

CENTRAL GOVERNANCE AND MINORITY RIGHTS: THE CASE OF THE DEVELOPING COUNTRY

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Abstract

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The purpose of the paper is to study the institutional approach of the Serbian state toward ethnic minorities, specifically towards the Albanian ethnic minority in Serbia. The research focuses on the Serbian state governance forms and how these forms reflect on local governance policies by the Albanian majority. The deprivation of many individual and national rights has influenced the strengthening of the national identity (Searle-White, 2001). The paper is a theoretical study that is based on the qualitative research method and includes the discourse analysis of programs, events, writings, and statements of intellectual and political figures of the relevant times. The paper finds out that the violation of freedom and national rights toward the Albanian minority in Serbia has reflected strong forms of political behavior. In conclusion, it turns out that the Albanian political class in Serbia, disappointed by the state institutions, seeks the help of the mother state of Kosovo so that the status of the Albanians in Serbia is resolved the same as the status of the Serbs of Kosovo. This paper seeks to contribute to central government relations with ethnic minorities as well as making a non-prejudiced approach to the freedoms and rights of ethnic minorities in general.

Keywords: Majority Governance, National Identity, Local Government, Discrimination, Reciprocity

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1. INTRODUCTION

The existence of large ethnic minorities in the countries of the Western Balkans continuously affects the relations between the states of the region. The states, but also the Balkan societies, have found it difficult to accept the ethnic and cultural diversity within their states, despite the obvious presence of this diversity (Hysa, 2020). Often, national minorities have been subjected to discrimination in the country they belong to, while they tend to seek help from their mother countries. In this context, they are inclined to strengthen the sense of national identity in their political activities

(Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2015). The relationship of these national minorities with the institutions and the population of the state where they belong, namely the relationship of the Albanian minority in Serbia with the Serbian state will occupy an important place in this paper.

National ideas may have been born as pure ideas, but their formation is largely influenced by different social circumstances and conditions (Ignatieff, 2000; Searle-White, 2001). The community creates its identity through a shared experience influenced by social circumstances and conditions (Putri, Nasruddin, & Wahab, 2017). This phenomenon continues to be more pronounced in multi-ethnic

environments, where the ethnic majority determines social life making certain minorities feel endangered, unrealized, and oppressed and are inclined to reflect against such situations, thus the periphery-center clashes are very dynamic and are described by different social and political actions (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Such clashes are even more influential where ethnic value disputes are still open and evident. In the same position is the Albanian minority in Serbia, where Albanians are often deprived of their individual and national rights (Biserko, 2021). The Albanian minority in Serbia is located in the South of the country, respectively on the borders with North Macedonia and Kosovo. It mainly covers three municipalities, Presheva, Bujanoc, and Medvegja, otherwise, this region is also known as the Presevo Valley (Ejupi & Bernabé-Crespo, 2022). Historically, this region has functioned as an integral part of Kosovo. Since the 1990s, the citizens of this region have organized important political actions as a result of dissatisfaction with the Serbian central government. Thus, the research questions of this paper are:

RQ1: How have certain policies of the central government influenced the strengthening of the national feeling among the Albanian ethnic minority in Serbia?

RQ2: What is the form of reflection of the political organization of the Albanian minority towards such governing policies?

The method through which this work is carried out is qualitative. The paper refers to reliable sources about the events such as documents, laws, reports of state institutions, reports of international organizations, reports of non-governmental organizations, media reports, interviews with people involved in these circumstances, and others. Comparison takes an important place in the work. The focus of this paper will be the main events of the last three decades in Presevo Valley, such as the referendum, the armed conflict, protests, events in the region, parallelism with the Kosovo Serbs, and other similar events (Zylfiu, 2019; Emini, 2016). As findings of this paper present the political events that come as a result of reflecting on the dissatisfaction with the central government, as a consequence of the economic, social, cultural, and administrative discrimination applied for many years by the central government in relation to the Albanian ethnic minority in Serbia. Even though this region is in a favorable geographical space and with favorable opportunities for significant economic development, it is located at the lowest level of economic development in the country which caused a large depopulation of this area (Perković & Vranjković, 2020). Also, as a result of the constant clashes between the central government and the Albanian minority, the idea of national identity has awakened and strengthened even more among them, but not as a refined idea, but rather as a disappointment towards the central government and as a need to solve the problems it faces every day. Moreover, due to political incompetence and the inability to solve the current problems faced by the Albanian minority in Serbia, it has come to the point that they can only be solved with the involvement of the mother state Kosovo. Thus, the Albanian political class in Serbia demands that Kosovo should condition Serbia with the concept of

reciprocity, namely the same rights applied to Serbian citizens in Kosovo should also be applied to Albanian citizens in Serbia.

