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The Albanian Renaissance in Political Thought: Between the Enlightenment and Romanticism

Lea L. Ypi*

The conceptual genealogy of the Albanian so-called Renaissance is often linked to the influence of Western Romantic ideas on the nationalist movements of the Balkans. This paper analyzes the specificities of the Albanian cultural and political context and suggests, by contrast, that Enlightenment categories provide a better means of comprehension of this stage in Albanian intellectual history. It focuses on the ideological function played by the critique of religion as well as by a cultural project addressed to political struggle and emphasizes its roots in the Enlightenment tradition. It finally argues that Enlightenment concepts such as self-criticism and rational teleology might help to grasp some unique features of the Renaissance movement and to construct a more sophisticated account of the emergence of the Albanian modern state.

Keywords: Albanian Renaissance; Balkans; Enlightenment; Romanticism; religion; education; modern state; nationalism

1. Introduction

The concept of Rilindje (Renaissance) is certainly not the most appropriate to define a stage of Albanian intellectual history, going from the mid-19th century to the 1912 Declaration of Independence, which marks the very first attempt to frame the Albanians’ national identity claims. Its terminological association to the Italian Renaissance, which is linked to a revival of classical paradigms in philosophy, the arts and science, might well be misleading for a general understanding of the concept.1 The cultural narrative of Albania could not ri-lind, re-vive, precisely because the symbolic representation of a unitary entity, sharing the same language, customs and history was hardly ever...
articulated other than in the people’s collective imagination. The 19th-century social and political upheavals that took place in Europe revealed in Albania a quasi-medieval society, culturally backward and characterized by clan divisions, poor economic development, and very weak administrative structures. This patriarchal society, where the law of particular privileges survived in a general context of anarchy, had very little in common with its fellow bourgeois states and their emergent civil society. However, profound historical transformations imposed a break with the feudal past and called for a new role for intellectuals in advocating modern state structures. The philosophical categories that accompanied the perception of these changes in Western Europe, and later inspired the Albanian intelligentsia to carry on this moral and political mission, still need to be clarified.

Current historiography often links this episode in Balkan history to the influence of Romantic ideas in the progressive definition of nationalistic claims. However, in the case of the Albanian Renaissance, the Romanticist manifesto — often described as a reaction to the so-called abstract and intellectualistic claims of the Enlightenment which led to the re-evaluation of existential and religious feelings, particularistic instances and a return to tradition — is problematic. Without fully denying the presence of some of these elements in the Albanian context and their affinities to a particular version of Balkan Romanticism, the scope of this paper is to establish how the national Renaissance reveals a more complex dialectic between the Enlightenment and Romanticism. With reference to Albanian historical and cultural specificities, it argues that Enlightenment ideals such as sovereignty, secularism, and rational knowledge are very relevant understanding the cultural shape and the political challenges that Despite its temporal proximity to European Romanticism, had to face.

In the first part of this article I provide a brief outline of the political and historical conditions in which the Albanian Renaissance emerged. The internal and external factors considered are expected to clarify some peculiarities of the Albanian context and illustrate the adequacy of Enlightenment paradigms in conceiving the project of a future sovereign state. In the second part, I focus
particularly on the intellectual attempts to construct and readapt the national identity myth to the actual political context. Enlightenment categories are here introduced in order to understand, on the one hand, the critique of religion in the name of a political claim for national unity and, on the other, the role played by the re-evocation of Albanian history. I argue that the separation of the religious from the ethnic elements, as a distinctive feature of the Albanian nationalist movement, would be impossible to understand without considering the way in which the Enlightenment ideal of tolerance and its critique of religious obscurantism inspired Albanian intellectuals. This leads to the third part of my paper, where I analyze the specific political and cultural program of the Albanian Renaissance in light of the Enlightenment ideals of popular emancipation through intellectual education. This pedagogical teleology constitutes the most important and systematic part of the Rilindje program. It is related to the perceived difficulty of transforming a family-centred structure, as Albania was, into a modern, unitary state without developing the public use of reason and a proper civil-society sphere. Understanding how these political claims and the elaboration of a concrete program for their realization combine with the introduction of local and ethnic elements should ultimately lead to an understanding of the way in which the national identity myth applies to the emergence of the early Albanian state.

