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EDITORIAL

Romania and the romanians in the eyes of Albania

Oltsen GRIPSHI
Sabin DRĂGULIN

Abstract: *This editorial/research paper explores the historical, cultural, and political relations between Albania and Romania, with a particular focus on how Romania and the Romanian people have been perceived within Albanian historical and cultural memory. The ties between the two nations have been built upon a solid foundation of friendship, cooperation, and mutual respect bonds that have withstood the test of time and various historical challenges. In this context, Romania has not merely been regarded as a neighboring country within a geopolitically and politically complex region, but as a significant actor in the internal developments of Albanian society, especially during crucial periods such as national formation, the support of Albanian Renaissance (Rilindja) activists in the quest for Albania's independence, and cultural emancipation, including the establishment of the first Albanian-language newspapers in Bucharest.*

The study examines the role played by Romanian institutions particularly those in the fields of education and culture in supporting Albanian intellectuals and students, and the impact this support had on the formation of the Albanian national elite in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Additionally, it addresses the political dimension of Albanian-Romanian relations in the broader context of efforts to preserve national identity and affirm Albanian statehood on the international stage.

Through an interdisciplinary analysis grounded in historical sources, archival documents, and relevant literature, this paper aims to highlight the importance of these bilateral relations in Albania's development, while also contributing to a broader understanding of inter-Balkan relations and cultural interconnectedness in South-eastern Europe.

Keywords: *Albania, Romania, culture, Albanians, Aromanians, Vlachs, history, art, politics.*

The relations between the Albanian and Romanian peoples have a long and often intertwined history over the centuries, built on feelings of friendship, cooperation and mutual respect. In the Albanian historical and cultural memory, Romania has not only been seen as a neighboring coun-

try in a region with a complicated fate, but also as a cultural, educational and political partner that has had a considerable influence on shaping some aspects of Albanian development, especially in important periods of our national history.

I. Romania in Albanian historiography

The bilateral relations between the two peoples, the Romanian and the Albanian, are very distant in the twilight of time. Albanians are descendants of the Illyrians and Romanians are descendants of the Dacians, who according to the Romanian polymath Nicolae Iorga: *“The earliest ancestors of the Romanians (Dacians) were the Illyrians themselves, aboriginal population of the Balkan Peninsula and the Carpathians, where only the Transylvanian Sarmatians, who contained Slavic elements, represented in smaller numbers a foreign race. The Illyrians lay on the Adriatic coast and Rome had to fight a difficult battle to overcome the fierce resistance of the Illyrian kings such as Teuta, Agron, etc., from the Illyrians the Romanians inherited most of their culture and folk art, the importance of which has only just begun to be appreciated”*¹.

The Gjika dynasty is a *historicum momentum* of Albanian princes at the head of two provinces of Romania; Wallachia and Moldavia.

One of the most prominent Albanian families that had an important political role in the present-day territories of Romania was that of

the Ghica dynasty. The founder of the political branch of the family was Gjergj Gjika (Gheorghe Ghica, 1600–1664), who settled in Moldavia and managed to become ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, to be later appointed prince of Moldavia during the years 1658–1660². His son, Grigor Gjika I (Grigore Ghica I) would be the heir to the Moldavian throne, while his grandson, Matei Gjika (Matei Ghica) served as dragoman of the Sublime Porte, playing a key role in diplomatic relations with the Ottomans. Mateu’s son, Grigor Gjika II (Grigore Ghica II), took over Moldavia again in 1726 and later became Prince of Wallachia in 1733³.

Other members of the Gjika dynasty, such as Skarlat Gjika (Scarlat Ghica), Aleksandër Gjika (Alexandru Ghica), Grigori III (Grigore III) and Grigori IV (Grigore IV), continued to rule the Romanian principalities until the Russian military intervention in 1828–1834. During this period, Aleksandër Gjika II held the title of Prince and then Regent of Wallachia until 1858, representing one of the last figures of this dynasty of Albanian origin in the local government of Romania before the unification of the principalities⁴ into a single Romanian constitutional monarchy on March 13, 1881.

Early modern documents attest to a significant Albanian presence in the territories of present-day Romania. According to a report by the Habsburg Empire, in 1595 about 15 000 Albanians were allowed to settle north of the Danube River, marking one of the

earliest waves of Albanian migration to the northeastern Balkans⁵. By 1628, an organized Albanian community had been established in Bucharest, most notably Vasil Lupu (Vasile Lupu), an Albanian originally from the city of Kavaja⁶, who ascended to the throne of Moldavia in 1634 and ruled until 1653⁷.

