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The Position and the Status of Albanian in the Presheva Valley

The aim of this paper is to describe the position and the social status of the Albanian language in the two municipalities of south-western Serbia – Preshevo and Bujanovac, where the majority of the population is Albanian, and where the Albanian language, together with Serbian, is the official language on the territory of these two municipalities. This situation has also been documented in the Official Gazette of Pčinje District (*Službeni Glasnik Pčinjskog Okruga*, 2008) for the following towns: Vranje, Bujanovac, Surdulica, Vladićin Han, Bosilegrad, Trgovište and Preshevo.

The status of Albanian will be treated by giving evidence of legal sanctions and describing the practical situation, based on application of the laws in force. Therefore, the paper is based on the data extracted from the official documents of the Republic of Serbia (*The law on national minority rights and freedom protection*, 2012; *The Law on the official usage of languages at the republic level*, 2005), then on the official records of the census taken from the Republic Statistics

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Office from the year 2002 and related to the national and ethnic affiliation of the population of these two municipalities, as well as on other documents at municipal level, such as: *The Official Gazette of Pčinje District*, numerous municipal brochures that are compiled and funded by the Local Economic Development Office for Bujanovac and Preshevo, and it is also based on other official brochures that aim to attract economic investments in this region. In order to reflect the status of Albanian in this region more precisely, other data, mainly deriving from a survey conducted with Albanian citizens from the two municipalities. Essays and anonymous questionnaires with high school students from these two municipalities (random questionnaires) have also been used.

The paper does not include the Municipality of Medvedja because of the lack of facilities to visit mountainous Albanian-populated villages, and because of the generally small number of the population, as a result of their temporary displacement in the Republic of Kosovo.

The territory of the Preshevo Valley (name used by Albanians of this region for the three Albanian-populated municipalities) covers about 1,249 square kilometers, and according to the FRY census of 2002¹, more than 60,000 citizens of Albanian nationality were living in this territory, including Medvedja with its periphery which does not belong to the Pčinje District but to the Niš District. Without counting their outlying districts, in the towns of Bujanovac and Preševo alone, the proportion of Albanian vs. Serbian population was 23,681 to 14,782 inhabitants (Bujanovac) and 31,098 to 2,984 inhabitants (Preševo). In addition to the Albanian (54,795 inhabitants, or 24.7% in the Pčinje District) and the Serbian population (147,046 inhabitants or 64.58% in the Pčinje District), in these two municipalities (especially in Bujanovac), there is a considerable Roma minority (3867 inhabitants in Bujanovac and 322 inhabitants in Preševo), a small Macedonian minority (57 in both municipalities), a Bulgarian minority (only 33 inhabitants in Bujanovac), Montenegrins (9 inhabitants), Gorans (10 inhabitants), those that have declared themselves Yugoslavians (2 inhabitants), Muslims (21 inhabitants), Russians (6 inhabitants), Croats (7 inhabitants), Hungarians (7 inhabitants), Bosnians (26 inhabitants), and the others that did not make any declaration about their ethnicity, or declared themselves according to their regional affiliation (304 inhabitants).

¹ FYR census of 2002 stands for: Law on census of population, households and dwellings in the year 2002 (n.d.). Reference can be found on: http://gis.geox.hu/mtaki/informaciok/ksh_yu_docs/lawoncensus.pdf

Albanians that have temporarily emigrated abroad have not been included in these data and according to municipal officials their number is about 10,183 in Bujanovac Municipality and 12,757 inhabitants in Preševo.

As far as the religious background is concerned, the Albanian population of this region declared that they belong to the Muslim religion. In 1992 Albanians of the three municipalities held a referendum for territorial autonomy with a right to be annexed to Kosovo. After the end of war in Kosovo, there was, in 2000, an armed conflict between the former Yugoslavian Army and Albanians who were represented by the Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedja (Alb. UÇPMB). After the declaration of Kosovo's Independence in 2008, the idea of comparing the future of this region with the northern part of Kosovo, which is populated mostly by Serbians, comes up very frequently. According to a MA study conducted by the Czech researcher Martin Surovčák, which deals with the development of the so-called Preševo irredentism in this region, the Albanian population of these municipalities faces major problems in the education system, with record unemployment rates and a very complicated process of crossing the interstate Kosovo-Serbia border (Surovčák, 2012 : 88).