2. Romanticism in the Balkans and Albanian society

At the time when the ideals of Romanticism were reaching the Balkans and contributing to the intellectual framing of nationalist claims, in Western Europe this particular aesthetics of the mal de vivre was being consigned to the past.4 It arrived even later in Albania, and if contingent historical events had not imposed a different perception of the country’s culture, one could even question whether a Romantic literary fashion would ever have influenced the 19th century Albanian literature. After all, other literary and philosophical movements crossed the path of modern Europe, barely exerting any influence on the still feudal Albania. This philosophically impoverished territory, where modern liberal
ideas hardly ever emerged, could ill-constitute an attractive force for a theory of the antinomies of reason and of the motions of subjectivity. Here, Romanticism was not just one current of thought opposing another and merely substituting for former ethical and aesthetical models, but coincided with the first emergence of a national tradition in literature. Interestingly, its reception in the country resulted in a cultural account whose conceptual features are very reminiscent of the Romanticism’s ideological rival: the Enlightenment. However, rather than the abstract features of opposing ideologies, what best introduces us to the genealogy of such an original conceptual combination are the historical circumstances that gave rise to the Albanian Renaissance.

The turbulence of the French Revolution and the internal crisis of the Ottoman Empire forced the Sublime Porte to a series of late reforms for the creation of modern State structures. The 1839 imperial decree, better known by the name of the Tanzimat Reforms, enacted radical changes in the administrative and legal system of the Empire, including the formal recognition of some liberal rights. This imperial statute, later transformed into a proper civil and penal code, promised to protect citizens’ “life, honour and property, regardless of religious and sect distinctions.” The educational system, which included the creation of free and compulsory primary schools, was removed from the domain of the Mullabs (Islamic clerics) and organized on a secular basis. Likewise, a deep reform of the judicial structures led to the formal recognition of Christian minority rights. Financial offices were opened and public officers replaced the former myltez (people who bought the right to collect taxes from the sultan). Several administrative innovations followed the French model; the whole territory was divided into smaller entities called vilayets which imitated the French prefectures. Transformations in the army included the creation of compulsory military service.

While these “enlightened” reforms might seem appropriate and indispensable in theory, they were undertaken late and were unable to prevent the Empire’s decline. Moreover, they encountered serious difficulties in being applied. Local populations perceived the reforms as an imperial move aiming to destroy their secular balance of autonomies. Especially in Albania, where
social affairs were regulated on the basis of personal relationships, ethnic affinities, and local rivalries, the Tanzimat reforms encountered hostility. Imperial functionaries were alien to the population and barely spoke the language; their lack of familiarity with the complicated primitive system of checks and balances created more problems than it resolved. Moreover the new tax-system and compulsory military service were viewed as a dangerous attempt to abolish a century-old de facto autonomy.

Following the new reforms, Albania was divided into four administrative entities (vilayets), but ethnical elements and historical affinities seemed to override these changes. The North of Albania, dominated by the “Geg” group, never accepted the new legislative rules and continued to recognize the laws imposed by the Kanun as the sole binding ones. By contrast, the South of the country, where the previous Machiavellian policy of the nobleman Ali Pashë Tepelena had already reduced some of the regional divisions and led to a certain concentration of power, found it easier to integrate. The Tosk aristocracy, or bourgeoisie representatives, often acted as mediators between the Albanian population and the foreign imperial functionaries and obtained administrative posts outside the country. Their descendants, who went to study in the Istanbul faculties, were certainly among the initiators of the Albanian Renaissance movement.

One should not, however, overemphasize the role of the Ottoman-educated intellectuals in constructing the cultural and political initiatives that determined the emergence of Albanian nationalism. A very important role was played by the Arbërësh communities in the South of Italy who maintained throughout centuries a profound attachment to their native country. The literary and political activity of Jeronim De Rada is but one example of the patriotic feelings and deep commitment to the ideal of national autonomy that animated such intellectual struggles. Moreover, a strong network of Albanian emigrants in Cosenza, Bucarest, Sofia, Cairo — to mention but a few — like their fellow philosophes a century before, tried to adapt the 17th century model of the République des Lettres to the country’s specific cultural needs.

In this context, the Tanzimat reforms seem to have conferred on the Ottoman Empire the distinctive traits of an enlightened
despotism, responding to the transformative requirements of a modern State in evolution. Had the Sublime Porte’s institutional innovations arrived earlier, the Empire’s decline would have probably been slowed. However, given the actual circumstances, this historical delay was interpreted as a sign of weakness rather than one of strength. Most of the Balkan colonies struggled for decades between 1830 and 1878 and eventually gained their independence. Not so Albania. Ironically, its neighbours’ autonomy, rather than inspiring solidarity or a need to support similar claims, was perceived as a signal of danger. The growing feeling of insecurity, related to the crisis of the Ottoman Empire, is well expressed in the words of one of the most distinguished representatives of the Albanian Renaissance, Sami Frashëri:

