

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

AUTHENTIC SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE TO THE STIRRING UP OF SERB-ALBANIAN INTERETHNIC TENSIONS

Lejla Ramić-Mesihović
Sarajevo, September 2023



Over the past century, interethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs have been defined by nationalistic that have proven to be unhelpful and unsupportive of resolution of tensions.



Since the beginning of the 20th century, authentic social democratic positions have remained on the political and social margins primarily due to permanent power-related struggles in realpolitical, rudimentary conditions of social and political mainstream activity.



Nationalist ideologies have proven time and again to promote conflict and divisions for their own purposes.

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"If this booklet could serve as a contribution to the historic task of Balkan social democratic parties, our modest expectations would be fully justified."¹
 Dimitrije Tucović, founder of the Serbian Social Democratic Party,
 January 1, 1914

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INTRODUCTION

For over 110 years, interethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs have been dominated by nationalist discourses which have proven to be unhelpful and unsupportive of resolving tensions between the two groups. From a historical perspective, these tensions reflect a moment in time rather than "eternal hostilities" as stubbornly suggested by nationalist discourses. This publication is meant to serve as a reminder that left-wing political positions in the region have been devoted to the resolution of this instrumentalized and repetitive generation of ethnic tensions and intolerance.

In addition, the publication aims to provide additional space and reaffirmation to an authentic social democratic discourse. The immense significance of the efforts and contributions of non-governmental activism in reminding the public of the long periods of togetherness of Albanians and Serbs in the Balkans should be noted and appreciated. Their engagement is particularly important in times when this logic becomes devalued in public discourse and political action. Hopefully, at least a part of this social democratic approach to interethnic relations in the Balkans will end up becoming of lasting value to the political culture in the region.

Essential to understanding the relations, myths, and fears in the region regarding Serb-Albanian relations is a historical overview of key events surrounding the strengthened articulation of Serbian and Albanian ethnic

conciseness during the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and development of contextual complex as "the Eastern Question". This is equally crucial for understanding the resulting context of ethnicity-driven events and ambitions.

Social democratic positions from the beginning of the 20th century often remain on the political and social margins primary due to permanent power-related struggles in mainstream social and political spheres. The highest intensity of these power struggles has been between Belgrade and Prishtina and as such this text will focus on this part of the Balkans. At the moment, interstate relations between Serbia and Albania are stable and solid, while before the 1990s there were tensions between the states (of Albania and then-Yugoslavia), but not between ethnicities as such.

The ambitions and aspirations of the social democrats remain relevant and credible today, as they represent the only meaningful ideological opposition to discourses of ethnic intolerance between Albanians and Serbs since the Balkan Wars. The main focus of this piece is the contribution of the social democratic discourse through some of its main political exponents and supporters. This often-underestimated discourse has only one ultimate goal – replacing the history of tensions and conflicts with a future of permanent peace, cooperation, and prosperity. This approach has proven to work in the creation of the European Union (EU) shortly after the end of World War Two, turning a continent with a long history of wars into a desired destination for all Balkan countries without exception.

¹ Serbian: "Ako bi ova knjižica poslužila kao priložak tome istoriskom zadatku balkanskih socijaldemokratskih partija, naša skromna očekivanja time bi bila opravdana." Dimitrije Tucović, *Srbija i Arbanija: jedan prilog kritici zavojevačke politike srpske buržoazije* (1914, reprint Mostart Zemun, 2011).

THE OUTCOME OF THE BALKAN WARS AS THE CONTEXT FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC POSITIONING

Since the end of 19th Century, the mainstream political discourse on Serb-Albanian relations has been dominated by realist, black and white paradigm, deferring to expansionist ambitions that justify hostilities against the Other through dehumanisation. This polarisation was maximised during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, when the former Ottoman territories were to be partitioned among the victors and newly created or expanded states emerging from the wars.²