The use of Albanian in the local government institutions in the three municipalities is sanctioned by law (article 1, paragraph 2 of *the Law on the official usage of languages...*, 2005), which means that the official usage of Albanian is guaranteed by several articles. The situations where the usage of Albanian is guaranteed are as follows:

- 1) in an official written or oral communication at the institutional or organizational level as well as between the parties and citizens;
- 2) In procedures related to the implementation and protection of the rights, duties and responsibilities of citizens;
- 3) In the issuing of public documents and other relevant documentation for the realization of the rights of citizens;
- 4) And in the realization of the rights, duties and responsibilities of workers at their working places or as a support to their work.

The official usage of the Albanian language is mainly related to locality (residence) names, geographical names, names of streets and squares, institutional, company or official inscriptions and signs, as well as the announcement of official publications. However, our research proves that out of 30 small businesses in Bujanovac, 70% of them used their company inscriptions in Serbian and Albanian, 15% in Serbian and 10% in English only. According to

the Laws in force, each Albanian citizen from the mentioned municipalities, has the right to appeal in front of the court in the Albanian language, and has a right to get a certificate in Albanian (along with Serbian), but this does not always work out into practice.

According to *The law on national minority rights and freedom protection* (2012, article 11, paragraph 1), the language of the minorities that traditionally live in local government units or in a particular region can be used equally with the official language of the State. Under this law, Albanians are allowed to get educated in their mother tongue at the primary and secondary school, because over 15% of the territory is inhabited by this ethnic minority, while article 14 of the same law allows the preparation and qualification of teachers of Albanian as educators, classroom teachers and teachers of a minority language, thus the Albanian language. The use of national symbols is also allowed, but they should not be identical with those of neighbouring countries (*The law on national minority rights and freedom protection*, 2012, article 16, paragraph 1 and 2).

The minorities have the right to be informed in their own language, to establish media in their language (*The law on national minority rights and freedom protection*, 2012, article 17, paragraph 1 and 2), the *Official Gazette* of Pčinje District supports the use of Albanian as a second language, alongside with Serbian, in the inscriptions and public information. However, an Albanian version of the Municipality Statute could not be found regardless of the fact that it has been foreseen that both languages are to be used equally (Article 2).

The municipal stamp must be in two languages and in two scripts, in Serbian Cyrillic and in the Albanian language.

An important demographic and geographical overview of this region has been presented in the book entitled *Lugina e Preshevës – studim kompleks gjeohapësinor* (Preshevo Valley – a complex geospatial study), written by Arsim Ejupi and published by KASA in 2013.

Another important contribution to the dialects and phonetic features of this region has been made in the dialect studies of the idioms of this region by the academicians Idriz Ajeti (*About some idioms of Albanians in Bujanovac and Preshevo*, Philosophical Studies 1971/3) and Rexhep Ismajli in the magazine *The Knowledge*. Ajeti points out that some Serbian academicians conducted anthropogeographical research of this region, which in his opinion could be very interesting for Albanian toponymy, but he also expressed grave doubt about the authenticity of the linguistic research by these scholars.

The answers relating to official recognition of Albanian and the acquisition of standard Albanian in the Preševa Valley have been extracted from a broader survey, conducted for the needs of a more comprehensive study on Albanian standard language reception in this region. The present extracted survey included 250 Albanian respondents from the Preshevo Valley, of which 125 were from Preševo and its suburbs and 125 from Bujanovac and its suburbs. The survey was conducted from November 4 to 9, 2012 with the help of MA students of the Albanian Language at the Faculty of Philology in Prishtina. The research was designed on the basis of random sampling selection in multi-stages. Sampling included 250 respondents, 60% from rural areas versus 40% from urban ones. The sample was stratified based on geographical scope. Also, the sample was divided into other layers such as: gender, where 52.8% (132 respondents) were male and 47.2% (118 respondents) female, and age, which is classified into three groups, one of which is under age 21. The selection of households was done randomly. Each research unit was given a starting point (a landmark or location) selected at random, too. In urban areas, the selected household was every third house on the left side of the road. In buildings up to four floors, every fifth apartment was selected, counting from the first door on the left of the entrance. Similarly, in buildings with more than five floors, every tenth apartment was selected. In rural areas, every third house on either side of the interviewer was selected, counted by hand-marking. In the densely populated rural areas, the selection method was identical to those in urban areas. The selection of the respondent per household was made through the method “the closest birthday”. Replacement of the respondents was done after three attempts (the visit and two calls), if contact was not available or participation was refused.