Until recently Albania was surrounded by Turkish regions and the borders of this kingdom were situated far from it. Albanians [...] considered their country out of danger. Now Albania is a far away corner of Turkey and it is surrounded by the enemies’ borders. Montenegro, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria have encircled and encompassed Albania and Austria looms above. Therefore Albanians [...] must be able to protect themselves and not expect anything from Turkey, which is obviously not able to defend itself. [...] Albania has not yet laid its foundations and its roots, it lives in the ruined foundations of Turkey and with its rotten roots. The first big storm will break it down and Albania will be crushed under its ruins.10

Indeed, the Berlin congress of 1878, in charge of revising territorial divisions in the Balkans after the Russian-Turkish war and the St. Stefan Treaty, presented a serious threat to the country’s territorial integrity. A large portion of the lands in the North (Hot, Grudë, Plavë and Guci) were annexed to Montenegro. Not only did the Western Great Powers seem to completely ignore Albania’s cultural and historical specificities, but Bismarck went even further by declaring that an Albanian nation did not exist and that Albania was nothing more than a geographical statement.

All the subsequent political and cultural history of the Albanian people could be interpreted as an extraordinary effort to prove that Bismarck was wrong. From an active political perspective, the Prizren League, which gathered representatives from several spontaneous defence-committees created all around Albania, marked the first important step towards the
organization of an armed resistance for the defence of the country. However, the Great European Powers were so little aware of Albania as a separate cultural entity, that they first thought of the Prizren League as a political trick of the Ottoman Empire to defend the pre-Berlin status quo. If Albanians wanted to be successful in defending in practical terms their territorial integrity, they had first to provide theoretical evidence that these territorial claims were legitimate. As the Polish nationalist Pilsudski recognized, the need was for a state to make a nation and not for a nation to create a state.11

This particular version of Albanian nationalism would at first appear close to the one that Eric Hobsbawm considers to be a result of the French and American Revolutions, emphasizing territorial integrity as an organizing principle for the exercise of collective sovereignty.12 Successive ethnic elements supporting nationalist principles were only a derivate of such first order claims. After the predictable fall of the Ottoman Empire, Albanians would need a national narrative to make their sovereignty claims sound plausible: they had to defend the cause of an Albanian nation and create its unifying culture. Supporting active resistance with an intellectual and literary movement, arguing for national sovereignty, freedom and self-determination came to be extremely important. In the words of Sami Frashëri:

Apart from the risks that will appear during times of war, Albania runs greater risks that will show their roots in times of peace, without blood and arms. It is the war of school and literature, the war of nationalism. [...] The Greeks, the Slavs and the other neighbouring countries do not want to recognize the existence of an Albanian nation. Each of them uses their own faith to attract those Albanians sharing their religion. 13

Two elements are worth considering carefully while analyzing these claims. The first is the identification of the military mission in defence of Albanian territorial integrity with an intellectual one. Armed resistance was considered a weak means by which to oppose the greater threats that a country whose cultural narrative had not proved its historical right to autonomy would always suffer. The second element is the critique of religion. The attractive force of religion in providing to the collective association of people a universal and transcendent foundation is here inverted.
and considered as a threat to national unity. Both elements are two of the most distinctive and recurrent features of the Albanian Renaissance. Their combination is also what confers on the Albanian nationalist movement some specific characteristics which distinguish it from the other Romantic movements in the Balkans and which link it to the Enlightenment. Just as the aversion for the 17th century religious conflicts between European states generated the humanistic ideal of tolerance and rationalism among the Enlightenment philosophes, the opposition to the Romantic claim “one God, one nation” became the Rilindas manifesto and informed its entire intellectual program.

But if religion was considered powerless — and even counter-productive — in shaping a national identity myth, other common substantial values had to be found. Language and history came to be the most indicators of the country’s authenticity. Such an unusual division of the religious from the purely ethnic element is of extreme relevance when analyzing the inspiring principles of the Albanian Renaissance, its specific cultural narrative and its ultimate political program. The reasons for this separation and its successive development are analyzed in the next section.

3. “The religion of the Albanians is Albanianism”

While considering the different conceptual and anthropological features explaining popular proto-nationalism, Eric Hobsbawm concludes that “we are left with the criteria of Holy Russia as the seventeenth-century Cossacks saw them: religion and kingship or empire.” Now, both criteria — shared religious symbols as well as the awareness of belonging to a lasting political entity — fail to provide a clear understanding of Albanian nationalism. By contrast, what Hobsbawm considers as less important to understand the role of popular proto-nationalism in shaping nation-states, namely language and ethnicity, seem to have played the most important role in the political program of the Albanian Renaissance. The common historical memory of a mythical past and traces of a unitary language through which people communicated over the centuries are precisely what substituted the lack of social and symbolic bonds provided by either religious or republican humanism.
A few considerations of the long-term resident in Albania Edith Durham summarize very well one of the clearest impressions that the Albanians’ attitude towards religion made on foreign travellers:

The Albanian remains Albanian. He is first of all Albanian. Religion always comes in the second place. […] When an Albanian must obey the circumstances, he does it so as to make circumstances obey him. He never took Christianity seriously, but apparently even Islam hasn’t been introduced properly. […] Some nations have a natural inclination towards religion. While Albanians, as a nation, are not interested in it.  