The structure of this paper is as follows. Section 1 is the introduction. Section 2 examines the relevant literature and deals with the theoretical aspect of the reason for identification with the nation, Albanian national identity, and identity reflections. Section 3 analyzes the methodology that has been used to conduct empirical theoretical research on the issue of minority rights. Section 4 presents the findings of the research. Section 5 discusses the research results and Section 6 concludes this paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

We can say that it is natural for people to want to live within a homogeneous ethnic and cultural space. Such a request, at first sight, may seem simple and legitimate, but when attempting to do so in practice, this idea is often impossible and sounds absurd. This idea is even more absurd when considering the countries of Southeast Europe, where ethnic diversity is evident in every country, and this is often the one that produces inter-ethnic and inter-state conflicts, and conflicts in the region. Namely, the inclusion of an ethnic minority within a predominantly ethnic majority creates a dynamic relationship between the mother state trinity, the evident state, and the respective minority. However, beyond this approach, there are norms and state and international rights that regulate this relationship, which normalizes the functioning and organization of the respective states. A certain minority is constantly inclined and has the right to refer to the mother country as the only cultural, social, and above all identity source in order to realize itself. Altermant (2002) through a series of questions wants to describe the reasons that make possible the idea of identification with national identity as something inexhaustible, postulated and legitimate. Thus, "Why do Hungarians in Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine and Vojvodina feel part of the Hungarian nation?... Why are Bosnian Muslims in the Sandzak province a nation, while neighboring Muslims in the Serb part a religious community?" (p. 25). Albanians have the same fate, so what makes the Albanians of Macedonia, the Presevo Valley, Montenegro, and Greece feel Albanian? Smith (1991, 2008) considers the idea of identification with national identity as something that its members are connected through cultural, linguistic, and customary elements, which have developed a strong connection with the given territory and invoking the land of the former as something sacred and unsurpassed: "A separate collective name, a myth of a common antiquity, common historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of a common culture, associated with a particular 'homeland', a sense of solidarity for parts of the population that have special meaning" (Smith, 2008, p. 68).

The sense of common identity gives life to the national idea through common elements (Putri et al., 2017), or as Anderson (2006) also points out that they are imaginary communities that are continuously shaped. In countries where these nationalities constitute a national minority against another majority, they keep the national idea alive

by constantly referring to the mother countries as the ideal source of identity through which the refined idea of the nation is projected (Golubivic, 2019). For the Albanians of Kosovo in particular, and the Albanians of other Balkan regions (Macedonia, Montenegro, Southern Serbia, Northern Greece), Albania is presented as the motherland and the source of the true Albanian identity (Kullashi, 2003, p. 129). There are many powerful identifying elements that keep this feeling awake, but according to Altermant (2002), language is among the main elements of identification. "The nation lives in its own language" (Altermant, 2002, p. 26) referring to the Hungarian people who emphasize national ideology over language and less on ethnic origin, and shared historical memories, in this context these associate with a "homeland" and idealize the mother country as a real source of national identity.

Thus, both the Albanians of the Presevo Valley and all the Albanians of the Balkans see themselves as ethnicity and as a nation having as a reference point the mother state which promotes the idea of being Albanian, not through any political and diplomatic strategy implemented by the government or the civil institutions of the mother country, but the very existence of Albania enables such a reflection of identity. The identification with the mother country, with Albania, with the language, history, and other unifying elements, made the Albanians raise the finger of their national and legitimizing belonging toward the realization of the national demands in the Serbian state.

The subject is inclined to identify with his most powerful feeling, namely to use it as a cover and as an opportunity for revival when he is deprived or discriminated against to exercise that feeling, in this case when he is deprived of nationality, language, symbols, culture and the traditions he possesses (Searle-White, 2001; Maalouf, 2006; Castells, 2010; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). However, discrimination against a minority is not only done for cultural reasons but also for economic and institutional reasons (Lancee, 2019). In our context, the discriminatory policies of the Serbian government through economic, cultural, and political discrimination and recently the deletion of Albanians from the Serbian civil registry (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2022) have resulted in various political acts, initially, with the installation of the pluralist system in the former Yugoslavia, the Albanian minority, in 1992, organized the referendum for political and territorial autonomy and the right of annexation with Kosovo, also in 2001, it founded the armed group of Albanians of this region to oppose the discriminatory political mindset of the central Serbian government and to protect the national identity (Zylfiu, 2019; Imami, 2017; Emini, 2016; Mustafa, 2018, 2019).

2.1. The reason for identification with the national identity

Psychologically and socially posed question of identification, respectively where the love for identification arises, why people tend to identify with each other to the basic question of why people tend to identify with the nation, and why not with other things. From this point of view, the main

function of the nation and nationalism is the fulfillment of one's need for identity as his basic psychological need. Its role increases first of all in the conditions of social modernization when traditional ties such as family or religion largely lose their importance and strength. According to Feraj (2010), identification is a psychobiological imperative that has its source in the needs of the baby to survive, but that also works in adults and the elderly throughout the life cycle. Having a stable identity is an important condition for psychological security and well-being, while identity risk is experienced as anxiety, both by the individual and the group. In this context, as long as there is a common identity, there is also the possibility of joint action of the group to protect or strengthen its identity (Feraj, 2010). The idea of identification is related to the idea of being stable, of being safe, while the state of security that offers stability to the individual, and on the contrary, the state of insecurity causes the individual to be unstable in his actions. In a word, identification with the national feeling or the idea of the nation is the most important element in the modern world. According to Anderson (2006), the sense of national identity did not only appear based on the awareness of the unity of the cultural background, ethnicity, religion, or social groups, but rather a strategy of a socio-cultural-political product to construct, produce, and reproduce new self-identity as the negation of identity that imposition by the colonial power. Identity or belonging is the most important part of the individual because he/she is born with this necessity. Thus, identity is acquired by birth and is continuously constructed depending on place of residence, geography, ethnicity, language, culture, marital status, chronology of historical views of society, way of life of people, and other individual and collective attributes¹. There are many definitions of identity, "the way in which individuals and collectivities differ in their social relations in relation to other individuals and collectivities" (Jenkins, 2004, p. 6); awareness and readiness to know oneself, images of an individual who has in his head, his self, character traits and physical characteristics, impersonal behavior, feelings, knowledge, consciousness (Pajaziti, 2017). These and many other definitions apostrophize the way in which the individual and the collectivities are distinguished in their social relations. They explain that the individual is the result of a series of social interactions based on which he positions himself in what surrounds him. Human identity is also understood as a product of social or political action, through which he identifies himself with the collective (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 29). In this context, we can say that the individual, before being a natural being, is a social and political being. Man as a human being is constantly trying to build the individual and the collective toward the perception he has of himself and others, he/she decides to join the collective. The collective or group is based on some qualities acquired from the existing sociocultural environment such as language, religion, traditions, norms, origins, collective memory, and others. According to Smith (2008), the shared

