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Religious and ethnic structure of the population in the area of Macedonian - Albanian border in the XV and XVI century

In the focus of this text is in particular the structure of population in the Macedonian - Albanian border stretch in the first two centuries of the Ottoman Rule. In this case, under Macedonian - Albanian border belt is understood the natural geographic border between Albania and Macedonia, which today stretches throughout three states: the Republic of Macedonia, the Republic of Albania and the Hellenic Republic. In doing that, the structure of the population is observed on the territory of the *kazas*: Debar (Debre), Ohrid (Ohri), Starova, Biglishte (Bilishti), Korcha (Gorica) and Kostur (Kesrie; Kastoria), which in the XV and the XVI century were positioned at both sides of this belt. For this purpose several published and unpublished Turkish census *defters* (books) (*Tapu Tahrir defterleri*) from the second half of the XV century and of the XVI century were used, the originals of which are kept in the Ottoman Archive in Istanbul.

The first conclusion that comes to the surface from the sources used is that, irrespective of the changes that took place after the occupation, up to the mid XVI century, the Christian population of the observed territory was predominant in regard to Muslim population. This is true in particular for the XV century. Sufficient illustration for this are the censuses of the two *kazas* of this region, the Debar and the Kostur *kaza*, on which we have data for the mentioned century¹. Namely, in accordance with the mentioned censuses of the period between 1440 and 1467, in these two *kazas* in total 4.915 families lived and almost all of them were Christian. In the first of them, apart from the *timarli-spahias* and the *timarli-guardians* of the Kodjadjik Fortress, there are no other Muslims. All of the inhabitants registered in the villages were Christians. The same is valid for the Kostur *kaza*. There are only 22 Muslim families registered in

¹ For the Debar *kaza* is used Maliyeden Müdevver Defteri no. 508, from 1466/67; for the Kostur *kaza*: Tapu Tahrir Defteri no. 237 from before 1460.

this *kaza*, and all of them as inhabitants of the town of Kostur.² In the villages of this *kaza*, apart from the owners of *timars*, i.e. the feudal lords, there is no register of a single Muslim.

For the other *kazas* in this border region there are no data for the XV century. However, judging by the number of Muslims in them in the beginning of the XVI century, it is certain that their religious structure in the second half of the XV century was identical with the two previously mentioned *kazas*, i.e. that they were inhabited exclusively with Christian population.

Certain increase in the Muslim population was noticed in the period between 1520-1540. According to the used *defters* from that period,³ Muslims were registered in all observed *kazas*. In the Debar *kaza*, in which in 1466/7, apart from the feudal lords, there were no other Muslims, now we have 103 Muslim families registered, and in the Kostur *kaza* the number of Muslim families raises from 22 to 150. In the other *kazas* the number of Muslim families looks like this: Ohrid - 102 families; Starova - 8 families; Korcha - 236 families; and Biglishta - 130 families. Otherwise, in this time period the total number of inhabitants in the Macedonian - Albanian border belt was 36.847 families. Of them, 36.118 were Christian, and 729 Muslim, or expressed in percentages 98% were Christians and only 2% were Muslims. Having in view these numbers, it is obvious that the population in the Albanian-Macedonian stretch up to the middle of XVI century remained homogeneous and had almost entirely belonged to the Christian community. It is important to emphasize that the Muslims in their greater part were concentrated in the towns. Only in Debar, Ohrid, Struga and Kostur lived 275 Muslim families, which represents almost 40% of the total number of Muslims.

In the period between 1566-1583 on the same territory, the number of the population, according to the census *defters*, was 29.317 families, of which Christians were 24.880, and Muslims 4.437 families.⁴ Expressed in percentages, the Christians counted 84.9% of the total

² Tapu Tahrir Defteri no. 237, s. 88

³ For the *kazas* Debar and Ohrid the following *defter* is used: Tapu Tahrir Defteri no. 367 (1536-1539), s. 368-381, 392-400; for Starova: Tapu Tahrir Defteri no. 81 (1536-1539), s. 36-51; for Kostur, Korcha and Biglishta: Maliye Müdevver Defteri no. 70 (1519), s. 197-217; 245-285.