In order properly to understand the distinctive features of this phenomenon, one should bear in mind that the lack of modern productive forces did not create in Albania the typical phenomenon of societal atomisation, with its consequent emergent individualism. Therefore, family and the fis could still act as the most appropriate collective institutions, providing powerful identity links within small communities and symbolic recognition in common anthropological features. With regard to the latter, religion did not succeed in conferring on Albanians a strong sense of shared belief. It was always considered, instead, an element of discord, introducing divisions and, later, jeopardizing the potential ground for the construction of a national ideology.

During the 15th century, a large majority of Albanians who had initially embraced Christianity promptly exchanged their religion for a number of privileges that the Sublime Porte extended to the newly conquered parts of population willing to convert. Successively, a combination of innate scepticism, pragmatism, and a lack of attraction to mystical self-absorption seems to have prevented them from embracing the most fanatic aspects of religious practice and reduced it to an exterior act of obedience, never deeply felt. From this perspective, as many scholars underline, the final solution to the question, carried out by Enver Hoxha’s socialist regime, appears to be only the last radical stage of a process started much earlier. The easy success of the mid 1960’s campaign, leading to the abolition of all religious practice, can hardly be attributed only to the Jacobinism of the small socialist republic.
Albania would not so easily declare itself the “first atheist country of the world” if a popular sense of indifference towards theological instances lacked historical roots.

One can argue, of course, that it would be reductive to give a single explanation for the complex factors determining the distinctive features of the Albanians’ perception of religion. As Noel Malcolm acutely observes, these phenomena include “the syncretism of folk-religious practices, the tolerance (and doctrinal syncretism) of the Bektashi, the much rarer phenomenon of crypto-Christianity (both Catholic and Orthodox), the social system of the northern Albanian clansmen, (for whom loyalty to their fis would take priority over any division of that fis into Catholic and Muslim branches), and the perfectly normal practice of Muslim men, taking wives without requiring their conversion to Islam.”17 However the reduction to a unique political motto is precisely what happened when the Rilindje protagonists transformed a vague and heterogeneous aggregate of sources into a systematic program which easily combined later with the Marxist emphasis on religion as the “opium of the peoples.” The words of the national poet Vaso Pasha in his most famous poem Mori Shqypni, e mjera Shqypni [O Albania, poor Albania], written just after the events of the Prizren League, constitute the strongest paradigmatic manifesto of this intellectual reaction: “The priests and the hodjas have deceived you / To divide you and keep you poor.” And, in the same poem: “Awaken, Albanians, wake from your slumber / Unite as brothers, swear a common oath / And not look to church or mosque / the religion of the Albanians is Albanianism!”.18

Although Albanianism was clearly a vague concept, the emphasis placed on the obscurantist and misleading function of religion is unequivocal. Apart from the cultural causes related to the particular anthropological development of the Albanian society, other historical factors contribute to clarify this radical position. When the Russian Orthodox Church declared itself the natural protector of all Slavic populations and actively intervened in support of the 19th century nationalist movements in the Balkans, Muslim Albania was identified, tout court, with the Ottoman Empire. Whereas the small Christian minority was disputed among the neighbouring Orthodox states, recognizing

The Albanian Renaissance in Political Thought
Islam as the official religion of Albanians risked having fatal consequences for the country’s viability after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Therefore, even those few attempts to propagate a reformed version of Islamism, such as Naim Frashëri’s *Fletoree Bektasbinjve* (Notebook of the Bektashis), chose to focus on the anti-Sunni and Shi-ite orientation of the Bektashi order and combine its heretical sides towards the Ottoman Empire with the emerging Albanian identity claims.  

It should be here pointed out that even though Naim Frashëri, like many Romantics, considered the language of poetry as the most appropriate to express the need for an *ad hoc* popular religion, he was very far from the romantic paradigm of a mystical rapture in the symbols of faith that one might find, for instance, in Novalis’s poems. His Bektashism tries to combine pantheist and materialistic elements representing the natural fusion of the parts into the whole and might be assimilated to an oriental version of Diderot and Voltaire’s deism. The association of divinity to nature and its relationship to human beings constitutes a paradigm of universal harmony and inspires a sense of tolerance and respect for everyone regardless of the positive forms of religious affiliation. But in spite of the modern shape that Naim Frashëri gave to his program promoting a national religion, his efforts failed to reach the large majority of the population. This is because, on the one hand, the Bektashi order represented a very weak minority of Albanians and, on the other, because its natural context of reference was very distant from the country’s historical memory.