¹ In this paper, an explanation of the clash of theories on identities (primordialist, constructivist, objective and subjective) is avoided, because this is not the subject of this paper. The main focus here is national identity as the most important social identity in the context of the subject we are dealing with.

memories and memories of a shared destiny also determine the individual's sense of who he/she really is.

Human nature and identity are not static, but they vary according to the context. Social dynamics is what brings to the fore a certain identity in the respective individual or social group. Thus, in the context we are discussing, we are dealing with national identities as the most important identities in the context of the social and political events and circumstances we are going through. Hobsbawn (2012) considers the nation as a separate social entity because it has to do with a certain type of modern territorial state, the "nation-state" and it does not make sense to speak of nation and nationality separately from this historical reality. In international law, the feeling of being a nation or a member of a nation is created to offer more privilege and security than to be identified with something else because the right of identification is ensured by the principle of self-determination (Hobsbawn, 2012). The need to be valued by the nation gives us the security of international recognition. To gain this epithet we must identify with the nation, with the values of the nation internationally recognized by the principle of self-determination. Being a member of a nation derives important political attributes. Thus, according to Ignatieff (2000), "Although men and women have many identities, it is the nation that provides them with the essential form of belonging". Being part of a nation makes the individual part of a wider community, part of a structural organization, and a sense of solidarity, and shared unity. National identity is built on the relation between those who feel themselves members of the same species that characterize a language, culture, shared collective memory, shared territory, and shared social goals.

In this context, the Albanian national identity also has the high features mentioned as features that distinguish it from other collective identities. Thus, the special feature of the Albanian national identity is the common language. The Albanian language constituted the most unifying element among Albanians, compared to neighboring peoples and other existing identities (Clayer, 2009; Sulstarova, 2003). Albanians are the only identity in the Balkans created only based on language, it was a language that was ethnicized instead of religion, so much so that it managed to nurture a true national ideology, just as if it were a religion. From now on, the "religion" of the Albanians will be "Albania" (Doja, 2009). For the Albanian identity, other integral features are also important, such as the origin, or the myth of the origin and antiquity of the Albanians as a people, this suggests that the Albanians are the descendants and most ancient inhabitants of South-Eastern Europe (Sulstarova, 2003). This thesis was adopted by Albanian nationalists because seniority claimed superiority over other neighboring nations and at the same time demanded the legitimacy of the present and the future of the Albanians as a nation. In this respect, because the Albanians are considered among the most ancient peoples in the Balkans, this simultaneously means a rich tradition and culture cultivated over the years. Another important component of a nation, besides the common origin, tradition, and culture, is also the territorial element where it lies.

The Albanian territories were within the Ottoman Empire and divided into four vilayets. For a long time, the request and aim of the Albanian revivalists was the inclusion of the Albanians in a single territory, within an autonomous vilayet, an autonomous Albanian state, under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire, relying mainly on the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural criteria of the extension of the Albanians (Bozborja, 2002). Albanian nationalists had the option of preserving the territorial and administrative compactness of the Albanian lands that were threatened by the neighbors and not by the Ottoman Empire (Feraj, 2010; Sulstarova, 2003; Bozborja, 2002). Thus, Albanian national identity is also closely related to the territorial element and this has determined many political movements in the following years for all Albanians.

The Presevo Valley is a place where the majority of the population is Albanian. Their identity coincides with the Albanian ethnic identity. The Albanians of Presheva are aware of the existence of their national identity, this creates a kind of self-confidence, security, and ontological freedom for them. However, as the Serbian government threatens the ontological security of the Albanians of the Presevo Valley, the feeling of being Albanian is awakened in them, the need for identification with the mother state is strengthened, and moreover, the feeling of reflection on the existing situation is strengthened.

2.2. Reactionary psychology

In Southeast Europe, it is not unknown or unexpected that the state fulfills the function of an ethnic majority versus one or more other ethnicities within the state. National minorities are often disobedient to governments that impose, discriminate, and oppress them because they are convinced that true popular freedom and sovereignty can be gained without being deprived of their legitimate rights, which are guaranteed by state and international law. What infuriated the national minorities within the states since the founding of the nations, were the tasks that the states issued to the minorities, in general, the states applied discriminatory and assimilative policies toward them. Also, we have cases when ethnic minorities put the national interest above the state interest, then the possibility of conflict was inevitable.

