”, given the belief that the ethnic structure of Kosovo was constantly being changed in favor of Albanians, since the end of the 17th century and all the way to 1912. What is obvious from the available archive documentation was the intention to populate this area “with nationally meritorious and verified elements”, that is, war veterans, Chetniks, policemen and border policemen, refugees and party



activists, although some of the colonists were also retired government servants, failed merchants and adventurers.

It is interesting to note that even after the Second World War, the collectivization and nationalization measures had a direct impact on the remaining Turkish landowners, while the abandoned land was distributed to war veterans as a reward for their service). The modest participation of Muslims in the antifascist movement classified them among disloyal minorities, even in Tito's Yugoslavia. Measures to deal with "reactionaries" and "class enemies" led to the introduction of military administration in Kosovo in February 1945. During this period, many civilians perished, while many left the country. Just one month later, the famous decree which prohibited the return of prewar colonists to Kosovo was adopted for security reasons. However, soon afterwards, Tito himself allowed for colonists to return.

One of the main protagonists of colonization in both Yugoslavias, Sreten Vukosavljevic, believed that, after 1918, the pressure of peasant masses on the state was so strong, that the government was forced to meet their demands, fearing a social revolution. He even advised the peasants to appropriate the land of their feudal masters, and thus force the government's hand. Incidentally, Vukosavljevic was the trustee for agrarian reform of the Kingdom of SHS, as well as a member of the first Tito government in charge of the issue of colonization.

Cheap colonization and unstable state

During the first decade of the Yugoslav state, it was popular to make comparisons with Mussolini's operation *Bonifica integrale*, in which he settled 20.000 families of soldiers and farmers in the area between Rome and Naples. With such de-urbanization, Mussolini prevented an influx of farmers into cities, and it seemed plausible that a similar recipe can be used in Kosovo and in Macedonia. However, this was not possible due to several reasons.

Unlike similar colonization endeavors in that period (Argentina, Canada, Caucasus), populating Kosovo and Macedonia had a prominently national tone. In the case of Kosovo, the emphasis was not on populating endless, deserted spaces, in order to cultivate the land and modernize the space (which can perhaps, in part, be claimed in the case of Macedonia), but, instead, on leveling the demographic structure, which was described as "horrible" amongst the Serbian elite of that time.



From the perspective of the state, Yugoslav colonization was “the cheapest”, that is – a sum of 10.000 dinars was allocated for each emigrant family, while for example, at the same time, every colonist in Canada received 160.000, in Prussia 120.000, in Caucasus 90.000 dinars. This is why the people who emigrated to Kosovo, Metohija and Macedonia were over-indebted, which was partially solved by the government led by Milan Stojadinović by writing off the majority of their debts (80%).

The colonization was regulated with decrees (1919 and 1931) and laws (1922, 1931 and 1933), while the Ministry for Agrarian Reform (that is, the High Agrarian Trustee Office in Skopje) and the controversial Alliance of Agrarian Cooperatives of Southern Serbia were in charge of its implementation. The long-time head of the Alliance was Vasa Saletic, a former clerk in the Tanning Office in Skopje and the owner of a large amount of real-estate. He perceived the process of displacing Albanians and purchasing their property as “a logical sequel to the liberation war”. Incidentally, the Alliance was a paradigm of corruption: only in the first half of the 1920s, the state invested 64 million dinars into this institution, despite failed investments and financial embezzlements during the acquisition of construction material and agricultural machines.

When they were settled, colonists were exempt from state taxes for the period of 3 to 5 years, while the state provided free transport and construction material. Colonists from Lika even moved entire houses and assembled them on new properties. They were mainly given uncultivated state land, abandoned by displaced people (almost a quarter of the land fund were “properties without owners”), and the land seized from Albanian rebels – Kachaks. Only on the territory of the agrarian office of Pec, there was almost 10.000 hectares of the so-called Kachak land. The distribution of land based on political criteria was not the only problem which made the colonists feel uneasy. They lived on unregistered land, which have changed owners many times. This made them prime targets for blackmail, particularly prior to municipal or parliamentary elections.