What remains therefore as a distinguishing feature of the *Rilindje* political program is the obscure concept of Albanianism and the permanent attempts to transform it into a would-be Rousseauian civil religion. The need to bring a country’s specific political structure in line with its mores and traditions, well expressed by Montesquieu in his *Spirit of Laws*, was clearly perceived but could be anchored to little more than legendary claims. This perspective leads to the second criterion mentioned by Hobsbawm in relation to Holy Russian nationalism: the sense of being part of a lasting political entity. As a collective entity Albanians had hardly ever experienced citizenship in an autonomous political community, but for the mythical Illyrian age and the short season
of anti-Ottoman resistance under the national hero Skanderbeg. Therefore two other elements came to be extremely relevant in order to prove the country’s authenticity: language and a common ethnicity.

The growing interest of Western scholars in Albanian language and history, certainly influenced by Herder’s studies on the Volk, led to the enthusiastic comment that “we are neither Bulgarians nor Greek.” But the Romantic tendency of evocating the myth of the past here assumed a very specific function. When the Renaissance intellectuals started to reflect politically on the country’s present situation, they felt obliged to begin their essays with historical arguments about contemporary Albanians as descendents of the Pelasgians, philological evidence on the Albanian etymologies of ancient Greek or even legendary narratives about the Albanian origins of great military leaders such as Alexander or Pyrro. 23 However, the evocation of Albanian late-medieval history under the myth of Skanderbeg in a large number of essays or poetical productions has very little to do with the role that medieval history plays in romantic literature. The Albanian national hero seems to be portrayed more as a would-be Rousseauian legislator unifying regional divisions under a national ethos conceived in opposition to the external Ottoman threat. This intellectual operation was meant to serve a double function: on the one hand, it offered Albanians a concrete example of the historical achievement of shared goals, regardless of local and religious divisions; on the other, it reminded the Great European powers about the temporal existence of Albania as a distinct political entity, even protecting Europe from the Turkish hordes. In the words of Sami Frashëri, “although full of wars and blood-shed, this was the most blessed of all times in our country’s history because only then did the whole nation unite under a pure government and its fame reached the whole world.”24

However, the intellectual protagonists of the Albanian Renaissance insisted on the country’s authenticity with the same emphasis that they placed on its cultural, social and political underdevelopment. Besides the enthusiastic tones and proud comments on “the oldest inhabitants of the Balkans,” a more complex sentiment of embarrassment for Albania’s clearly perceived backwardness
emerges from these political writings. Rather than fomenting a sense of self-glorification, ultimately leading to chauvinism, the Romanticist myth of the past was ironically meant to remind Albanians of their current miserable conditions and to awaken a typical Enlightenment feeling: that of self-criticism. The need to rely on collective memory arose precisely because no other testimony to the country’s culture could be found: no literature, no written history, no art. Vaso Pasha’s beginning of his *Albania and the Albanians* provides a very precise and realistic description of how the Albanian cultural elites perceived the phenomenon. Together with two categories of nations, those that “have been granted glory, wealth and power” and those that “have lost their proper individual existence and were removed from the world’s stage,” he claims that there is a third one, that of peoples:

> whose origin is lost in the darkness of mythical times and who continue their individual life in spite of the unexpected events that they necessarily had to face. Their history, because of a lack of developed civilization or because of circumstances that is impossible for our mind to grasp, remains a problem having not yet found a solution. [...] To this category the Albanian nation certainly belongs. Where does it come from? What is it? How does it live?\(^25\)

Therefore, when it comes to describing the life and customs of this mysterious Albanian entity, Vaso Pasha does not hesitate to define its conditions as “completely primitive and patriarchal,” a place where “the law of the talon still survives and the division of society into family clans still dominates.” What, other than common history and language, do Albanians lack that the civilized countries have? Here is the question that the *Rilindas* all raised, and the answer sounded as simple as it was dramatic: civilization. So, once the point in favour of territorial integrity had been made through the Romantic myth of perpetual existence, it was necessary to prove that governing such a political community was also realistic. This severe diagnosis led to a political platform of cultural emancipation through intellectual education in which the Enlightenment ideology of rational knowledge and cultural progress sounded more convincing than the ideals of Romantic heroism, power of spirit, creative genius, and primitive authenticity. The Enlightenment program of intellectual evolution through massive education was
thus privileged over the Romanticist passion for immediate political action. While this does not imply the absence of any political initiatives, as the Prizren League events show, it certainly determined the moderate features of the nationalist claims at an early stage of the Albanian Renaissance. The presence of some elements of the Enlightenment ideological programme and their influence on the reluctance to claim total independence are analyzed in the next section.

