

The Church Issue of Shkodra between Albania and Yugoslavia in its Initial Phase (1912-1923)

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Abstract

This paper examines the initial phase of the Church issue between Albania and Yugoslavia, regarding the area of Shkodra. Northern Albania contains a small orthodox population, of both Albanian and Serb/Montenegrin ethnic origin. When Albania was declared independent in 1912, the Yugoslav Government and the Serbian Church tried to establish special privileges regarding the ecclesiastical jurisdiction in Shkodra area, by appointing a Serbian administrator. After the separation of the Albanian Orthodox Church from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, this jurisdiction was elevated into a diocese and the administrator was elevated into the rank of bishop. Although, Serbian officials tried to mediate the endorsement of the bishop by local authorities, the Albanian Church convinced the Albanian authorities to reject his installation. This development triggered a diplomatic battle between Yugoslavia and Albania, forcing the involvement of the international community for the resolution of the issue, which was reached temporarily in 1923.

Keywords: Albania, Yugoslavia, Albanian-Serbian relations, Orthodox Church, cultural diplomacy, religion

1. Introduction

Northern Albania was a territory mainly inhabited by Muslim and Catholic population, when Albania declared its independence in 28 November 1912. Orthodox people constituted a small minority, divided in two large dioceses of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The largest part of Albania's North, including Shkodra, Kukës, Mirdita, Lezha, etc., were under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Prizren. Meanwhile, the Dibra area was under the homonymous diocese's jurisdiction. They bordered an important diocese, which had been the ethno-genesis of Montenegrins: the Metropolis of Cetinje, while the rest of Serbian lands were under the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Bulgarians constituted the majority of the Orthodox population in Dibra area. Orthodox Albanians of that area were mainly established in Reka region, which was occupied by Serbia. Very few Orthodox remained in the Golloborda region within the Albanian state, whose marginal presence could not trigger any development.¹ The priests of this area Andon Blazev and Riste Marku were on Serbian authorities' payroll until 1922, when Albanian authorities forbid foreign payment on Albanian clergy (Dervishi, 2007, p. 187). On the other hand, the number of Orthodox people in Shkodra area was small, but considerable. There were 170 households inside the city, numbering 705 Orthodox people, 649 of whom were Albanians and 45 Slavic-speakers. In nearby Vraka village lived 1.855 people of Montenegrin descent in 151 households (Meta, 2009, p. 45).

2. The Beginnings of the Church Issue of Shkodra

Serbia and Montenegro occupied both dioceses of Northern Albania during the Balkan Wars. Shkodra itself was invaded by Montenegrin troops for several weeks, until the Albanian independence was recognized by the Great Powers in July 1913. Thus, the Metropolis of Cetinje tried to boost its influence in the Shkodra Area.

Cetinje Metropolis claimed that Albania's liberation from the Ottoman Empire implied that the Ecumenical Patriarchate was expelled too from those lands in the ecclesiastical viewpoint. On this grounding, Shkodra could not be part of Prizren Diocese, which was still under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and should be controlled by Cetinje Metropolis (Stamatovic, 2000).

¹ For Orthodox in Golloborda area there is a comprehensive publication in Albanian language: Kristofor Beduli, *Ortodoksët e Gollobordës [Orthodox of Golloborda]* (Tirana: Neraida, 2008).

In early 1914, the Metropolitan of Cetinje Gabriel appointed the newly-ordained Archimandrite Viktor Mihajlovic, as his representative in Shkodra. Archimandrite Viktor, 39 years old, was a Montenegrin, from Piperi family. Upon his graduation in a Constantinople² High School he attended the orthodox seminary in Prizren. He was ordained monk in 1902 in the Holy Mountain.³ Archimandrite Viktor was a teacher in Decan, Kosovo for six years, while in 1912 he was appointed the head of a Russian school of priests in Constantinople.⁴