During this period and beyond, Albanians in present-day Romania were known in local terminology as *Arbănasi*, a term that derives from the Albanian self-designation “arbër” and also as *Arnăuți*, a form borrowed from Ottoman Turkish (*Arnavut*) referring to Albanians⁸.

The Albanian community experienced further expansion during the Phanariot period (1711–1821), when many Albanians were integrated into the commercial and social life of Wallachia. They opened up economic activities, especially in the retail and confectionery sectors⁹. In Bucharest alone, in 1820, around 90 merchants from *Arnavutköy*^[tr] (an Albanian neighborhood in Istanbul) were registered as owning confectionery shops. Albanians also enjoyed a special status as elite bodyguards of the Wallachian princes, serving as part of the personal security structures and the military guard¹⁰.

In this long historical, cultural, political and bilateral journey between Albania and Romania, the most significant historical period to be highlighted is the one that has marked the most, which is related to the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. A historical period when

Albanians fought for national awareness and independence from the Ottoman Empire, Romania served as an important refuge for Albanian patriots of that time. Bucharest, which in Albanian means “It is beautiful”, became a center where the most famous figures of the Albanian nation such as Sami Frashëri, Jani Vreto, Naum Veqilharxhi and Elena Gjika (Dora d’Istria) had contacts, published works, and acted politically on the Albanian issue, publishing in 1844 the first Albanian dictionary. In 1888, the Albanian intellectual and patriot Visar Dodani founded the first Albanian-language newspaper in Bucharest, entitled “Sqipetari” (*Albanezul*^[ro]), which continued to be published until 1903. 1884 was the year that the well-known Pogradec merchant Nikolla Naçi founded the first Albanian Cultural Society named “Drita”, located in Bucharest, which in its beginnings was composed of representatives of the Romanian community in order not to be noticed by the Ottoman ruling circles in Istanbul. Its leadership, according to contemporary records, included V. A. Ureke as chairman, D. Butkulescu as vice chairman, and Dr. Leonte and M. Deshliu as secretaries, all of Romanian origin. Most of the members of the representative committee were Romanians as well^{11, 12, 13}.

However, in 1889, an important change occurred in the internal structure of the Albanian Cultural Society “Drita”, as a result of the proposal of the Albanian founder Nikolla Naço. Sultan Abdyl Hamiti was declared the “High Protector” of the Society, an act

that gave it a new form of legitimacy and political support in the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, the former president and former vice-president who were Romanians were appointed its honorary members, while the new leaders were elected from among the Albanians: V. Batan became president and Naço himself was appointed vice-president. Thus, the Albanian representation in the governing bodies of the Society became the majority¹⁴.

Moreover, since 1887, “Drita” managed to establish other branches in various cities of Romania such as Braila, Focşani, Calarasi and Marashest. Its main activity was focused on publishing school literature and periodicals in the Albanian language, with the aim of spreading the culture and national language among Albanians outside the homeland. According to article 4 of the Society’s statute, the alphabet used in these publications was the Latin one, specifically the variant used by the temporary “Dituria” of Istanbul, a magazine with wide influence in Albanian intellectual circles of the time^{15, 16}. During this period, the “Drita” society published the most famous works of the great Albanian national poet Naim Frashëri, such as: “*Bagëti e Bujqësi*”^[al] (*Cattle and Agriculture*), a poetic hymn dedicated to the Albanian people and nature (1886), “*Histori e përgjithshme*”^[al] (*General History*, 1886), “*Dituritë*”^[al] (*Knowledge*, 1888), “*Lulet e verësë*”^[al] (*Summer Flowers*) (1890), “*Parajsa apo fjala*”^[al] (*Paradise or Word*, 1894), “*Fjalë të urta*” (*Proverbs*, 1894), “*Qerbelaja*”^[al]

(*Qerbelaja*, 1898) and “*Historia e Skënderbeut*”^[al] (*History of Skanderbeg*, 1898).