Most countries of the South Balkan region are multi-ethnic with a significant Albanian population who make up a majority or minority. In this regard, it is interesting to look at the dynamics of interethnic relations in countries with a Serb and Albanian population – Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and the southern part of Serbia – from the perspective of socio-democratic views. Since their inception, ethnic relations with Albanians tended to be part of the social democratic perspective, stemming from over a century ago. In Serbia, the founders of social democratic movement believed that better understanding across interethnic lines and improvement of relations between Albanians and Serbs was a crucial element of Serbian foreign policy. At the time, the Serbian state's aspiration to access the Adriatic Sea through the occupation of Albania was a major foreign policy goal of the radical government led by Nikola Pašić. The Serbian Social Democratic Party, founded by Dimitrije Tucović, voiced their opposition to these politics of territorial expansionism and polarization. The London Treaty ended the First Balkan War on December 20th, 1912, with the London Conference of Ambassadors deciding to territorially cut off Albania from the rest of the Ottoman Empire. The Conference appointed commissions for demarcation of the Greek border between Montenegro and Serbia. Conflicts arose on the northern Greek border due to Serbian violation of the agreement and incursions south. The famed Austro-Hungarian Ultimatum to Serbia followed in 1913, and the Commission did not complete

the assignment prior to outbreak of the First World War. Yet among the Albanian population of this region, there is a lively sense of historical remembrance about these events.³

The Serbian occupation of Albania lasted between November 1912 and October 1913.⁴ The most prominent social democrats of the time, Dimitrije Tucović and Dragiša Lapčević, lobbied for the imperative of improved inter-ethnic understanding as a key foreign policy goal. This aim has also been understood in the context of the confrontation with the bourgeoisie of the time. It was understood as particularly important "to demonstrate on one actual practical question how healthy and salvaging labour of Balkans social democracy on building friendship, alliances and the fullest community of all Balkans peoples is."⁵

Since the very beginning of affirmation of ethnic identities in the Balkans at the end of 19th century, interethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs have been seen as highly complex and charged.⁶ It makes sense that interethnic relations were part of the socio-democratic political focus, especially when it came to the question of forming a foreign policy that would reflect socio-democratic values of solidarity, equality, and freedom. The socio-democratic response to the problematization of these interethnic relations was and remains a valuable part of the social legacy and serves as proof that discourse about these topics can and ought to be fairer, more rational, and more civilized.

² The victors of the First Balkan war were Greece, Montenegro, Bulgaria, and Serbia, while during the Second Balkan war Bulgaria was defeated by Serbia, Romania, and Greece.

³ John Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels in the Balkans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 29.

⁴ Miranda Vickers, *Albania: A Modern History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 1999).

⁵ Tucović, op cit.

⁶ Fatjona Medjini, "Albanians Feel Reserved About Serbs, Poll Shows" (Balkan Insight, 28 Oct 2015); Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, "Attitudes of Serbian Citizens Regarding Relations with Kosovo and Albania: Analysis of public opinion poll" (Belgrade: March 2022).

At the time, Dimitrije Tucović advocated in favour of a more inclusive and more equal approach to different ethnic groups in the Balkans, including Albanians and Serbs. He believed in the importance of class solidarity and asserted that working class people from different ethnic backgrounds needed to unify in the struggle against their common oppressors, which often meant ruling elites and imperial forces. He was critical towards nationalistic and chauvinistic ideologies that promoted conflicts and divisions, which only served the interests of ruling classes and imperial forces which stood in the way of the progress of the working class.

Tucović often emphasised the need for cooperation and solidarity between different ethnic groups on the region in the struggle for social justice and workers' rights. His positions were deeply rooted in socialist and internationalist principles which stressed class solidarity and cooperation across ethnic lines. He was critical of what he saw as poorly defined and implemented Serbian expansionist politics towards countries that became inhabited by Albanians after the two great waves of Serb migration.⁷ He also condemned the ignorance of those who saw Albanian people as a group of primitive tribes, reminding that Albanian tribes were isolated from the rest of the Balkans peninsula at the time due to the lack of road and communication infrastructure and inhospitable geography.⁸

During his political engagement as one of founders of social democracy in the region, Tucović was committed to disputing the main discourse in Serbian politics, trying to call to mind the demographic dynamism of the new country, centuries after the defeat of the medieval Serbian state and mass northward migrations of Serbs. He also reminded the public that Albanians very often inhabited these deserted areas under pressure of local authorities and feudalists during Ottoman rule.