4. “And the light of knowing will lead us forward”

Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of Enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own understanding. 26

The emergence from the obscurity of ignorance and irrational superstition, as well as the need for collective cultural emancipation as we find these in Kant’s definition of Enlightenment, was also one of the most recurrent themes of the Albanian Renaissance. The clear perception that a strong claim for political autonomies must come with a profound revolution in the Albanians’ Denkungsart emerged through two distinct features, both typical of Enlightenment philosophy: self-criticism and rational teleology. The element of self-criticism, well synthesized in the Kantian charge of self-incurred immaturity, is expressed by Sami Frashëri in the following terms: “If our nation is backward, it is not its fault but our fault; if the Albanian language has not been written, this is not because it is a bad or handicapped language but only because we did not worry about writing it.”27

This mea culpa, derived from a realistic consideration of the historical passivity of the Albanians, is far from any kind of nationalistic exaltation of the past, an element that scholars analysing nationalism from a Romanticist perspective often fail to grasp. Any deep critical consideration of past inactivity, however, leads to the second element, rational teleology, which implies a cultural
project in order to overcome the present inability to use one’s capacities without any guiding authority. It is well emphasized by Kant in the motto sapere aude and was interpreted by the Albanian Renaissance as a civic obligation to engage with a pedagogical mission promoting the public use of reason. “If there is one thing Albanians should worry about right now,” claimed Sami Frashëri, “it is knowledge.”28 Albanian elites, however, were well aware of the fact that the goal of large-scale cultural emancipation could be achieved only after the development of a public sphere and civil society structures. This explains the unprecedented commitment to creating patriotic and cultural associations, intended to spread the written language and propagate the idea of an intellectual struggle against obscurantism and superstition.

Two centuries later, Albania was experiencing in the most dramatic circumstances the radical changes that the Copernican revolution and the invention of the press brought about in Western Europe. A quick look at the names of the cultural associations founded during these years provides clear evidence of how much the Albanian nationalist ideology owes to Enlightenment categories, even metaphorically. Conceptual images such as the “light of knowledge” and the “emergence from the darkness and the obscurity of the past” largely occur even in the names of different literary magazines, suffice it to mention a few of the most relevant ones: “Drita” (The light) founded in 1879 in Istanbul by the brothers Frashëri and later transformed into “Dituria” (The knowledge), “Dëshirë” (Desire) founded in 1898 in Sofia by Jani Vreto, and “Drita”, founded in Sofia in 1901 by Shahin Kolonja. The same can be argued about many of the Renaissance literary productions; Naim Frashëri’s poem Fjalët e qiririt (The words of the candle) is only one of the most successful examples. In this poem, a candle, symbolizing the light of reason in the darkness of error and superstition, dramatically emphasizes the superiority of knowledge and its role in promoting the humanistic ideal of reciprocal understanding and peaceful living: “Here among you I have risen / And aflame am I now blazing / I’ll combust and I will wither / Be consumed and be extinguished / Just a bit of light to give you / Just to give you brightness, vision / That you notice one another […] Humanity is what I long for / Goodness, gentleness and wisdom.”29
One element which is worth mentioning while analysing the ideals behind Albanian national literature is the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Romanticism resolved this dialectics by clearly privileging the second term as the closest to nature and truly authentic. Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as the “spontaneous overflowing of powerful feelings” is perhaps what best summarizes these features. By contrast, the Albanian Renaissance inverts such terms by subordinating art to ethical and political purposes. The ideal of beauty promoted by the artistic production is very reminiscent of the Kantian aesthetic idea as a symbol of the morally good, thus implying the ennobling mission of art. It is also related to the pedagogical commitment of the Albanian Renaissance and to the necessity of promoting the written language and a national literature. While reading these works one often has the impression that what worried the Albanian artists of that time was not so much the outcome of their aesthetic activity (nor, one might maliciously add, its expressive quality), but the need to produce something intellectually relevant, describing the changes occurring in people’s self-understanding. Certainly, on a purely aesthetical level, it would be impossible to find here any traces of the attraction for an art pour l’art ideal, a vision that, inherited by the Romantic school, was rapidly spreading in Europe and intensely expressed by someone like Baudelaire. This does not, however, mean that Romanticist aesthetic models completely failed to influence Albanian poetry during the 19th century. Such a claim would seem particularly ungenerous towards that branch of literature developed by intellectuals of the Albanian minority in Italy like Jeronim De Rada or Gavril Dara i Riu. Nevertheless, what distinguished the aesthetic canons of the Albanian national Renaissance was their subordination to moral concepts which limited the poetic themes to a few artistic expressions of broader political slogans.