So, the perception that these ethnicities cannot live in peace, made them see the "other" as an enemy who must be suppressed, eliminated, and degraded in order to achieve "our" goals. In such circumstances "our identity" is more important than "the identity of the other". According to Searle-White (2001), the various aspects of our identity become more important depending on the situation. Some social identities are by nature more "primary" or more important to us than others, also no social identity is more important than the other, but certain social circumstances serve to strengthen certain identities, especially that national, currently the most important or prominent (Searle-White, 2001). Also, Maalouf (2006) explains the mobility, formation, and transformation of identities. The identities that are found in us from birth are few — some physical characteristics such as sex,

color, and others, so at any time there are elements that determine the identity of each one, a kind of hierarchy, which is not unchangeable, it changes with time and profoundly modifies attitudes. According to Maalouf (2006), it is the conflict or threat that strengthens the respective identity, if people feel threatened in their faith then it is the religious affiliation that presents itself as a complete identity, if the mother tongue or the ethnic group is threatened then they fight bravely unparalleled against those who believe in the same religion or ethnic group.

The realization of national feeling comes as a psychological reaction to the action initiated earlier. Oppression of national entities, not allowing them to express their nationality freely, and not allowing the creation of cultural and social autonomy in the form of reaction to national minorities, encourages the rise of ethnic nationalism because they are already endangered. Seen from the fact that "our identity" is more important than "the identity of the other", the perception of the "other" as an enemy that should be suppressed, eliminated, and degraded, to achieve "our" goals confirms the need that enemies have for each other so that each realizes who he really is. "The national self, which is worshiped and respected, would not be clearly defined without the hatred of the other" (Ignatieff, 2000, p. 24). National identity is often defined as relation to others. The identity of a group is transformed through its relation to other identities. The imagination of self and the other, perception of self and other, differ within a dynamic of political and cultural events.

Such cases viewed through the reaction that results in the formation of the concepts of "we" and "they" are numerous, such antagonisms embody the notion of war and conflict as inevitable. In our context, the discriminatory policies of the Serbian government through economic, cultural, and political pressure and the physical liquidation of Croats, Bosniaks, and Albanians resulted in the establishment of armed groups within these states opposing this political mindset to protect their national identity.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The key method this work is realized is the qualitative one. Shaping national identity in the form of reflection, extension, and reflection of concepts in time makes this method necessary. The paper includes the socio-political reflections of the Albanian minority in Serbia from the 1990s to the present day, respectively their reflection on the actions, decisions and different practices of the governments of the Serbian state and this includes different historical, social, and political circumstances. Thus, at first, an explanation of the theoretical concepts and ideas on the issue of national identity and the necessary aspects of reactionary psychology will be made, and then the events, activities, happenings, and political discourses that influenced these identity reflections will be selected. Also, the paper incorporates a theoretical approach, which includes the discourse analysis of events, works, articles, writings, interviews, and statements of intellectual and political figures of the relevant times. The study includes the period from the beginning of political

pluralism in the former Yugoslavia, namely from 1992 to 2022. The reason for choosing such a long period lies in the nature of the study because the formation of political discourse with a national orientation requires the analysis of many social, cultural, and economic factors spread over the years. Also, the national political discourse in this period is "reawakened" to rearticulate the national demands of the people of the Balkans. The paper is based on official and original documentation and interviews with the participants of the events analyzed in this paper. It also refers to laws, reports of state institutions, reports of important international organizations, reports of local institutions, internal and external non-governmental organizations, and treatments of various media where the comparative method will occupy an important place in the work. The paper examines the various regional and international norms, laws, and practices on the issue of national minorities and especially the comparison with the countries of the region, specifically with the Republic of Kosovo.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

Presheva, Bujanoc, and Medvedja, or the so-called Presevo Valley are located in the south of the Republic of Serbia, very close to the Kosovo administrative boundary of the Dukagjini Plain. It stretches in the triangle of Serbia, Macedonia, and Kosovo. Most of it lies in the hilly-mountainous region through which important axle and railway axes cross the southern and central parts of Serbia with Anamorava of Kosovo, Central Kosovo, and Macedonia. Presheva represents the important regional knot connecting to the north with Bujanovac and Vranje from the southern side with Kumanovo and Skopje, and in the west with Gjilan and beyond with Kosovo. The city of Presheva is located on the 5th km west of the E-75 road, but also the M-25.2 road. Special importance is also given to this region with international significance. Its surface area is 1249 km², while its population is over 110,000. Referring to the historical facts, the three Albanian-majority municipalities in the South of Serbia, Presheva, Bujanovac, and Medvedja are a region with the majority Albanian population and are considered as an autochthonous national minority within the state of Serbia (Ejupi & Bernabé-Crespo, 2022; Emini, 2016; Zylfiu, 2015, 2019).

Thus, to come to an important momentum, to the findings of this paper, on the identity reflections in the last three decades among the Albanians of the Presevo Valley, i.e., how the various political processes of the Serbian central government have influenced the construction of the political identity of Albanians of this region. So, we will focus on how important social and political events caused by the Serbian central government, as well as political cohesion with Kosovo Albanians, reflect on the construction of the political discourse of the Albanian political class in the Presevo Valley.