Dragiša Lapčević, Tucović's colleague from the Serbian Social Democratic Party in the first two decades of the 20th century, attended a rally in May 1919 devoted to the struggle against imperialism as an umbrella idea of the left. There, he called for "Greeks, Serbs and Italians to stop the partition of Albania ... so that the Balkans could stop being a huge mutual slaughterhouse."⁹ He also called for

the organisation of a federation of Balkan and Danubian republics to create the "economic and political conditions for the happy lives of people in this South-East of Europe."¹⁰ Inspired by events in September 1913 which were known in Serbia as the "suffocation of Albanian rebellion," the Serbian Social Democratic Party reported to the International Socialist Bureau based in Brussels that they felt embittered by the politics of divisions, permanent tensions, and wars of extermination. In addition to this, the party accused the ruling elite that "by chasing the sea, it has led the country into a bloody adventure connected to incomprehensible misery."¹¹

There was a diversity of discourses and views over questions related to Kosovo existed among Serbian intellectuals in the second half of the 19th century. For example, the opinions of Tucović, Milan Šuflaja, and Milovan Đilas significantly differed from the positions of Stojan Protić (alias Balkanikus), Vladan Đorđević, and Jovan Cvijić. The left wing of the Serbian Social Democratic Party, as well as a part of Austrian Social Democrats such as Leo Freundlich,¹² fiercely criticized atrocities committed against Albanians in 1913.

Mainstream theoreticians such as the anthropologist Cvijić, did not question the behaviour and politics of the Serbian government under Pašić. On the contrary, they did their utmost to provide it with scientifically relevant backing. The radical right-wing nationalist Pašić served on key state positions and played an important role in shaping the foreign policy and alliances of Serbia during the Balkan wars and First World War. His aims were to expand Serbian territory and its influence on the Balkans. Numerous notes and reports on the harassment and ethnic cleansing of Albanians, particularly in Prizren and Gnjilan, were presented to the Great Powers. At the beginning of 1914, a report of the International Commission of the Carnegie Foundation, while not confirming the number of murdered Albanians, confirmed that houses and entire villages have been turned into dust and unarmed and innocent population was massacred in these areas.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Leo Freundlich, *Albania's Golgotha Indictment of the Exterminators of the Albanian People* (Albanian History.Net: 1913).

¹³ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan War" (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 1914).

⁷ The two waves of Serb led by Peja/Peć patriarchs northwards from Kosovo in 1690 and 1740 remain a major part of Serb mythology and sense of ownership towards regions they had previously inhabited.

⁸ Tucović, op.cit.

⁹ Dragiša Lapčević, *Rat i srpska socijalna demokratija: 1908.-1914* (1925; reprint Mostart Zemun, 2010).

CHALLENGES OF THE "BROTHERHOOD AND UNITY ERA" AND THE EVENTS THAT FOLLOWED

The essential logic of Tucović and Lapčević was adopted as the backbone of Josip Broz Tito's socialist Yugoslavia, which aimed to group different ethnicities and people into one nation. The slogan "Brotherhood and Unity" was set in stone during the Second World War 1941-1945. At first, this slogan was to inspire common struggle against fascism, but after the war it was one of pillars of the preservation of Yugoslav togetherness and Yugoslavia itself.