In a hostile environment

After spending several years as a colonist in Vucitrn, Adam Pribicevic, brother of the more famous Serbian politician from Croatia, Svetozar Pribicevic, noted that only the highlanders from the Dinara mountain region managed to survive as colonists in Kosovo. On the other hand, it was believed that some type of



“cultural coercion” of the Montenegrin colonists and “aggressive colonists from the Dinara mountain region” should be carried out, because they regularly entered into conflicts with the native population, sold machines and slaughtered the cattle received from the agrarian authorities. The Albanian villagers and town Turks perceived colonization as a national threat, while even local authorities viewed the colonists with mistrust. For political reasons, the clerks did not refrain from threatening the colonists with displacement, particularly before elections. On the other hand, colonists were a convenient means to threaten the local population, whose votes were also counted upon.

The hilly Albanian settlements were primarily colonized by Montenegrins, because it was believed that they were mentally and culturally most similar to Albanians. According to the words of the head of the Ministry for Agrarian Reform in September 1919, there was a plan to settle army volunteers and Montenegrins primarily in Metohija and Drenica, “in order to prevent further intrusion of Arnauts”. A special category of subjects were the “army volunteers”, who were promised, back in 1917 by the Serbian government in Corfu, that they will be given a sufficient amount of arable land, as an award for joining the Serbian army. Milorad Vujicic, then minister of internal affairs, believed that Serbian colonists should be settled only in zones that were under heavy attacks by armed Kachaks. A similar point of view was shared by Vasa Cubrilovic, who proposed the colonization of the entire area bordering with Albania.

Incidentally, the militarization of the area followed as a consequence of poor security in the areas bordering Albania and Bulgaria, which practically lasted from the final years of the Ottoman Empire. The problem of armed Albanian population (which also dates back from Turkish times) threatened the very constitutional order of the Kingdom of SHS. Because of this problem, army and police forces were permanently mobilized, all the way up to 1924, when the Kachak hideaway in Drenica was destroyed with the aid of artillery fire. On the other hand, the colonists were systematically armed from the storages which belonged to the Agrarian Offices, since they were the most frequent victims of Kachak attacks. Only after the incident in Lab, when Serbian colonists sold massive amounts of arms to Albanians, was the decision made to disarm them as well. The sincerity of the concept of disarmament in Kosovo was seriously brought into question when, during the electoral campaign of 1927, the leader of the government electoral list distributed 500 rifles to the Albanians living in Gnjilane. Simply said, total anarchy. While I was going through the archive documents, I got the impression that the government intentionally pushed



those people in Kosovo against each other, and, even more, constantly switched sides in “rooting” alternatively for the colonists and for the Albanians.

During the chases after the armed gangs, uncontrolled repression over entire villages was carried out, which brought additional uneasiness amongst all classes of citizens. Albanians definitely mistrusted the state, while the colonists stuck together, married amongst themselves, appeared together to vote, even organized burials on shared cemeteries. Many colonists believed that the state has tricked them. In March of 1936, the army volunteers from the Gnjilane county called on prince Pavle, using an almost threatening tone, to give them the land they were promised and for which they participated in the armed conflicts with the Albanian Kachaks. Instead, they remained as paid laborers of local Albanians.

Pressured by these problems, in the mid-1920s, many colonists illegally sold the land they were given and returned to their hometowns. Some of them leased the land to Muslim landowners and moved to neighboring towns. According to Jacques Anselm, almost 65% of colonists from Kosovo and Macedonia returned to their homeland by 1928. This is why the first serious revision of the colonization was carried out in 1927, while the Supreme Agrarian Office (which was mostly headed by military personnel) organized inspections and threatened to seize property or criminally prosecute everyone who dealt in this kind of trade. Colonists used tricks, signing “cession agreements” with the buyers, which included the clauses on the purchase of debts that mostly corresponded to the market value of the real-estate in question. One village in the Tetovo area (Brvenica) was inhabited by Chetniks, who were specialized in the trade of state land, and no one was able to touch them. After all, even the properties owned by Nikola Pasic and Milan Stojadinovic in the so-called southern parts were purchased cheaply, and then sold to local population for huge sums of money.