In the early 1990s, major political changes began in Europe. The former communist states began to apply a multiparty system with the aim of relying on democratic values. The destruction of the communist system is manifested by the change in the geopolitical map of Europe. Alongside the fall of the Berlin Wall is the process of dissolving the Yugoslav Federation. Its disintegration is followed

by wars and ethnic cleansing and the change of the geopolitical map of the Balkans. The disintegration of the communist system presents the need to organize people and ethnic communities into associations and political parties. In the life of Albanians, in addition to the violence and state terror, Albanian political parties with a democratic orientation were born, which manage to absorb the national potential, hegemonize the people and present their first demands before the international forums. One of the forms of democratic action in the circumstances of the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia was the expression of the political will of the Albanian people through the organization of the Referendum. Thus, exercising their legitimate right to self-determination, which belongs to all peoples under the Charter of the United Nations (Articles 1(2), 55, and 56), as well as other international conventions, they expressed their free political will through a referendum.

During 1991 and 1992 state repression increased dramatically in various forms against the Albanians of the former Yugoslavia, such as murders of protesters, kidnappings, beatings, unofficial arrests, imprisonment of political dissidents, imposed political unions between Kosovo and Serbian companies, mass expulsions of Albanian workers, closure of churches and mosques, and much more. With the outbreak of the armed conflicts in Slovenia and Croatia, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo in exile, adopted a resolution according to which Kosovo should be transformed into a sovereign republic and announced the holding of a referendum on Kosovo's sovereignty. Despite the large police presence, 87% of the Albanian population voted in a referendum in September 1991, of which more than 95% supported the sovereignty and independence of Kosovo (Bugajski, 2006). Also in 1992, in coordination with the political class in Kosovo and beyond, the Albanians of Eastern Kosovo, Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja voted for a territorial, political, and cultural autonomy in the Presevo Valley, with the right to join Kosovo (Ndreca, 2010). The purpose of the referendum was not only the declaration of political will but also the creation of a legitimate legal-political basis for the realization and implementation of this will. The referendum was also an opposition to violence, systematic pressure, violation of fundamental rights, and the unbearable life created by Serbian hegemonic politics. The political situation in Serbia, which was characterized by a nationalist spirit, ignored the results of the referendum, thus continuing the violation and denial of the rights of Albanians in this region.

The period from 1990-1999 is known as one of the most difficult social, economic and political periods for the Albanians of the Presevo Valley. The Milosevic regime abolished the autonomy of 1974 by giving the Serbian parliament and the Serbian government all decision-making power in relation to Kosovo. From this period, a state of emergency prevailed in Kosovo because the pressure, violence, and state terror of Serbia accompanied by victims and hundreds of prisoners became the main topic of power. According to Schmit (2012b), Serbia embarked on a comprehensive policy of Serbization, reminiscent of the measures between the two world wars and those of the Rankovic period. Serbization covered all areas of social life, initially education,

where Albanian curricula were removed and replaced with Serbian ones, the Albanian language was minimized, all media outlets were brought under control and journalists were fired, purges include theatrical and cultural life, general dismissals of the public administration, and the health sector also suffered, where a total of 90% of Albanians employed in the state economy suffered (Schmitt, 2012b; Imami, 2017). Also, this was the period of wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Serbian government was committed to destroying everything that was anti-Serbian. A serious situation reigned in all spheres of life, especially for the Albanians. This situation also reigned in the Presevo Valley, the process of ideological differentiation was applied in the Albanian municipalities in Serbia, namely the dismissal of many intellectuals from various institutions, especially from school institutions. In Bujanovac and Medvedja, state political structures led to the closure of Albanian-language schools. The difficult socio-economic and political situation in the Presevo Valley produced a massive emigration of the population of this region. What further pushed the emigration of young people abroad was the individual and collective insecurity created by the military mobilization that Serbia practiced against the Albanian population, to supplement the Serbian military forces fighting against Bosniaks and Croats. Medvedja was most affected by the emigration of Albanian society; about 90% of the population, respectively 740 families with 3,846 members was displaced while only 159 families with 560 members remained (Emini, 2016). During the Kosovo war and the NATO air campaign against the Serbian military forces, the latter and the paramilitary forces exerted constant violence, arrests, raids, and various pressures as well as killings against Albanians in Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja. These events had a massive impact on the displacement of the population from the highlands of this region, a population that never returned to their homes (Zylfiu, 2019). This form of behavior of the Serbian government toward the Albanians further influenced their awareness of their social and political future. It was violence, pressure, and persecution that further strengthened the sense of national belonging for the Albanians of the Presevo Valley. The situation became even more unbearable when after the Kosovo war a large number of Serbian army and paramilitaries settled in the Presevo Valley, thus the Albanian citizen was even more insecure with the situation created. In this regard, the population began to act, to self-organize for self-defense, forming the Liberation Army of Presevo, Medvedja, and Bujanovac (*Ushtria Çlirimtare e Preshevës, Medvegjës dhe Bujanocit, UÇPMB*). With the outbreak of the armed conflict, Albanians abandoned the feeling of being oppressed and persecuted, now this area was in focus not only by the Serbian and Albanian political and military factors but now the issue of Albanians, their demand and political will were already internationalized. This self-manifestation was born as a need for peaceful defense and not as aggression, as a reflection on the annihilating "other" and "self" that claims itself, showing the collective feeling and will, for territorial unification and to preserve Albanian pride and dignity.