During the foundation of the new Yugoslav state, there were three key moments that the Kosovo Albanians would subsequently see as deceptions. The first one dates to December 1943, from the anti-fascist conference in Bujan, Northern Albania, when it was recorded that the Albanians of Kosovo wanted unification with Albania after liberation from the Axis forces. This position, which raised the hope of the Albanians of Kosovo and Albania in achieving unity, was later ideologically corrected with the claim that "when the communists come to power in Albania and Yugoslavia, it will not matter where the borders will be."¹⁴

In July 1945, during the Military Administration of Kosovo, a second conference of anti-fascists was held, where it was decided by the Yugoslav Communist Party that "Kosovo and Metohija should be annexed to federal Serbia."¹⁵ Albania did not oppose this view and it was even suggested that Kosovo was a "bridge" between two brotherly states. However, in 1948, after the Communist Party of Yugoslavia distanced itself from the Soviet communists under Stalin's leadership, the leader of Albania, Enver Hoxha, decided to break off relations with Yugoslavia.¹⁶

After 1948, Albanians in Yugoslavia, especially in Kosovo, were under distinct pressure and scrutiny from the intelligence service - the State Security Agency (UDBA), headed by Aleksandar Ranković - which spread fear and uneasiness during that time. There was a conviction

among Albanians that Ranković was presenting incorrect information about Albanians in Yugoslavia to Tito. After the Brioni plenum of the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia held in July 1966, Albanians breathed a sigh of relief: Ranković and his closest collaborators officially resigned and were relieved of their functions due to the abuse of authority that went as far as the unauthorized interception of Tito's communication channels.

As is usually the case, the aggressiveness of the two nationalisms was mutual and went hand in hand. The essential difference was that until the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbian nationalism often had an official, institutionalized means of power within Yugoslavia, while Albanian nationalism did not. Both Serbian and Albanian Yugoslav leftists who were fundamentally committed to solidarity, equality, and freedom, recognized this spiral of problems, and reacted to it.

Azem Vllasi and Kaqusha Jashari stand out as some of the most concrete examples. These two Albanian politicians were very pro-Yugoslav oriented, while the system was governed by the spirit of the constitutional changes that began in 1968, with the amendments finally adopted in 1974. These changes enabled the autonomy of the provinces of Kosovo and Vojvodina. Both politicians hailed from multi-ethnic families and appeared to be dedicated to the principles of brotherhood and unity and tolerance.

In the improved conditions of Kosovo and Vojvodina having the status of autonomous provinces, they were able to develop their own legal solutions, provided that they were in accordance with the constitution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and Socialist Republic of Serbia. They were also able to participate in the federal government through their own representatives. This period was considered a good basis for coexistence in these areas.

¹⁴ Azem Vllasi, *Kosovo: Početak raspada* (Sarajevo: Šahinpašić, 2016).

¹⁵ Vllasi, op. cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

However, the infamous 1987 speech of the then Serbian president Slobodan Milošević in Kosovo was fueled by nationalist rhetoric. It followed a petition signed by over 60,000 Kosovo Serbs, claiming that they felt they under pressure from Albanian irredentists and demanding a purge of the Albanian part of the Kosovo party leadership. The following year, both Vllasi and Jashari were removed from party positions. Vllasi was arrested, while Jashari's family situation was exploited to force her to leave the political scene.¹⁷ As early as 1989, there were large demonstrations in Kosovo against the government.

Luljeta Pula-Beqiri, a social democrat and one of the most prominent Yugoslav feminists, repeatedly stood with dignity and expertise on the side of truth in attempts to create further discord between Albanians and Serbs, condemning the propaganda that fuels that discord. She famously commented against the instrumentalization of an incident of poisoning of over 3,000 Albanian children in 1990, which was tendentiously and mockingly called "mono-national poisoning" in order to encourage intolerance towards Albanians and their further marginalization, especially emphasizing the then already institutionalized ethnic segregation in Kosovo as a distinct part of the problem.¹⁸

With the breakup of Yugoslavia, remaining in Serbia was no longer an option for Kosovar Albanians. After all, Kosovo, apart from the period of 1912 to 1918, was not part of Serbia as an independent state for any of its history. It was only within the first and second Yugoslavia that Kosovo was in some way related to Serbia. Without this greater federation, Serbia was not a country where Kosovo belonged according to the democratic will of the Albanians who made up the majority there.¹⁹

¹⁷ Vllasi, op cit.

¹⁸ RTS TV, "Porota" (1990), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NF9UM-9Uu9Us>

¹⁹ Personal authorised communication with Azem Vllasi from July 2015.