⁴ The data for the Debar, Ohrid and Starova *kaza* are taken from: The Turkish documents for the history of the Macedonian people (from here on: TDIMN). Comprehensive census *defter* of the Ohrid sancak from 1583, Volume VIII, book 1 and 2. Translation, editing and commentary by Aleksandar Stojanovski, Ph.D., Skopje, 2000; for the Kostur *kaza*: TDIMN. Comprehensive census *defter* for the Kostur, Serfidje and Veles *kaza* of 1568/69, volume VII, book 2. Translation, editing and comments by Aleksandar Stojanovski Ph.D. and Dragi Gjorgiev, M.A., Skopje,

population, while for the Muslims this percentage was 15.1%. Meaning that for a period of less than a half a century, the participation of the Christians in the total number of the population has declined for 13.1%, and for the exact same percentage the participation was increased for the Muslims, which, in its greater part was a result of the process of islamization. This is the case given that in the mentioned period there is neither mechanical influx of Muslim population, nor this enormous increase of the number of Muslims of more than 6 times can be explained with the birth rate of the existing Muslims.

Careful analysis of the Turkish census *defters* in respect to the islamization of this area, leads to one more interesting conclusion. Namely, the statistic data enable us to note that the process of islamization has initially started and has a more rapid pace of expansion on the territory of Albania and among the Albanian population, while its expansion on the territory of Macedonia and among the Slavic population has developed at a slower pace. Examples for this are the Dolni Debar *nahiya*, in the Debar *kaza*, and Gora and Mokra *nahiyas*, in the Starova *kaza*, as well as the Korcha and Biglishta *kazas*, which in their greater part stretched on the Albanian territory and were populated predominantly with Albanian population. Precisely in these *nahiyas* the number of Muslims has increased the most. Thus, in 1536-39 in the *nahiya* of Dolni Debar, the number of Muslim families was only 24, while in 1583 already 697 families; in the Gora *nahiya* in 1536-39 only 2 Muslim families were registered, and in 1583 - 518 families; and in the Mokra *nahiya*, from 6 Muslim families in 1536-39, their number in 1583 rose to 150.

Both in the *kazas* Korcha and Biglishta, which lay on Albanian territory, the number of the Muslims had drastically risen. In the former, from of 235 families in 1536-39 to 983 in 1568/9, while in the latter from 130 families in 1536-39 it rose to 884 families in 1568/9.

In comparison, at the same time, for instance, in the Prespa and Debarca *nahiyas* from the Ohrid *kaza*, then in the Zhupa *nahiya* from the Debar *kaza*, as well in the Kostur *kaza*, which lay on the territory of Macedonia, and were predominantly populated by Slavic population, the spreading of the Islam was much weaker. Thus, in 1536-39 in the Prespa *nahiya* there were no Muslims, and in 1583 23 Muslim families were registered; in the Debarca *nahiya* in the first half

1999, 13-186; for the Korcha and Biglishte *kazas*: TDIMN. Comprehensive census *defter* for the Gorica, Biglishte and Hrupishta *kaza* of 1568/69, volume VII, book 1. Translation, editing, and comments by Aleksandar Stojanovski Ph.D., Skopje 1997, 15-164.

of XVI century also there were no Muslims, and in 1583 there were only 8 families; in the Zhupa *nahiya* in 1536-39 there were two Muslim families, and in 1583 there were 29 of them. The same is the case with the Kostur *kaza* in which in 1568/9 there were in total 179 Muslim families, which in comparison to the 150 families of 1519 means a minimum increase of only 29 families. Stronger islamization on the territory of Macedonia is present in the Debar western *nahiyas*: Reka - from 12 to 146 Muslim families, and Gorni Debar - from 63 to 256 families, as well as in the Ohrid *nahiya* (which also encompassed a small part of the Albanian territory) from 102 to 431 Muslim families, of which 239 families live in Ohrid. Still this increase is much smaller in comparison to the percentage of the increase in the Muslim population on the Albanian side of the borderline.

Irrespective of the massive embracing of the Islam on this territory in a very short time span, the sources used do not leave any space for discussion regarding the forceful and systematized/organized islamization by the state. The acceptance of the Islam by the Christian population, in the biggest number of cases was a voluntary one. In respect to that, we can mention the village Zhirovnica. In other words, the name of the first registered Muslim in the census of this village of 1583 was Mustafa Zhupan⁵. So, the title “Zhupan” indicates to the assumption that this person might have been the elder of the village or, he was an influential person, whose islamization influenced other Christians from the village to adopt the Islam. This case points to one of the possible ways through which the Islam has spread in these regions in the second half of the XVI century.