The Konçul Agreement (The integral text of the Agreement signed at Konçul, 2001), ended

the war in the Presevo Valley, thus paving the way for resolving problems through political agreement. It contained eight points, which are mainly of a technical-military and security nature. This plan obliged the demilitarization of the area by the military forces, the amnesty for the former soldiers of the UÇPMB, the inclusion of Albanians in the multiethnic police, and the integration of Albanians in state institutions. Also in 2001, the Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia, Nebojsa Covic, presented the plan known as the Covic Plan. The plan found international support and provided three measures to be taken: 1) integration of Albanians; 2) demilitarization of the area; 3) socio-economic reconstruction (Covic, 2001). If we refer today to the situation of the Albanians in the Presevo Valley, we can say that the points foreseen by the Konçul Agreement and the Covic Plan, excluding the point of multiethnic police which has been realized to some extent satisfactorily, no other point has been realized but on the contrary, the situation has worsened even more. Numerous military forces are constantly patrolling the respective cities, emphasizing here the two military bases one near Presevo (Caravajk) and the other near Bujanovac (Cepotin) built after the armed conflict, so the state continues to treat this area as a potential area for conflict (Zejnnullahu, 2015). Here we can mention the arrest of former Albanian fighters in Presevo and Bujanovac who took part in the last two wars, in 2008 and 2012, respectively, despite the amnesty agreement reached between the parties (Lugina protests: "I'm a terrorist too", 2012). Also, it is worth mentioning the case of the brutal removal of "Lapidar" by the Serbian military forces from the square of the municipality of Presevo in 2013 in which were written the names of the martyrs who fell in the UÇPMB war (Shenja Magazine, 2013). These events have greatly disturbed the Albanian citizens who were already clearly threatened with security and ontological freedom. As a result of these circumstances, the citizens of these areas joined the protests demanding the release of prisoners, the return of the tombstone, asking for more rights in the field of education, the field of using national symbols, more political rights, the international community is also calling for more attention to the rights of Albanians, and the protection of national identity by the mother countries, Albania and Kosovo, and others. These acts violate the preliminary agreements reached by the Serbian state, the Albanian, and the international side, the law on demilitarization or amnesty for ex-soldiers, and the Serbian legislation in force by denying the cultural and ethnic diversity of its citizens. The Serbian police and military actions simultaneously "rediscovered" our national identity, because "the motive for the arrests and the removal of the headstone was interpreted as that the fighters and the martyrs of the last wars were terrorists" (Mustafa, 2013, p. 26), thus, the attitude of the citizens took an action throwing slogans for the fascist approach of the Serbian state to the Albanians. The subjective clash of the citizen of Presevo, with the objective reality, revived and strengthened the idea of national identity, but not as a pure idea, but rather as a disappointment to the Serbian government and the indifference of official Tirana and Pristina. The active and daily negative, provocative, and denigrating actions of the Serbian

government have continuously created dissatisfaction among the Albanian citizen, so protest letters were sent to the international factor, the Albanian political factor in Kosovo and Albania, and others. Thus, the created dissatisfactions have turned into national awareness for the Albanians of the Presevo Valley.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the different approaches of the subjects involved in this issue will be discussed. In a research published by the Gap Institute (2015), it is stated that the parallel municipalities of Northern Kosovo base their organizational structure on the model of local government in Serbia. All documents and activities organized and sponsored by these bodies bear the stamp and coat of arms of Serbia. They have a dual salary system, i.e., part of the municipal administration staff, education staff, and some persons from social enterprises refuse to enter the payroll system of the Republic of Kosovo. Daily trade is done in Serbian currency, in dinars. Based on this report for these municipalities, the Development Fund for the North has been formed, which is filled mainly by customs revenues border crossing Brnjak 1 and border crossing Jarinje 31. These municipalities provide civil status services according to the standardized model of Serbia and these bodies have full control over education, culture, and health. The curricula are based on the Serbian model, the textbooks are provided free of charge by the Ministry of Education of the Government of Serbia. We can say that these municipalities have built a parallel system of government from other municipalities in Kosovo, based entirely on the Serbian model of government (Gap Institute, 2015).

Now, the Serbian government insists on a special status for the Serb population in Kosovo, that of the Association of Serbian Municipalities, whose competencies are defined in accordance with broad autonomy, thus continuing the agenda of factoring the Serb population against the Albanian population in Serbia. The proposed legal framework for the Association stipulates that it will operate within a certain territory, which will have executive powers, which will be carried by the central and local government, also its employees will have the status of employee civil, and it can send cases to the constitutional court and initiate legal amendments, and it is even envisaged to have representation in international institutions. The Association of Serbian Municipalities will have the following bodies: the assembly, the mayor, the council, the board, the administration, and the complaints office (Association/Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities in Kosovo, 2015). The Association cannot be interpreted simply as individual autonomy, or cultural autonomy, because the document in question is more like territorial and political autonomy because the Association will have its Assembly and its political representatives (Kartsonaki, 2020). The agreement for granting such a status to the Serb population in Kosovo, that of the Association of Serbian Municipalities, whose competencies are considered in accordance with broad autonomy, has continued the agenda of factoring the Serb population against the Albanian population in Serbia.