AFTER THE 2008 DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

The context after the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008 requires was a state of permanent tension in Serbian-Albanian relations in general, and especially in the north of Kosovo, inhabited by many Serbs who rejected the declaration.²⁰ The Declaration of Independence of Kosovo states that it is a secular and multi-ethnic state. However, the political scene is often polarized due to the struggle for the widest possible acceptance of independence on the side of Kosovo, and Serbia's refusal to accept its independence, which is also reflected in the political scene of Kosovo Serbs, especially in the north. In such tense moments, there is not much room left for a moderate and constructive approach.

Pula-Beqiri and Jashari have continued their political activism after independence within the framework of social democracy. As for the next generation of social democratic politicians, Shpend Ahmeti, now a well-known figure in Kosovo politics and the leader of the Social Democratic Party of Kosovo (PSD), has been particularly prominent. During his mandate as mayor of Prishtina, Kosovo's capital, Ahmeti was a vocal advocate of social democratic politics, urban development, and good governance. On several occasions, he invited Serbs from Prishtina to return and tried to understand the needs and priorities of those few Serbs who gravitate to Prishtina.²¹

Nenad Čanak, the leader of the League of Social Democrats of Vojvodina (LSV), is one of the most visible politicians who took the letter and spirit of authentic social democratic logic to the extreme from the beginning of his political engagement, not hesitating to raise his voice against nationalism even when it seemed futile and pointless. In connection with the 2014 burning of shops and bakeries owned by Albanians in Vojvodina after the interrupted football match between Serbia and Albania, LSV issued a statement in which it is emphasized that "all this is already too ominously reminiscent of a rerun of Kristallnacht, of Nazi beatings, and the end Weimar Germany in 1932. Whoever burns bakeries today will burn people in bakery ovens

²⁰ Declaration of Independence of Kosovo.

²¹ "Gradonačelnik Prištine: Želim da Srbi shvate da ovde može normalno da se živi" (Danas: 29 Aug 2019).

tomorrow."²² Speaking in an atmosphere of maximum tension due to the landing of a drone with an Albanian flag on the football field, Čanak recalled the violation of the security of Albanians and their property in Vojvodina after the declaration independence of Kosovo in 2008, and asked for the preventive engagement of the police and the army on the streets, concluding: "If the state is unable to stop this - the leaguers will protect their neighbors. It will not be the first time. We did it in the nineties, we will do it again. And whenever the need occurs."

²² "Čanak: Ako neće policija, ligaši će čuvati komšije Albance" (Portal 021, 17 Oct 2014).

CONCLUSION

In the Balkans, a place that Winston Churchill characterized as a place that produces more history than it can consume, social democratic thought since the period of its institutionalization intended to play an alternative role on the political scene. In the region, realpolitik-inspired considerations of power still provide much greater political capital than constructive policies of peace and cooperation, making authentic socio-democratic ideas of ending inter-ethnic conflicts all the more important.

Any political action in accordance with that logic, regardless of the level of government and the possibility of immediate political influence, is of existential importance. While there are not enough of these in the political scene, there are enough of them that it is impossible to fit all of them into a work of this type. Any further concession to nationalist policies comes with an ever-increasing price. The abandonment of social democracy and its logic will spell the final destruction of civilized political culture, chances for dialogue, and any logic of community and cooperation. That is the moment when neighbors do not defend one another and when violence against the Other is tolerable and justified. It will also be the end of hope for an EU future of the region. That is why the reminder of an authentic social democratic response is more important than ever before.

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Since the very beginning of the creation of ethnic identities in the Balkan at the end of 19th century, interethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs have been highly complex and charged.



Nationalist ideologies have proven time and again to promote conflict and divisions for their own purposes. Meanwhile, since the beginning of the 20th century, authentic social democratic positions remain on the political and social margins of mainstream debate, which tends to be defined by realpolitik.



The abandonment of social democracy and its logic will portend the destruction of civilized political culture, as well as any chances for dialogue and a logic of community and cooperation. This creates conditions in which neighbors do not defend one another, and violence against the Other is tolerable and justified.

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