After arriving in Shkodra, he acted as the head of the local church and as the only priest of Shkodra and Vraça for several years. During the First World War, Cetinje Metropolis reorganized the ecclesiastical jurisdiction by establishing a vicariate in the territory of northern Albania called the "Vicariate of Shkodra, Vraça and Kamenica". Archimandrite Viktor was appointed the administrator of that jurisdiction. Shkodra, Kamenica and Vraça were the three parishes of the vicariate. When Montenegro joined Serbia in November 1918, the churches followed up: the Metropolis of Cetinje and every other jurisdiction in the territory of Yugoslavia merged within the Holy Synod of the Serbian Church. The Metropolitan of Cetinje Gabriel sent to the Metropolitan of Belgrade, Dimitri, the official request for the merge on December 1918 (Peric, 1996). On 17 December 1918, Metropolitan Gabriel asked Viktor to sign a secret declaration of unity of the Church in Shkodra with the Serbian Church (Metropolis of Cetinje, 17/12/1918).

These actions were facilitated by the fact that the Patriarch of Constantinople had recognized Serbian Orthodox Church's authority over the dioceses of Prizren and Dibra, through a special Tomos. In the legal-canonical⁵ perspective, this meant that the territory of Northern Albania was included into the Serbian Church's jurisdiction. The Albanian authorities were preparing the declaration of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the upcoming month and deemed that this move was unacceptable. Canonically, the declaration of the Albanian Church would reverse the situation, because the principle "independent church in an independent state" implied that the whole territory of a state should be under the jurisdiction of the Autocephalous Church (Avakumovic, 1935).

3. Initial Acceptance and Subsequent Rejection of Bishop Viktor by the Albanian Government

The Serbian Patriarchate was established through the completion of the Church's unification process in 1922. Dimitri was elected Patriarch and was recognized as such by all other autocephalous churches. Upon the new Patriarch's proposal, the Holy Synod of the Serbian Church elected Victor as the Assistant Bishop for the Vicariate of Shkodra, Vraça and Kamenica. This decision was made in a hurry, at a time when the declaration of the Albanian Church's Autocephaly was eminent. The Serbian Patriarchate, taking into account Yugoslav government's opinion, tried to secure a permanent presence in Albania, by changing the status of Victor, imposing a new ecclesiastical reality. Viktor was ordained in Karlovci, on 22 June 1922, by the Metropolitans of Montenegro and Craina (Biography of Bishop Viktor, 1937).

The Serbian Church was sympathetic to the Albanian Church issue during its initial steps. Meanwhile, Greek eminent disaster in the war of 1922 against Turkey, would diminish, if not eradicate the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. Thus, the Serbian Patriarchate and the Yugoslav Government were ready to help the Albanian Church Issue, in exchange of the preservation of a special school and church status in Shkodra. (Avakumovic, 1937, p. 17).

Yugoslav Authorities had approached Albanian Archimandrite Visar Xhuvani, who was a leading personality of the Albanian Orthodox Movement as well as a trusted person of the Albanian Government. Yugoslav Government had promised Archimandrite Visar that the Serbian Patriarchate would ordain him and other Albanian priests as bishops, if an agreement with the Ecumenical Patriarchate for the Albanian Church's Autocephaly would not be reached (Theodhosi, 23/11/1922). Archimandrite Visar mediated at the Albanian Government in August 1922, a month before the Albanian Autocephaly was announced, to accept Bishop Viktor as a prelate of the Slav minority in Shkodra (Della Rocca, 1994, f. 56-57).

² Today's Istanbul in Turkey.

³ Holy Mountain or Mount Athos is a peninsula in today's Greece, nearby Thessaloniki, which is home to 20 Eastern Orthodox Monasteries.

⁴ A full biography of later-Bishop Viktor Mihajlovic is found in the Archives of the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, without author, date of publication, or other relevant information. *Biography of Bishop Viktor* (1937). (Year 1937, Folder 308, File 4). Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives, Tirana, Albania.