⁵ In the medieval Serbian state before the coronation of Stefan Prvovenchani for a King (1217), the Serbian rulers bore the title of Great Zhupan. After his coronation, this title was born by the relatives of the rulers and individual distinguished feudal lords. Thus, before the occupation of Ohrid by the Ottomans, the town was under the governance of the feudal lord Andrej Gropa, who had a title of zhupan. It seems that later this title lost the meaning it had in the medieval times, however, it still kept certain importance and marked a lesser function within the local Christian communities. This was valid for the territories which before the Turkish occupation were part and parcel of the Serbian Mediaeval State. Otherwise, the term "zhupa" means area, territory managed by a lord called zhupan. Some of the nahiyas created in Macedonia after the Turkish occupation are compatible with the former medieval zhupas.

Irrespective of that how unavoidable certain reserves and disassociation are made in respect to this data, the results stemming from them offer an approximately realistic demographic picture of the territory of the Macedonian-Albanian border region in the 15th and 16th century. In this respect, I would like again to reiterate the crucial conclusion that is being imposed by the numbers: that in the first two centuries following the Ottoman occupation, in respect to the confessional structure, the Christian population remained, in terms of numbers, dominant over the Muslim one, irrespective of the tendency of its diminishing, especially in the second half of the 16th century.

Regarding the ethnic affiliation of the Christian population on the researched territory, in accordance with the registered names, the mix of the three major ethnicities is notable: Slavonic, Albanian and Vlach, and the more south we go, the more numerous, but not dominant, is the Greek ethnicity. The population in the Debar, Ohrid and Kostur *kaza*, as well as in that part of the *kazas* in Starova, Korcha and Biglishta, that stretch on the Macedonian territory, in its larger part was constituted of Slavonic ethnos. In parts of these *kazas* that stretched on the Albanian territory, like Dolni Debar and Chermenika *nahiya* of the Debar, as well as greater parts of the Starova, Korcha and Biglishte *kazas*, the presence of the Albanian element is greater compared to the Slavonic element. Nonetheless, the latter one is still present in those *nahiyas*, like in essence also the Albanians are present on the Macedonian territory. However, the presence of the Slavonic element on the territory of Albania is much greater than it is the case with the presence of the Albanians on Macedonian territory. Apart from the personal names, one of the most important facts that proves this is the names (*toponymy*) of inhabited places on both sides of the border belt. While on Albanian territory in the border belt the inhabited places in massive numbers have Slavonic names, on the Macedonian territory it is almost impossible to detect an Albanian *toponym*. This is also validated by the artifacts from the two *kazas*, Korcha and Biglishta, which almost exclusively stretch out on Albanian territory, but inhabited places of which have an abundance of Slavonic *toponims* as well as Slavonic population.

An interesting phenomenon is the presence of persons with Serbian *ethnonims* in the midst of the Slavonic population in the *kaza* of Debar in the 15th century. Thus, in the Goren Debar and Reka, in the Debar *kaza*, there are several villages in which the surnames of all registered inhabitants are ending on ‘-iç’, which is a typical feature of the Serbian ethnicity. In accordance with the census of 1466/67 in the Reka *nahiya* there are five such villages, while in

the *nahiya* Gorni Debar in seven villages the inhabitants have Serbian *ethnonims*. Even in the very center of the *kaza*, in Rahovnik (Debar), there were 10 Serbian families⁶. To some extent, this corroborates the ethnic changes that occurred on the territory of Macedonia already in the pre-Ottoman period, when this territory in various periods, was part of the Balkan Medieval states⁷.

As to the Muslim population regarding their ethnicity, in the 15th century it is homogeneous and almost completely comes from the Turkish ethnic element. The first change in this homogeneity took place with the beginning of the islamization, when amidst the Turkish ethnos begin to be incorporated Albanians, Slavonic population, to a lesser extent Vlachs and Greeks as new Muslims. This especially was visible in the second half of the 16th century. At that point of time, the islamization process reaches a level and extent that the participation of these ethnic elements amidst the Muslim population had exceeded the number of the Turkish ethnic element.

There were several reasons for the occurrence of the demographic change in the Macedonian – Albanian border belt in the 15th and 16th century. The most important among those, undoubtedly, was the process of islamization. In accordance with the data offered in the census *defters* of the 15th and the first half of the 16th century, it was apparent that the process of islamization was not yet widely spread amidst the Christian population on the stated territory, which could also be easily observed from the above stated ratio in numbers between the Christians and the Muslims. Occasional cases of islamicised Christians are very rare⁸.

However, already in the second half of the 16th century, the landscape is completely different. In the censuses from 1568/69 until 1583, the number of the Muslim families is drastically increased, which comes as a result almost exclusively of the process of islamization. In a much more illustrative manner this is depicted by the total number of Muslims in the

⁶ Maliyeden Mudevver Defteri No. 508, l. 108, 109, 112, 113, 119. See, also, in: Aleksandar Stojanovski, *Demografskite promeni vo Debarskata kaza (15-16 vek)*, in: *Makedonija pod turskata vlast (statii i drugi prilozii)*, Institut za nacionalna istorija, Skopje, 2006, 114.