Displacement of “the people of Turkish culture”

After the Great Eastern Crisis at the end of the 19th century, a large number of non-ethnic Turks, led by their religious feelings, perceived the fall of the Ottoman Empire as their personal misfortune, and thus chose to emigrate to Turkey, considering this country to be their true homeland. The Balkan wars, the final collapse of the Empire, the First World War and the creation of the Yugoslav state, deepened these demographic shifts. The dominant reasons for emigration were “religious fanaticism”, as it was called back in those times,



which prohibited Turks from living under the rule of “infidels”, family ties, fear of revenge for participating in the war on the enemy’s side, but also the hope for a better life in Turkey.

The expatriation of Muslims from both Yugoslavias was a part of broader “de-Ottomanization” of the Balkans, which was supported and implemented by all Balkan governments, regardless of their ideological profile. The methodology of expatriation was similar both in the monarchist and in the socialist Yugoslavia, starting from the obligation to relinquish Yugoslav citizenship, a simple emigration procedure, to bureaucratic complications for potential returnees (whom were numerous). As for the assessment of the number of emigrants, it turned out to be a very convenient topic for manipulation and exaggeration. Although some Albanian historians offer amazing numbers (for example, two million people of Albanian origin who ended up in Turkey), the majority of available sources do not offer proof that, by the end of the 1970s, more than 450.000 Turks and Albanians, who originated from Yugoslavia, ended up in Turkey.

Incidentally, the entire idea of expatriating Yugoslav Muslims to Turkey was constantly suggested from Turkey, which was planning to inhabit the deserted areas in the far east of the country, and possibly use the immigrants from the Balkans in the fight against the Kurds. The idea was placed through media propaganda about easy life in Asia Minor, as well as through the activity of the Turkish diplomatic offices in Yugoslavia. The formal results were the Convention on Expatriation of the “non-Slavic element” from 1938 (200.000 people) and the so-called Gentlemen’s agreement between Tito and the Turkish head of diplomacy Koprulu in 1953, which was supposed to “revive” the Convention from 1938, by “connecting families”. Incidentally, according to one project from 1935, Yugoslav authorities proposed concrete measures in order to encourage the expatriation of Albanians: suppressing the propaganda against emigration which came from Tirana, frequent drafting of “non-Slavic recruits” to participate in military exercises, transferring “non-Slavic public servants” to other parts of the country, penalizing the parents of pupils, more frequent formal announcements of cattle disease in Albanian villages, the ban on tobacco planting, nationalization of personal names and geographic terms, etc.

Independently from the character of its political system, Yugoslavia was “an accomplice in crime”, wholeheartedly accepting the Turkish idea and elaborating it in great detail. An almost identical process of expatriation was



organized in Romania and Bulgaria. On the other hand, involving Albanians in such a migration process, and placing them in its foreground, was an exclusive idea of Serbian and Yugoslav ruling elites. The disloyalty of Albanians in the period between the two wars was attributed to their “proclivity towards irredentism”, and, in the early 1950s, to their loyalty to Enver Hoxha and Stalin, who were ideological enemies of Yugoslav socialism. War crimes (primarily by Chetnik units) against Sanjak and Kosovo Muslims and the demolition of religious buildings, also strengthened the state of collective fear. Further expatriation was encouraged by numerous laws adopted by the socialist regime – laws prohibiting Sharia courts and religious schools, laws which prohibited the wearing of the hijab, and other “atheist” regulations, which encroached on the patriarchal world of Muslims (the law on marriage, mandatory schooling). As early as 1951, many Muslims began declaring themselves as Turks, with the hope that they will be considered for emigration. This is why, after the Kosovo census (1948-1953), the number of individuals who declared themselves as Turks increased by 26 times, although the Turkish embassy in Serbia kept repeating that they were willing to “tacitly” accept a certain number of Albanians as well.