⁵ Apostolic and Synodic Canons govern the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

The Albanian Church was declared autocephalous in 11 September 1922, via a special Cleric-Laic Congress held in Berat. The Statute of the Church sanctioned that no bishop could be allowed, without being elected by the newly established High Church Council, headed by Father Vasil Marko. However, the Albanian Government allowed Viktor to enter Albania. In exchange, Yugoslavia pledged its support to the Albanian Church issue. Yugoslav Minister of Foreign Affairs, Momcilo Nincic told representatives of the League of Nations in 5 November 1922 that Yugoslavia would support Albanian Church issue. He added that Bishop Viktor would stay provisionally in Shkodra until the Albanian Autocephaly would be recognized (Legate in Belgrade, 5/11/1922).

In December 1922, Bishop Viktor left Belgrade, accompanied Shkodra-born Serbian priest Lazar Matijevic. Viktor had acquired the Albanian citizenship and as such had visited the Albanian Legation in Belgrade in order to get a new passport. The Albanian minister ordered him to be obedient to the laws of Albania and not to interfere in politics (Legate in Belgrade, 30/12/1922).

Yugoslavia had two goals: either Viktor to stay in Shkodra as a bishop of the Serbian Church in Diaspora, or Shkodra to become a diocese of the Albanian Autocephalous Church, under a Serbian bishop and with special language provisions (Avacumovic, 1937, p. 17). Viktor proclaimed himself as a local bishop and informed the High Council of the Albanian Church about his election and ordination. Albanian Church's head, Father Vasil Marko declared that a foreign bishop could not enter Albania without a formal approval of the Council (Meta, 2009, 52-64).

Fr. Marko and the Albanian Government suspected that Bishop Viktor's move were in agreement with the Ecumenical Patriarchate. They feared that by other minorities would ask for similar privileges, undermining the Albanian Church, if they accepted Viktor as a bishop for the Slav minority in Shkodra (Korça Prefecture, 21/1/1923). Fr. Marko proposed to sign a special temporary and limited permission for Bishop Viktor in exchange of Albanian Church's Autocephaly recognition by the Serbian Patriarchate, which did not happen (Korça Prefecture, 18/1/1923).

Albanian newspapers, especially those run by Orthodox, heavily criticized the Albanian government. "Koha" newspaper of Orthodox Movement Pioneer, Mihal Grameno wrote that such a development would force the Autocephalous Church to ordain dozens of bishops and send them in Serbia and elsewhere for the religious services of Orthodox Albanians, who were living on those countries (Grameno, 27/1/1923). The newspaper "Albanian of America" called the acceptance of Viktor by the Albanian Government as a "damaging joke of Albanian politics" (Albanian of America, 3/2/1923)

On January 22, the Interior Minister, Ahmet Zogu ordered local authorities not to recognize Viktor as a Bishop of Shkodra (MoI, 22/1/1923). He reinforced the order after a mass on Saint Sava's day, when a local Serbian school teacher called Bishop Viktor "local metropolitan" (MoI, 27/1/1923). Shkodra's Prefect informed Viktor that he was not allowed to mass until he reached an agreement and get the necessary permit by the Synod of the Albanian Church (Shkodra Prefecture, 28/1/1923). Viktor was taken by surprise. He blamed Archimandrite Visar for this development, as Visar had assured that the Albanian government would recognize him as a bishop. But, Archimandrite Visar relations with the High Church Council were at their worst, as they were in conflict regarding the future position Visar would take in the church. As such, when Visar Xhuvani visited Shkodra in early 1923, Bishop Viktor refused even to host him, blaming Visar as the reason why the Albanian Church did not recognize Viktor's authority in the city (Report, 21/1/1923).