In 1891, also in Bucharest, the well-known “*Apel à nos frères albanais*”^[fr] was published, of particular importance for Albanian national consciousness, which aimed to awaken national consciousness and mobilize Albanians on the path of emancipation and national unification¹⁷. While in 1897 another newspaper called “*Shqipëria*”^[al] (Albania) was published for the first time, directed by Visar Dodani, while a year later in 1898 another newspaper “*Ylli i Shqipërisë*”^[al] (Star of Albania) was founded, which was distinguished by the fact that it was published in three languages: Albanian, Greek and French. This multilingual approach aimed not only at communicating with Albanian communities with different religious and cultural affiliations, but also at promoting the Albanian cause in the international arena, especially in French-speaking and Greek-speaking European circles^{18, 19}.

Another very important daily in the Albanian language was the publication of the newspaper “*Shqipëria e Re*” (*Albania Nouă*)^[ro], which was founded in 1919 and continued to be published continuously until 1935, as part of the national popular organ with director Mihal Sotir Xoxe. This publicistic initiative aimed to affirm the common Illyrian origin of Albanians and Romanians, as well as to promote political cooperation between the two peoples in the context of their national aspirations for freedom and independ-

ence²⁰. In this sense, Romania was seen as a friendly country, where the Albanian national movement could breathe freely and operate without censorship.

In 1893, the Albanian community in Romania numbered around 30 000 individuals, reflecting a strong presence of Albanians during and after the Ottoman period²¹. In this context, the first movements for Albanian independence began precisely in Romania, led by Albert Gjika, who as heir to the Gjika dynasty claimed to ascend to the throne of the kingdom of Albania after independence, thus accelerating Albanian national aspirations. The movement had an important development in 1912, when a pan-Albanian congress was held in Bucharest, chaired by Ismail Qemali. That congress served to approve the first resolution that paved the way for the national consciousness of Albanians for Albania's independence from the Ottoman Empire²².

A key figure during the year of independence was Aleksandër Stavre Drenova (Asdreni), an emigrant from Korça to Bucharest, who was the lyricist of the Albanian national anthem, "*Hymni i Flamurit*^[al]" (Hymn of Flag). This anthem, which expresses the national aspirations of the Albanians, was first sung to the notes of the Romanian composer Ciprian Porumbescu, who adapted the music to express the Albanian unity in a single and indivisible nation²³.

After Albania was annexed by the Ottoman Empire, among the first countries to recognize its independ-

ence in 1913 was Romania. Meanwhile, on December 16 of the same year, Romania established diplomatic relations with Albania. The recognition of Albania's independence by Romania marked an important historical act in the bilateral political and cultural relations between Albanians and Romanians²⁴. The well-known Albanian poets Viktor Efimiu and Lasgush Poradeci would be the two central figures in the spread and support of Albanian culture and identity in Romania²⁵.

Other central periods in this fraternal relationship between the two peoples are those of the reign of King Zog I and later that of the communist regime, where ties with Romania continued to be present, especially in the fields of culture, education and diplomatic exchanges. During the regime of Enver Hoxha, relations with Romania had their ups and downs, but there was no lack of cooperation in various fields, especially in socialist art and cinematography.

II. Cultural Perceptions of Romanians in Albania

In terms of culture, Romania is seen as a country with rich folkloric traditions, music similar to that of the Balkans, and a literature that has aroused interest over the years. Important personalities of Romanian literature such as Mihai Eminescu, Lucian Blaga, or Mircea Eliade have been translated into Albanian and are read with respect in Albanian intellectual circles.

On the other hand, Albanian figures such as Asdreni, Konstandin Kristoforidhi, or Thoma Avrami have had important contacts with Romanian cultural circles, bringing mutual influences and building intercultural bridges. One of the most special poems of the Aromanians or Vlachs (*Vllahë*^[al]) in the Korça area is the following in the language of the Romanians of Albania, naturally composed of Albanian, Greek and Italian words²⁶, where the Pharsaliot shepherds sang these verses in chorus with the usual music of their songs:

*Ciudie laie ciudie,/Çi s'façe tu
Rrmănie,/Doi ficiori di-arbinisie,
Pitricuți-li di Vlăhie/Ianina, tu puliție,
S' revizuiască laia șculie;Li băgară tu
filăchie/Li pitricum ti lucre bune,
Osman pașa li feaçe surghiune/
Surghiune tu Italie,/Tu Italie portul
Brindiz,/Păn s' li ghină văr aviz;/Un
Andrei al Balamaci,/Exilați doili cu
Taci;/Pădianu agudi hiru/Ta s' lia
hăbare Viziru,/Ștepsu çi feaçe Valiu;/
Agudî telu Sultanu,Valilu s' lia lirtare
la Pădianu;/Al Pădeanu di Vlăhie li
scriară,/S' clidă poarta din afară;/
Pădianu a Valilu li zaci;/Ma s' vrei s'
nà lirtăm doili,/Pitriaçi s' aduci
fiorili;/ Valilu aștipta cu banda/
Când işiră revizorli Saranda,/Ordin
dă Valilu pi la tabori,/Si s' veagliă
doili ficiori/S' nu pată civa pi cale,/Că
di Pădianu nu vra scăpare;/Andrea cu
Tacit doili ca frați,/Ninti ș' napoi cu
sufarazi;/Când viniră tu puliție,
Grecili s' făcea mare ciudie,/Că s'
turară dit exurie;/ Osman pașa mulți
avea exilată,/Ma di văr nu' ș-u avea
affată,/Di aești el ș-u păță,/Ca lirtări
el căftă²⁷.*

III. Aromanians/Vlachs in Albania: history, culture and status of a community

Aromanians, an ethnic group closely related to the Albanians. They have long had a stable presence in the territories of Albania and consequently have interacted and interacted with each other. The Aromanians or Vlachs are a people as ancient as the Albanians themselves as direct descendants of the Illyrians in the Illyrian Peninsula, which after the Ottoman conquest was called the "Balkans". Although the Aromanians are scattered in several Balkan countries, including Greece, Serbia and North Macedonia, Albania has a special role in the development and preservation of their culture over the centuries, making them an integral part of its own national culture. The Aromanians speak the Aromanian language, a Latin dialect that is a form of Latin and that carries numerous influences from the Ottoman period and Balkan culture as a whole²⁸.

3.1. Origin and History of the Aromanians in Albania

The Aromanians are also known as "Vlachs" (*Vllahë*^[al]) in Albania and are considered a people full of rich traditions and diverse folk costumes, maintaining a strong ethnic and cultural identity over the centuries. During the Ottoman period, the Aromanians were often engaged in economic activities, especially trade and livestock, and therefore settled in various areas of Albania, mainly in the south,

in regions such as Dropull, Çamëri, and Pogradec²⁹. During the period of the Ottoman Empire, many Aromanians served as traders and representatives of the Ottoman administration, a key factor that helped strengthen their ties with the state structures of the time³⁰.

3.2. Aromanian Language and Cultural Identity

One of the most distinctive characteristics of the Aromanians is their language, which represents a mediation of Roman and Balkan culture. The Aromanian language is a Latin dialect, similar to Romanian, but with pronounced influences from Albanian, Greek and Turkish³¹. During the 20th century, the Aromanian language has been subject to strong pressure for assimilation from other languages of the region, including Albanian and Greek, affecting the decline of its use in everyday life. However, a part of the Aromanian community has strongly preserved its language and cultural traditions, inheriting it through their families and rites.

3.3. The Status of Aromanians in Albania and Their Role in Society

In Albania, the Aromanians are recognized as one of the minority communities, and, although they have a long history of integration into Albanian society, they have experienced various periods of exclusion from Albania's political and development decision-making. After World War II,

many Aromanians were involved in the fight against the communist regime, and after the fall of communism, the Aromanian community resumed preserving more of its ethnic and cultural identity³².

In recent years, the Aromanian community has sought formal recognition of its status as a national minority. Although the Aromanians constitute a small proportion of Albania's population, they have a significant impact on cultural and social life, particularly through their music, folklore and traditions, which are often shared with those of the Albanians³³.

Since the 1990s, Albania has seen Romania as a close European model for reform and development, particularly in the fields of education and technology. A significant number of Albanian students have studied at Romanian universities, where they have been welcomed with friendship and integrated into local society.

In popular culture, the Romanians are perhaps not mentioned as often as the Germans or Italians, but in academic, diplomatic and historical circles, they are valued as a close people, with whom we share not only a geographical region, but also a common memory of Balkan solidarity at important historical and developmental moments of the Albanian state.

The Aromanians in Albania represent an important part of the cultural heritage of the Balkans, with a rich history and an identity that continues to be preserved and developed, despite the challenges of assimilation and social change. Their culture remains an

important element in understanding the ethnic and cultural pluralism of Albania. Despite the challenges they face, the Aromanians continue to contribute to Albanian society and maintain a strong connection to their historical and linguistic identity, which has led to Romania and Romanians being seen as a brotherly people in the eyes of Albanians and the Albanian nation.