Both in the period between the two wars, and after the Second World War, big operations of disarming Kosovo Albanians preceded big expatriation waves. After the modest results of the ten county disarmament campaign, which took place in the early 1920s, the majority of the Albanian population was set in motion. Some joined the Kachaks, while others emigrated. During 1955/1956, the Yugoslav state security service, headed by Aleksandar Rankovic, carried out one such campaign, while, amongst Turkish diplomats, Rankovic was believed to be the person who “watches over the implementation of the 1953 Gentlemen’s Agreement”.

The problem of compensating the emigrants was the most difficult one. It was temporary solved in 1936, when Yugoslavia paid Turkey the sum of 17 million dinars for the purchase of Muslim land, in order to settle “our healthy national element”, after taking a loan from the State Mortgage Bank. However, the problems ensued in January 1950, when the Protocol on compensating Turkish property and property interests in Yugoslavia was signed in Ankara. According to the Protocol, Turkish property owners were exempted from all taxes and debts which incurred prior to nationalization. In addition to this, Turkey requested that Yugoslavia pays, in foreign currency, for all the assets of people who emigrated before April 1941. The sum they requested was 20 million



dollars, while the Yugoslav side considered that half a million dollars was quite enough for compensation. Ankara understood this as an insult.

Epilogue

The results of the colonization of Kosovo, Metohija and Macedonia, which took place between the two wars, were 19.500 settled families in a little over 1000 colonies. If we count in also the families of native inhabitants who were given land, then around 48.000 families were directly included in the agrarian reform and colonization. Truth be said, one fifth of the land that was distributed was not arable, which, in addition to an unfavorable climate, poor security situation (Kachaks), autocratic behavior of police and tax authorities – made the entire story about rich Kosovo and “heaven of South Slavs” nothing but simple propaganda. Needless to say that some people fell for this story, like, for example, the Slovenians from Istra, who chose to emigrate to Macedonia instead of Argentina (Bistrenica in central Povardarje), something they bitterly regretted later. This entire idea of moving people from more progressive parts of the country to the south remained at the level of a failed experiment. The abovementioned Adam Pribicevic claimed that one needed more courage to head for Kosovo than for America. Nevertheless, the largest number of colonies arose in Kosovo proper (Gracanica, Lab, Vucitrn), where the majority of houses for settlers were constructed.

The colonization of Kosovo did not satisfy either the state, or the colonists. The least satisfied was the native population. Even the state representatives who participated in this process during the mid-thirties claimed that settling Serbs amongst half a million Albanians was a total failure. The absence “of the spirit of the mission” can be illustrated by the fact that, out of 23 ministers for agrarian reform (who occupied this position in the twenties), only four visited “the southern parts”. This shows that, during the process of colonization, there was no continuity, because it was carried out by a political body which is, by definition, prone to frequent changes. This is why even the clerks felt threatened and believed their jobs to be uncertain, and the result was an increasing level of corruption. Landowners received unfair compensation, while discouraged colonists became a burden, worry, even a threat to state administration.

After the Second World War, 15.770 refugee Serbian families were not allowed to return to “the southern parts”, because, at the beginning, the new regime distanced itself from the results of the colonization that took place between



the two wars. More precisely, their return was temporarily cut short in March of 1945 with the *Decree 153*, due to the announced revision of awarding land between the two world wars. In August of the same year, the Law on the revision of colonist relations was adopted. According to the provisions of this Law, land was seized only from the colonists who were given land of private owners before the war, or in case they were not cultivating the land. This was an attempt to right the wrong done to Albanian peasants during the first wave of colonization. In September 1945, only 3.352 former colonists were allowed to return to their properties in Kosovo and Metohija, while many were redirected towards Vojvodina, or remained in central Serbia. Even Slobodan Milosevic toyed with the possibility of settling the refugees from Croatia (following the operation Storm) in Kosovo. However, that mission was completely naïve and unrealistic.