These political slogans, however, appear rather limited if they are compared to the nationalist vehemence of other Balkan states in this period. Ironically, it is precisely the awareness of the dramatic circumstances in which Albanian emancipation would have to occur that deterred any radical claims. One could say that theoretical self-criticism was here so drastic that it resulted in
hesitation towards any kind of practical political action. This attitude reveals a certain lack of faith in the potential for a totally independent political entity. As Vaso Pasha observed: “Albanians know that the way they are now, divided into three religions and with an embryonic education, they would not easily agree to self-determination without a strong hand to govern and lead them. [...] Albania cannot survive unless under a government that respects its own existence, mores, traditions and nationalism and the Ottoman Empire has met all these criteria up to now.”

The Ottoman Empire was, however, nearing the end of its life and the Albanians urgently had either to prove their capacity for self-determination or disappear as a nation. The need for appropriate conditions in which a modern state could be created and could develop was clearly perceived by the Renaissance intellectuals. When Sami Frashëri sketched out the programmatic guidelines of the Renaissance political claims, he made some very familiar arguments about what might contribute to the consolidation of modern state structures. His points ranged from the need to develop industry and trade, to the secularisation of religion, to the importance of guaranteeing property rights and, finally, to the necessity of developing an independent educational system. However, these claims were all being expressed within the framework of the regional autonomies conferred by the Ottoman rulers and they should not be confused with a call for full independence. “The Albanians”, Frashëri wrote, “have shed their blood for the Ottoman Empire for five hundred years and they will never want it to be defeated.” All the same, he believed that Albania ought to be recognized as a geographical unity, the regional divisions introduced by the Tanzimat reforms should be abolished and the distinctive traits of the Albanians’ common ethnicity respected in their right to exist.

Certainly, it is not easy to determine how much of this reflexivity is due to the Enlightenment preferences for an intellectual struggle that internally eroded the fundaments of despotism, rather than directly confronting it. What is even more interesting is the contrast between this ideology and the stereotype of Albanians as people willing to combat to death. While implicitly raising the question, another famous poem by Naim Frashëri,
called Gjuha jonë (Our language) provides a brilliant answer. “Those were flaming times / And required many endeavours / But what we need now / is pen and paper, nothing more.” The Romantic myth of the perpetual rebels might well have been appropriate for celebrating the country’s past pride and heroic gestures but was certainly not enough to face concrete historical and political challenges.

5. Conclusion

The specific cultural and philosophical features exhibited by the 19th century Albanian Renaissance movement certainly appear unusual, and difficult to grasp, if one schematically employs traditional Western European categories. However, an articulate combination of the main philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, linked to a careful examination of historical events, is likely to produce a more sophisticated understanding of the national identity myth and its relationship to the emergence of modern state structures. While analysing the historical, cultural, and philosophical terrain in which certain influential ideas in Albanian intellectual history emerged, the aim of this article was to point out how fundamental concepts of the Enlightenment such as secularism, reason, self-criticism, and rational teleology influenced the first intellectual steps in the creation of an Albanian national identity. In methodological terms, I tried to engage with a comparative analysis of ideas rather than with a search for positive philological proof. This approach might not be exhaustive, and certainly a number of questions remain open. However, if this article has managed to provoke—at the very least—a non-stereotyped account of the emergence of an Albanian national culture, it will hopefully constitute an interesting starting-point for further, deeper enquiries.

Notes

1. A few pantheistic elements present in the Weltanschauung of both Albanian and European Renaissance constitute very weak evidence of similarities if one realizes their different cultural origin: Islamic metaphysics and the influence of Persian poetry in the Albanian case and a revival of Platonism in the European one.

2. The Albanian language was the last one to be written down in Europe. Apart from a few religious fragments such as Gjon Buzuku’s Mesbar (1555), a proper Albanian literature
only started to emerge during the Renaissance. This phenomenon was well recognized by the Renaissance intellectuals. For a good overview on the evolution of Albanian literature, see R. Elsie, *History of Albanian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

3. It is very difficult to provide a common definition suiting all versions of western European Romanticism. What I argue certainly applies to the German one, mainly identified with the Jena circle, which was also the initiator of the movement. For a deeper theoretical discussion of European Romanticism, see I. Berlin, *The crooked timber of humanity: chapters in the history of ideas* (London: John Murray, 1990).