4. Diplomatic Conflict between Albania and Yugoslavia Regarding the Church Issue

The Albanian Government informed Yugoslav Authorities in late January that it could not accept Viktor's appointment as the local bishop of Shkodra. The Albanian MFA wrote to the Yugoslav Legate the reasons of its decision. Firstly, it noted that Shkodra never had an episcopate or a bishop. Secondly, it argued that a bishop could not be appointed by foreign authorities in any part of Albania; as such an appointment would violate the canons of the Church. Thirdly, the Albanian Government emphasized that Shkodra's Orthodox community were Albanian citizens, and as such an indivisible part of the Albanian Orthodox Church. Furthermore, it stated that the Orthodox community of Shkodra was small and poor and could not maintain financially an episcopate. Finally, according to Albanian Orthodox Church Statute, a bishop should have been Albanian citizen at least for two generations and he should hold a Theological Faculty diploma. The letter concluded with Albanian Government's assurance that it would respect the right of the minority to use its own language in the church (MFA, 30/1/1923)

The Yugoslav Legate replied on 7 February, considering illegal any measure regarding Bishop Viktor. The Legate argued that Albanian Church's Autocephaly implies that Shkodra would be under its jurisdiction, but this Church was not formed yet legally. The relevant Congress had unilaterally declared Autocephaly, but this process should be concluded by an official recognition act from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Until then, Serbian Patriarchate could not recognize the existence of the Albanian Orthodox Church. Yugoslav Government proposed a peaceful solution, by allowing Bishop Viktor to mass in Shkodra, without any obstacle from local authorities. Finally, it assured that Serbian Patriarchate would influence the Ecumenical Patriarchate for a fast recognition of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (Yugoslav Legate, 7/2/1923).

The Albanian Government opposed Yugoslav grounding. Tirana replied that Albanian Church's Autocephaly began since 1912, when Albania was declared an independent country, based on the principle "independent church in an independent state". Furthermore, although it was not yet recognized by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, its emissary in Albania had acknowledged the Autocephaly, making the Serbian footing void (MFA, 14/2/1923).

Bishop Viktor continued to declare himself as the local bishop of Shkodra. He hired a secretary and elevated Lazar Matijevic as proto-priest. Matijevic was suspected by Albanian authorities as a major of Yugoslav Secret Services, or as a onetime police director in Serbia (Shkodra Prefecture, 30/1/1923). Albanian Authorities were aware that Matijevic was a major in the Army during the First World War. Meanwhile, both Viktor and Matijevic were paid by the Yugoslav Government (Legate in Belgrade, 23/2/1923). Bishop Viktor had declared in Shkodra that he would appoint other local priests who opposed Albanian Church's Autocephaly. He transferred in Serbia, local priest Mihal Strikic, who had been a delegate to the Congress that declared Albanian Church's Autocephaly. The Ministry of Interior ordered Shkodra Prefecture to temporarily close the local Orthodox Church and to halt any attempt of foreign priests to enter Albania (Meta, 2009, p. 61-62).

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania presented to European Governments and to the League of Nations its concern about the breach of canonical rules from the Serbian Church backed by the Yugoslav Government. Albania asked foreign governments to advise Yugoslav Government for moderation and not to insist in this act against canonical rules (MFA, 24/2/1923).

Meanwhile, Albanian minister in Belgrade, Ali Kolonja met Yugoslav MFA. Nincic had declared that his government could not be the first to recognize the Autocephaly of the Albanian Church, but the Yugoslav representative in Constantinople had requested Albanian Church's recognition from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Patriarch had refused the Yugoslav suggestion and told that he was exploring the possibility of granting autonomy to the Albanian Church. Nincic blamed the Albanian authorities for the events in Shkodra and protested for Albanian Prefecture intervention in religious services (Legate in Belgrade, 24/2/1923).

Kolonja and Nincic met again on 15 March. The Yugoslav Minister proposed an intermediate solution. Bishop Viktor could ask the High Church Council to associate himself with the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Albanian Legate in Belgrade reported that the real goal of the Yugoslav Government was the appointment of a person aligned to Belgrade in the High Church Council of the Albanian Church (Legate in Belgrade, 15/3/1923a). Meanwhile, Yugoslavia asked the League of Nations to intervene, but the League refused to interfere in a religious matter (Legate in Belgrade, 15/3/1923b).