⁷ In her unpublished doctoral dissertation: "Islamizacija na torbe{ite i formirawe na torbe{kata subgrupa", defended in Skopje in 1965, page 82 - 89, Galaba Palikrusheva points out to the arrival of the settlers from the north at the time of the Serbian rule in Macedonia beginning at the end of the 13th century.

⁸ Maliyeden mudevver defteri No. 508, l. 40, 73-75; 102, where the following was registered: "Jakub, new Muslim", then "Arnaut Hamza, yanichar Ali and Ibrahim Dibra", for whom it could be assumed that earlier they were Christians.

Macedonian- Albanian border area and in the total number of islamised people among them. Namely, the number of Muslim families in the Debar, Ohrid, Starova, Kostur, Korcha and Biglishte *kaza* in the period from 1568/69 – 1983 was 4.466, and the number of the islamised families was 1912. Expressed in percentage, this means that 42.8% of the total number of Muslims earlier were Christians. This percentage was without doubt much greater given that we know that the census *defters* enable us to detect only the first generation of the islamised Christians, while the second and the next generations of islamised Christians remain ‘hidden’, and the detecting of the same is almost impossible⁹.

The fact that the increase in the number of Muslims in this area is almost exclusively a result of the islamization shall be corroborated with several very illustrative examples. A specially striking example is the one with the mentioned village Zhirovnica, in the Debar nahiya of Reka. In 1536-39 only 3 Muslim families lived in this village and in 1583 already 69 families had a Muslim religion. Out of them, 44 were undoubtedly families that were islamised given that as their *patronim* they have their father’s Christian name¹⁰. These types of villages are more numerous in the western part of the Debar *kaza*, especially the *nahiya* Dolni Debar. We shall mention the villages: Darda, where in 1536-39 there were no Muslims, and in 1583 there are 44 Muslim families; Luznija, where in 1526-39 as well there were no Muslims, and yet in 1583 there are already 39 Muslim families; as well as the village Slatina, where the number from 2 Muslim families in 1536-39, in 1583 grew to 34¹¹. In all of these cases the islamised people as their *patronim* have their father’s Christian names.

Cases like these are present also in the Starova *kaza*, where the islamization was especially massive. Here it is also characteristic the keeping of the Christian father’s names, and as an example of complete islamization we shall point out to the villages: Mamel, Chereschnik and Kakach, in which in the period 1536-39 there were no Muslim families; on the other hand, in 1583 there are no Christian families¹².

⁹ The islamised persons, apart from the explicit and clear cases when they have a personal Muslim name and Christian patronim, or where it is explained that this is the case of a “new Muslim”, could be detected solely through the patronim “Abdulah”, meaning “the slave of God”, i.e. through the sintagm “bin Abdulah”, meaning “the son of Abdulah”. In essence, the patronim “Abdulah” was added to the name of the new Muslim and had replaced the Christian name of his father, the mentioning of which attempts were made to be avoided.

¹⁰ TDIMN. Comprehensive census *defter* of the Ohrid *Sandjak* of 1583, volume VIII, book 1, 640 - 642 .

¹¹ Op. cit., 502 - 503; 513 - 518; 547.

¹² Op. cit., 33; 338- 339; 342.

Contrary to the case of the Starova *kaza*, in the population census in the other *kazas*, like for instance in Kostur, Korcha and Biglishta, to the new Muslims instead of their father's Christian name, most frequently, the *patronim* "Abdulah" was added. Thus, for instance, in the village Moglica in the area of Korcha, all registered Muslims have the patronim "Abdulah"; in the village Borovo, in the same *kaza*, out of 10 Muslims, seven have the surname "Abdulah". Also, the Biglishte *kaza* has an abundance of similar examples. Thus, in the village of Bitincka, out of 9 Muslim families, 8 have the patronim "Abdulah", and in the Village Popovic (?), out of 6 Muslim families, 5 have the same surname¹³. Examples as these are high in numbers along the whole Macedonian - Albanian border stretch, which corroborate that the more massive islamization, and with it also greater religious and ethnic changes in the structure of the population, began in the second half of the 16th century.

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¹³ TDIMN. Extensive census *defter* of the Gorica, Biglishte and Hrupishta *kaza* of 1568/69, volume VII, book 1, 51,184.