This approach of the Serbian state is considered a policy with two standards since the Serbian state refuses to make a similar treatment of the Albanian minority in Serbia. But not only that, Serbia has been exercising systematic discrimination and repression against Albanians in the Presevo Valley for decades. In this context, we can refer to the “2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Serbia”, which states that “Ethnic Albanians were subject to discrimination and disproportionate unemployment” (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2022, p. 34). This report also mentions the problem of deleting about 6000 Albanians from the civil registry of the municipalities of Medvedja, Bujanovac, and Presevo, otherwise known as the “passivation of addresses” and settlements. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor report states that “The addresses of numerous Albanians from three municipalities in southern Serbia were “passivized” (rescinded), resulting in the loss of personal documents and access to health, education and social services” (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2022, p. 34) The report also mentions a number of other problems faced by the Albanian community in Serbia, such as the use of hate speech by Serbian state institutions, under institutional representation at the local and state level, the lack of textbooks in Albanian, which states that “There were no textbooks in the Albanian language for high school students” (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2022, p. 35; Biserko, 2021). The same problems for the Albanians of the Presevo Valley are addressed by the Progress Report of the European Union for Serbia for 2021 (European Commission, 2021). The report mentions serious violations of state institutions in the implementation of fundamental human rights, treatment of national minority rights, the passivity of addresses, hate speech by senior officials, the need to continue the process of providing textbooks in Albanian, the lack of inclusive democracy, freedom of expression and the lack of inclusion of Albanians in state institutions (European Commission, 2021).

Another serious concern for Albanians in the Presevo Valley is the degraded economic situation. The three Albanian municipalities are among the most underdeveloped in Serbia. According to the level of development of local self-government units, the municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja belong to group IV of extremely poorly developed local self-government units, in which the development rate is below 50% of the republican average (Municipality of Presevo, 2019). Research by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia in 2021 highlights the great problems of this region in the field of economic development. He explained that there has been no significant economic recovery or development during the last two decades in these three municipalities. Most state/social enterprises are closed. Privatization of some of them did not give the expected results. Since these companies were in the process of liquidation for years, they are now collapsing. They live on remittances from the diaspora, which still shows great solidarity. Albanians from the diaspora would invest in these municipalities, but they are very unreliable due to various restrictions and discrimination from the central government (Biserko, 2021). In addition, Nuhiu (2019) analyzes that Preshevo Valley remains one of the most underdeveloped regions in Serbia,

as there is no investment or contribution from the state in any sector. There are no job opportunities for young people, who graduate from different faculties, and as a consequence, these people are obliged to go abroad and search for jobs in order of having a career. The unemployment rate in the three municipalities is more than 70%. The extensive and natural agriculture, mainly tobacco cultivation, was the income source of the Albanians of this region. Nowadays, the income derives from remittances sent by migrants who live and work in Western European countries and overseas (Nuhiu, 2019, pp. 40–43). Referring to a “Report on the Structure of Employees in the Presheva Valley” (Albanian National Council, 2022), at a general level, it appears that very few Albanians are involved. A large lack of employees is evident in republican institutions. Albanians are not involved in almost all the republican issues they do at the municipal level, for example, no Albanians are involved in the prosecutor’s office, the Court of Presevo has been moved to Vranje, Bujanoc does not have a court for misdemeanors, they are not involved at all in secondary health protection (hospital), only 1 Albanian inspector out of 24 district level inspectorates. At a better level, but still, with shortages, they remain in local-level institutions (Albanian National Council, 2022).

Despite the readiness of the Albanian side through numerous institutional and democratic initiatives to solve the above-mentioned problems, through various projects initiated by the Albanian National Council², the Albanian Member of Parliament (MP) in the Republican Parliament, the respective Mayors, and other institutional instances, nevertheless the Serbian state has not shown readiness and attention to such problems. On the other hand, it supports in all forms Kosovo Serbs, especially those in the north, not accepting the jurisdiction and institutional order of Kosovo by building a parallel system of government. This approach with the “two standards” of the state of Serbia has only further strengthened the position of the Albanian political factor for a mutual solution with the Serbs of Kosovo. Here we can refer to the political leaders of the Presevo Valley who demand a reciprocal treatment of rights with Kosovo Serbs, this is also stated by the Republican MP in the Serbian Parliament, Shaip Kamberi, and he among other things says that Serbian extreme demands must be balanced. There is a paradox. Serbia demands standards that are above the Ahtisaari plan. It demands Ahtisaari + but denies the rights we have been guaranteed by the constitution. It is a flagrant violation. Kosovo has the moral and political integrity for the issue of the Albanians of the Valley to be raised and resolved. I think that Serbia will continue to violate the Albanians. This is even if an agreement is reached. Reciprocity is a formula that guarantees some rights to Albanians (A.P., 2020). The same is stated by the Political Platform of the three local Albanian assemblies, where political representatives declare similar treatment between Kosovo Serbs and Serbian Albanians (Hyseni, 2006). The one-sided approach of the Serbian state in relation to the advancement of the position of Serbs

² The National Council represents national minorities in the field of education, culture, information in the language of the national minority and the official use of language and script, participates in the decision-making process or decides on issues in these fields and establishes entities, economic societies and organizations other than these areas. The Law of the National Councils for the National Minorities in Serbia.

in Kosovo has pushed the Albanians of Serbia to strengthen their articulation for equal treatment with the Serb minority in Kosovo. Moreover, they seek help from the government of Tirana, respectively from that of Kosovo for the application of a reciprocal model of rights between them.