An intermediate solution was put forward by the Albanian Government too. On 21 March, the Ministry of the Interior asked High Church Council whether it was possible for Bishop Viktor to mass in Shkodra as a temporary resident of the city, mentioning only Orthodox Patriarchs and Bishops of the Whole World. He would sign as Bishop Viktor or just Viktor, while the priests in Shkodra would mention the High Church Council and Bishop Viktor, but not "Our Bishop" (MFA, 21/3/1923). The wording of this proposal implied that Viktor would no jurisdiction over Shkodra. Secondly, the fact that he would mention all Orthodox Patriarchs, implied that this territory was not part of the Serbian Patriarchate, but a church without a primate, i.e. the Albanian Orthodox Church.

High Church Council chairmen, Father Vasil Marku accepted this proposal. He answered that every priest, including Bishop Viktor, could ask the Council for a permit for a specific time, with the condition to act accordingly to the Status of the Albanian Orthodox Church (MoI, 27/3/1923). The Albanian proposal was referred to the Yugoslav Government, but Prime Minister Nikola Pasic and MFA Nincic refused it.

They answered that Viktor was an envoy of the Serbian Church in Shkodra and that this issue was between the Serbian Church and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The Yugoslav Government concluded that the Albanian Government could expel Viktor, but this would have a negative impact in Belgrade (Yugoslav Legate, 1/4/1923).

Albania addressed the issue to the international community, as long as the bilateral effort to resolve it resulted in vain. The Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs asked its consul in Geneva, Benedict Blinishti to report on the intent of the League of Nations' Secretariat on the issue (MFA, 3/4/1923)

Blinishti replied in 5 April that the Secretariat thought that Albania could resolve this issue by asking the Ecumenical Patriarchate to recognize Shkodra as part of the Albanian Church, despite the latter's status. It also suggested caution in order to avoid troubles during the Easter (Blinishti, 5/4/1923).

Shkodra Prefecture had requested the sending of a priest to mass during the Easter by the High Church Council of the Albanian Orthodox Church (Shkodra Prefecture, 19/3/1923). Viktor and other Serbian priests were not allowed to mass, thus the Church had remained closed. On 6 April, the Church was allowed to open and priest Mihal Stirkic held the mass of Easter. Bishop Viktor did not attend, while priest Lazar Matijevic attended without officiating (Shkodra Prefecture, 6/4/1923).

The Yugoslav Government informed its Albanian counterpart on 6 April that it would suspend the diplomatic relations with Albania and withdraws its legate in Tirana as a result of Bishop Viktor's prohibition to mass during the Easter (Legate in Belgrade, 7/4/1923). Albanian MFA, Pandeli Evangjeli asked the Albanian diplomatic missions in Rome, Paris and Geneva, to inform respective governments and the League of Nations. The Albanian Government deemed that the suspension of diplomatic relations was "a direct insult of the State's prestige", as long as the intervention in Shkodra, was an intervention in Albania's internal affairs. It noted that Albania respected the minorities, by holding the mass in the Slav language (MFA, 7/4/1923a).

Moreover, Evangjeli expressed to the Yugoslav Government Albania's willingness to send a commission authorized to discuss the Shkodra Church issue in Belgrade (MFA, 7/4/1923b). The diplomatic tension was reduced only after international community's intervention. Italy engaged to convince French and British Governments to jointly suggest Yugoslavia moderation on this issue (Blinishti, 14/4/1923). After this suggestion, Yugoslav Government withdrew and declared on 12 June that Shkodra Church issue was a religious one between the Serbian Orthodox Church and High Council of the Albanian Orthodox Church (MFA, 12/6/1923).

Bishop Viktor was prohibited to mass until October 1923. Archimandrite Visar Xhuvani intermediated again on 10 August 1923. He declared to the Ministry of Justice that Albanian Orthodox Church's High Council order not to allow Viktor to mass as a local Bishop was necessary and reasonable. However, he added that Bishop Viktor could not be prohibited to mass privately for his own clerical private needs. "Bishop Viktor, whether an Albanian citizen or not, has the right to mass whenever he likes in order to please himself and to fulfill his personal religious needs, according to the canons of the orthodox religion. As it happens in every state, a guest bishop or priest, not as a local bishop, has the right to mass without interfering in the local church's administration" (Xhuvani, 10/8/1923)

Justice Minister, Milto Tutulani accepted the proposal of Archimandrite Visar. He declared to the Ministry of Interior on 13 October 1923 that if Bishop Viktor claims to mass as a local bishop he should be prohibited, but if he wanted to mass for his personal religious needs and as a guest, he was free to do it according to the laws of Albania (MoJ, 13/10/1923).