IV. Cultural diplomacy and political science magazine *Polis*, from Iași

In order to continue and develop bilateral relations, the editorial staff of *Polis* magazine decided to produce a thematic edition dedicated to the history of Albania. Its production was entrusted to Oltsen Gripshi and Sabin Dragulin.

The corpus dedicated to the history and culture of Albania comprises twelve contributions. The approaches are diverse and come from historiography, event history, art history, sacred and profane art, theater, film, architecture, poetry and cultural interferences, the published texts being signed by specialists in the field from Albania.

The ordering of articles and studies was carried out according to chronological and thematic criteria.

Looking at the history of the last half millennium, it is easy to see that the expansion of the Ottomans in the Balkans and Central Europe, which led to the conquest of Constantinople (1456), Belgrade (1521) and Buda (1541), also consecrated the entry of the territories inhabited by Albanians

into the empire. Of course, changes in state, economic, social, religious realities, etc., will be achieved over time, but will have major implications up to the present day. The Albanian case is suggestive, given that a Christian society and culture, anchored in the economic and geopolitical realities of the area for millennia, will gradually transform, as a result of the influences and pressures of the Ottomans.

The coordinators' intention was to identify specialists in different fields, who would cover through their contributions both the period of the last five centuries of local history, placing less emphasis on the eventual element and, especially, on that of culture, which will have and will reflect the influences of the different political regimes that succeeded each other during this period, as well as the historical, linguistic and cultural links between the inhabited territories and Albanians and Romanians.

The contribution entitled "Where's the sword, there's religion: Local Elites, Ottomans, and Islamization Among Albanians during the 15th Century", signed by Caka Eduart, presents the consequences that followed the conquest of Albania in terms of the Islamization of the population. To explain how the conqueror applied a policy of Islamization, the author used both Ottoman cadastral registers and Western archival documentation. Throughout the text, the stages through which the Ottoman conquest took place in the 15th century and its direct consequence, as I stated previously, the triggering of the Islamization process, are presented.

The study concludes that the **Ottomans** used the same method applied **in Constantinople and other Byzantine cities**. The process of Islamization **began with the local elites and later spread throughout the territory to the population**.

The second article, proposed by **Adriana Qafa and Andrea Llukani**, is **entitled "The iconographic school of Berat"**. The text brings to the attention of specialists the internal cultural reaction of the Christian cultural space, **in the face of the process of Islamization, with the development of Albanian iconographic art in the 16th-17th centuries**. The great master of this art is **Onufri from Neokastr**a (Elbasan). A school developed around him, from which the authors of the approach emphasized the activity of **Onufri's son, Nikolla**, along with his collaborator **Joani, Onufër the Cypriot**, as well as many other icon painters who preferred to remain anonymous.

The study "Travellers in Albania during the first half of the XIX Century", signed by **Lida Miraj**, presents us with a very important period in the process of reconnecting the Albanian territories with the Western space. The period identified by the author is **1796-1815**, which overlaps with the Napoleonic Wars. Practically, after three centuries, from the moment when the Albanian territories became part of the Ottoman Empire (1478), after a heroic resistance led by **Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg**, we begin to have information that comes from the accounts of foreign travelers. The approach is important because it allows

those interested to look into the past through the "eyes" of foreigners. The information provided is very important because it allows us to understand the internal organizational system of these territories, the dynasties that ruled them, the cultural centers, the cities, the way in which power passed through generations, the main occupations of the population, etc.

Oltsen Gripshi, through his study "Albania and Albanians in foreign graphic novels", comes to complete the previous study. Various foreign authors published works of this type in the 19th and 20th centuries, in which they highlighted the rich **Illyrian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman cultural heritage** of the territories inhabited by Albanians. **Oltsen** combines historical chronological aspects with comparative analysis, exploring the creativity of the authors of these graphic novels that allowed young readers around the world to know the temperament of Albanians and the history of Albania through visual description.

With **Rovena Vata Mikeli** and her contribution "The poetry of **dritero agolli** has left deep traces in Albanian tradition", a series of themes are opened regarding the way in which Albanians identify themselves through their own culture. **Mikeli** emphasizes the poetic creativity of **Dritëro Agolli**, who in a difficult period for the history of Albania tries to escape from the present by creating a work that has as reference elements the ideals, qualities and roots of the ancestors. Returning to the past is a mission and is achieved