Manipulating the Kosovo myth and the Serbs from Kosovo reached its highlight during the rule of Slobodan Milosevic, when Kosovo was perceived more like a set of electoral units with the (nonexistent) votes of Albanians available for misuse. For more than two last decades, the system based on mediocrity and unquestioning obedience allows persons who are, to put it lightly, inadequate for the job at hand, to be at the head of vital state bodies. Truth be told, in the kingdom of Yugoslavia, clerks were also sent south as a punishment – thus, the worst of them ended in Kosovo, both in regard to professionalism and morality. The Third army region was the “punitive command” for officers, for teachers – “the Yugoslav Siberia”. Despite all this, it appears that the pinnacle of negative selection of cadre was reached at the end of 1990s, when semiliterate apparatchiks like Zoran Baki Andjelkovic were placed in charge of solving the (internationalized) Kosovo issue. An outcome other than mutual misunderstanding, arrogance and violence was impossible to expect. This nationalist wave was placed fully in the service of maintaining the oligarchy which was in power at that time. Today, Kosovo is handled by a warmonger journalist from Radio Television of Serbia, and of one pompous JUL (Yugoslav United Left) politician.

On the other hand, as times goes by, Serbs from Kosovo are increasingly turning towards the Church, which, ever since the early eighties, imposed itself as the replacement for the expected institutional support of the Serbian state, where, in the meantime, the society collapsed during Milosevic’s rule. Instead of concrete help and a search for a rational solution, the clerical circles, with their political ambitions, became an important factor of manipulation with Kosovo symbolism.



It is a fact that, following the 1878 Berlin Congress, the Albanian issue was continuously developed and internationalized. Turkish authorities had serious problems with Albanians in Kosovo Vilayet, while their tax collectors regularly avoided Drenica. In the eve of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the so-called Young Turk regime offered Albanians very specific concessions in regard to education and self-administration. Several years later, the Serbian and Yugoslav states did not offer such concessions. On the contrary, they showed a lack of willingness to abandon the irrationality of a myth, without acknowledging the new reality. Five centuries have gone by, and things no longer looked the same in the demographical sense. The way in which the Serbian army entered Kosovo in 1912 (war), appeared to have cemented this epic path, along which political elites of the states Kosovo belonged to would move in the future.

The integration of Kosovo has definitely failed, despite numerous methods which have been used: from experimenting with administrative status (part of the province, dividing Kosovo into three *banovine* (regions), autonomous province, etc.), through expatriation and colonization, all the way to the most repressive measures. It appears that the only thing that lacked were sincere methods of integration (like cultural and educational emancipation). At the same time, the percentage of Serb population in Kosovo and Metohija was in constant decline, except for the small increase during the 1930s, which was a result of colonization: 64% (1871), 44% (1899), 25% (1912), 26% (1921), 27% (1931), 34% (1939), 27% (1948, 1953, 1961), 21% (1971) and 15% (1981). Having in mind that Albanians boycotted the census from 1991, it is estimated that, at the time, the percentage of Serbs in Kosovo stood at between 9 and 11%, while the percentage in 2000 was around 7. The Serbs boycotted the 2011 census, and the official percentage of Serbs in Kosovo now stands at just above 1%.

Some will say that, within Yugoslavia, Serbs spent too much energy on the Serbo-Croatian dispute, instead of focusing all their energy on the south. It is most likely that the very idea of “reconquista” did not fit the spirit of the time, nor the strength of the state which had aspirations to rule this territory. This, logically, resulted in wrongly conceived campaigns, which culminated with the passing of the tragicomic Constitution of 2006. With a science-fiction preamble, the authors of this Constitution unintentionally showed their lack of ideas and inability to face reality.



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