4. See E. Çabej, *Romantizmi në Evropën lindore e juglindore dhe në literaturën shqipe* [Romanticism in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and in Albanian literature] in *Shqiptarët mes Perëndimit dhe Lindjes* [The Albanians between West and East], (Tiranë: Çabej, 1994). This essay was written in 1945 and published in 1994 for the first time.

5. The deep impression made by the French Revolution on Sultan Selim who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1789 to 1807 was due to the military performance of the Great Army rather than to his admiration for the transformative power of ideas. However, Turkish sultans felt the need for administrative and cultural reforms even before the Tanzimat period. Sultan Selim certainly shared with his father, Mustafa III, a few projects for their realization but was obstructed by other internal conservative forces. For a more detailed account of this stage of the Ottoman Empire with regard to the emergence of nationalism in the Balkans, see G. Castellan, *Histoire des Balkans* (Paris: Fayard, 1991).

6. In Turkish “tanzimat” means reform.


8. Some might argue that although the distinction between the two dialects of Albanian (“Geg” and “Tosk”) is appropriate to a study of the language, it should not be used to trace a historical and cultural distinction among groups. I am grateful to Kathleen Imholz for having brought this to my attention. Although I agree that such distinctions must not be abused to fix ethnic specificities; it is also difficult to consider them totally arbitrary for the interpretation of certain historical events. The danger that the division between the “Tosks” of the South and the “Gegs” of the North could be a threat to national unity was certainly perceived and fought even by Albanian intellectuals. One example among many is Gjergj Fishta’s epic poem *Lahuta e Malcis* (1937) where one of the recommendations to save the country sounds like this: “Lsho kushtrimin n’T osk e n’ Gegë / Mblidhuni tok si kokrrat n’shegë” [Call both Gegs and Tosks / Unite together as the fruits of a pomegranate]. Quoted from T. Zavlanë, *Histori e Shqipnis* (1996), 188.


10. S. Frashëri, *Shqiptëria ç’ka genë, ç’estë e ç’d ë tê jetë* [What Albania was, is and will be], (Tiranë: Shtëpia botuese e librit shkollor, 1990), 69. This essay was firstly published in Bucarest, in 1899. All translations from Albanian into English are mine, with a few exceptions mentioned.


13. S. Frashëri, *Shqiptëria ç’ka genë, ç’estë e ç’d ë tê jetë* (1899), 70.


16. S. Frashëri, *Shqiptëria ç’ka genë, ç’estë e ç’d ë tê jetë* (1899), 70.


East European Politics and Societies 679
Another coherent exposition of similar proposals is Naim Frashëri's *Qerbelaja*, where the Shi-ite’s theme of suffering and redemption was directed to both Muslim and Christian Albanians and proposed rather as an epical model of resistance to inspire the Albanian nationalist campaign than for its religious standing. See Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the politics of Albanianism in Albanian Identities*, 60-69.

It is possible to find traces of this attitude in many poems, particularly in Zemëra [The heart] (1890), Perëndia [The divinity] (1890), Gjithësia [The universe] (1895) ecc. See N. Frashëri, *Vepër të zgjedhurë* [Selected works], (Tirana: Naim Frashëri, 1981).

One example among many is provided by a couple of verses from the poem *The Universe* (1859). The one who enquires himself / And understands the universe / Knows what divinity is / And has his own way on humanity […] Universe is one body / And has never an end / Divinity is everywhere / A sea to which you can not find the bottom. See N. Frashëri, *Selected works*.

See above p. 5.

The most relevant among these essays are certainly V. Pasha, *The truth on Albania and the Albanians*, first published in London in 1879 and S. Frashëri, Shqipëria, ç’ka qenë, ç’është e ç’do të jetë [What Albania was, is and will be], first published in Bucharest in 1899.

S. Frashëri, *Shqipëria, ç’ka qenë, ç’është e ç’do të jetë* (1899), 42.


S. Frashëri, *Shqipëria, ç’ka qenë, ç’është e ç’do të jetë*, 121.


A clear Romanticist poetics, perceivable in both the descriptions of nature and human characters, influences some of the most important works of De Rada such as Këngët e Milosaos [The songs of Milosao] published in Italy in 1836, Serafina Topia and Skandërbeu i pafan [The unfortunate Skanderbeg]. Another good example is Këndek e sprapsme e Balës [The last song of Balal] by Gavril Dara i Riu. See E. Cabej, *Romantizmi në Evropën lindore e juglindore dhe në literaturën shqipe*, 97-105.

Again, with a few individual exceptions coming from the Albanian immigrants in Italy, including the most romantic of all Albanian poets, Zef Serembë.

See. V. Pasha, *E vërteta për Shqipérinë dhe Shqiptarët*, 123.

See N. Frashëri, *Gjuba jonë* in *Vepër të zgjedhurë*, 148-150.