Coming up to 2018, the time when the request or continuous stay of the Albanians of the Presevo Valley for full reciprocity of rights with Kosovo Serbs is legitimized by the highest political instance in Kosovo, by the President of the Republic of Kosovo Hashim Thaçi, which comes up with the idea of correcting the border between Kosovo and Serbia. Here we can also refer to his official position which states that "I have proposed the option of correcting the border with Serbia. I have argued that the eventual agreement on the peaceful correction of the border with Serbia provides Kosovo with recognition by Serbia and the annexation of Presevo, Bujanovac, and Medvedja with our country" (Thaçi, 2022). The President of the Republic of Kosovo sees this idea as the final stage of state-building of Kosovo, at the same time paving the way for safe membership in the EU, NATO, and the UN, thus ending the hostility over a century and maintaining stability in this part of the Balkans (Thaçi, 2022). In addition, the current Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo Albin Kurti invites a concept of reciprocity in the agreement with the Republic of Serbia, i.e., in a meeting with the political representatives of the Presevo Valley he stated that "in the new dialogue process will be committed to reciprocity of rights of national minorities in Kosovo and Serbia" (Kurti, 2021). The Albanians of the Presevo Valley are the case of shaping their political identity influenced by socio-political circumstances and conditions. This reality is becoming more and more legitimate, so the Albanians of these three municipalities see themselves as equal to the Kosovo Serbs and that their political fate must be linked to the fate of the Kosovo Serbs, i.e., they are the opportunity to resolve their issue. Furthermore, the Government of Kosovo should make further talks with Serbia and make more conditions on the principle of reciprocity between Kosovo Serbs and Serbian Albanians. On the contrary, the special treatment and one-sided application of rights for Kosovo Serbs risk creating grounds for new political articulations throughout the region and beyond. This approach could jeopardize the immersion of the people of these states in new inter-ethnic disputes.

6. CONCLUSION

The conclusions drawn from this paper show that the central government should do more in the treatment of ethnic minorities, namely the Albanian ethnic minority. The Albanian minority in Serbia is marginalized by the dominant political narratives about Albanians, so they are prejudiced and stereotyped by the burden of past conflicts and the current Kosovo-Serbia disputes. As a result, they experience institutional discrimination that has limited their range of economic and social opportunities. Albanians continue to be underrepresented in public institutions, also the few employment opportunities continue to frustrate the Albanian minority in the Presevo Valley. Today, this region is considered among the most underdeveloped regions with the lowest employment

in the country. Other problems that burden the Albanian citizen in Serbia are also in the educational, cultural, and social fields. Despite the opening of a public university in recent years, young people who graduate from the universities of the Republic of Kosovo are not recognized with their diplomas and their right to employment in their country is denied. Also, the lack of textbooks is evident at all educational levels, especially at the high school level. Serbia is the only country that has prohibited by law the use of the national symbols of Albanians, so these and other problems have led to continuous emigration of the Albanian population during the last thirty years.

In reflection on these events, the social and political class of the Presevo Valley is organized and operated over the years. The inability to realize oneself in many areas of social life has made Albanians reflect on different political forms, often contradictory to each other. This has simultaneously resulted in the radicalization of political means on the part of the Albanian side. In order to protect their national identity, the Albanians managed to carry out the Referendum for joining the Republic of Kosovo, they organized a guerrilla war against the Serbian state for more freedom, dignity, and human and national rights, and they carried out many protests, strikes and other important activities that came as a result of systematic denial or coercion by the dominant majority. Finally, the Albanian political class in Serbia sees the possible solution to their problems from external factors, namely from the conditions that can be made by the mother country Kosovo, Albania, or even the pressure of the international community. According to them, the only solution is the similar treatment of Kosovo Serbs and Albanians in Serbia, that is, reciprocity should be the solution for both minority communities, in Serbia and Kosovo.

The Serbian central government must protect the rights of all citizens, including the Albanians of the Presevo Valley. Government politicians must show the will to implement the necessary reforms that would have a significant effect on education, culture, health, and proportional representation in all government institutions in the Presevo Valley. Economic revitalization in this region is essential for improving the living conditions of the Albanian community. Central policies should encourage different businesses to invest in the Presevo Valley and eliminate the systematic discrimination that has long characterized the system. Thus, without the creation of a good investment climate for more economic opportunities, the exodus of Albanians will continue. The Albanian minority in Serbia and the Serbian minority in Kosovo should be given equal opportunities in all areas of social life so that the respective minorities are treated as normal citizens within their countries. So, this paper tries to contribute to improving the approach of states in relation to ethnic minorities, considering their rights and freedoms as something natural and as a universal value.

Also, it would help other research to find a more cooperative approach of national minorities in relation to the central government, considering the central initiatives as initiatives with good will and without prejudice. Thus, a developmental and non-prejudicial approach to these power relations is necessary to integrate even more such multi-ethnic spaces.

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