This decision put an end to the first phase of the church issue of Shkodra between Albania and Yugoslavia. Bishop Viktor continued to settle in Shkodra, without any official ecclesiastical position, as a guest bishop. The Yugoslav Governments was temporary silent on the issue, after Italian and French suggestion to show moderation. However, Belgrade had achieved to create a special status quo in Shkodra. Viktor was waiting the moment to legalize his presence in the city. However, the issue of Bishop Viktor was the reason why the Serbian Patriarchate refused to recognize the Albanian Church in its first phase (Psomas, 2006). On the other hand, the Albanian Government and Church managed to stop a Serbian ecclesiastical expansion and paved the way towards the end of the Church Issue in Shkodra that would be possible, only in 1930.

5. Conclusions

The initial phase of the Church Issue of Shkodra started on Albania's independence in 1912. The Metropolis of Cetinje appointed Archimandrite Viktor to act as the head of the local church and later elevated him as the Administrator of the Vicariate of Shkodra. The reasoning behind this move was that Ottoman Empires' withdrawal from Albanian lands implied Ecumenical Patriarchate withdrawal too. As long as the Orthodox Church in Albania had not yet declared its separation, the Metropolitan of Cetinje reasoned that he could intervene.

When it became clear that Albanian Orthodox Church would declare its Autocephaly, the newly restored Patriarchate of Serbia ordained Victor as Bishop and sent him to Shkodra. This move was coordinated with Albanian authorities, through the mediation of a central figure of Albanian Orthodox Movement, Archimandrite Visar Xhuvani. Yugoslav officials had promised to help him in the process of Albanian Church's Autocephaly recognition, in exchange of the privileges of the Orthodox community in Shkodra. The Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church was declared in September 1922 in the Congress of Berat. Bishop Viktor entered Albania in December 1922, being permitted by the Albanian Authorities. However, the newly established High Church Council, which provisionally governed the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, rejected his installation as a local bishop.

Albanian Church's Statute sanctioned that a bishop had to be Albanian citizen of two generations, as well as should have been elected from the High Church Council. Protests from Albanian Orthodox media and the suspicion that Serbian Patriarchate acted in cooperation with its Ecumenical counterpart made Albanian Authorities to order Bishop Viktor halt his activity in Shkodra.

This development triggered a diplomatic conflict between Albania and Yugoslavia. Yugoslav authorities deemed the Albanian act as illegal, as long as the Albanian Church had yet not been recognized as Autocephalous by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, an argument considered void by Tirana. Albania asked Italy, France and Great Britain to suggest Yugoslavia moderation on this matter. Yugoslav authorities proposed Bishop Viktor to be aligned with the Albanian Orthodox Church. Albanian authorities counter-proposed that Viktor could be accepted as a non-resident temporary visiting bishop. This proposal was refused by Yugoslavia. Consequently, Bishop Viktor was not allowed to head the mass liturgies in April 1923, which resulted in a diplomatic stalemate between the two countries. Yugoslavia withdrew its legate in Tirana and halted any diplomatic relations with Albania. Only after the intervention of Italy, France and Great Britain, Yugoslav Government stated that the Church issue of Shkoder was between the Serbian and Albanian churches and not between the two governments.

After a second intermediation from Archimandrite Visar Xhuvani, Albanian Government and Church agreed to provisionally allow Bishop Viktor mass in Shkodra for his personal religious needs, but gradually he gained control of the local church, giving an end to the first phase of conflict between Albania and Yugoslavia on the Church issue of Shkodra.

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