The research was conducted by four interviewers, who are students at the Department of Albanian Language and English Language and Literature at the University of Prishtina. The survey included only respondents who declared the Albanian language to be their mother tongue.

In the survey conducted in Preševo and its suburbs, 145 respondents were 21 to 65 years old, and 36 were over 65 years old – the oldest was 80 years old at the time of the survey (born in 1932) and 44 were under the age of 21. The average age of respondents was 38. With respect to other languages than Albanian, 12.8% of the respondents (16 of them) said that they do not speak any foreign language, while 33.6 % (42 respondents) said they do not speak Serbian, of which 25 respondents (59.5 %) were under the age of 21!

Concerning some lexical borrowings in this multinational environment, the words “opština and pečat” (municipality and stem) are the best example of the existing diverse language contacts: they were identified as Albanian words, whereas the word “volan” (steering wheel) was identified as an Albanian word by 6 respondents (4,8 % of respondents), whereas 22 respondents (17,6 %) answered: I don’t know. Forty-one respondents (32.8 %) mentioned linguistic features that are characteristic for their region: *shti po vi; shti po shifmi; thashë të shkojna kah Bujanovca; shti shkova te autobuska* etc.

In the survey conducted in Bujanovac, 58 respondents were from 21 to 65 years old, 37 were over the age of 65 and 30 respondents were under the age of 21.

As for other languages, 18 respondents (14.4 %) declared they do not know foreign languages at all, while 33 of them (26.4%) stated they do not speak Serbian. Among them, 16 respondents (48.5 %) were young people under the age of 21.

One more stratum of usage has been conducted: that of the reception of Serbian language among Albanians and its different social functions: 9 respondents (10, 23%) said they use Serbian in the market, 27 respondents (30.68%) – at work, 18 respondents (20.45%) – at the doctor’s, 8 respondents (9.09%) – in state institutions, 4 respondents (4.55%) – while communicating with Serbs, 2 respondents (2.27%) – in Vranje, 4 respondents (4.55%) – in the town and 16 respondents (18.18%) gave no answer at all.

Regarding the Serbian words “opština and pečat” (municipality and stem), none of the respondents identified them as Albanian words, the word *vollan*, was identified as an Albanian word by 9 respondents (7.2%) whereas 11 respondents (8.8%) answered: I don’t know.

Forty respondents (32%) cited following linguistic features as characteristic for their region: *shti, shka po bon; turkuzë; di (for dy); përnime*, etc.

In general, the research results indicate a high degree of bilingualism, especially in the municipality of Bujanovac, where the Albanian population is smaller in number than in Preševo, with one specific exception: the decrease of bilingualism among young people aged under 21 and with a poor command of Serbian.

The results show a low mastery of standard Albanian, too, but also a high degree of usage of administrative discourse Serbian words, and a low degree of language identification of ordinary discourse words. In both municipalities, about 32% of respondents identified linguistic features typical of their region, which they identified as deviating from norms.

In a paragraph translation test, from Serbian into Albanian, high school students in Bujanovac could translate relatively well from Serbian into Albanian, but not vice versa. The non-standard Albanian plural forms typical of this region *pleqët, pulët, delët, miqët* etc. which dominate in those translations, the overuse of the letter *ë* at the end of the word (not typically used in the Gheg dialect) and many other non-typical structures for the Albanian language could be seen as indications of the influence of Serbian during the translation. In some cases these are deviations which students are not aware of at all. Very frequently problems of lexico-semantic and syntactic expression in the written standard language have been noticed (in the students' paragraph-long discussion on the topic: Experimentation on animals – for or against!). Compared to previous generations, who were educated in the Albanian schools in this municipality (in the academic years preceding 2000), the number of Albanian students is decreasing. From 4 classes composed of 40 eighth-graders that attended the former elementary school *25 May* (present name of the school is Naim Frashëri) in Bujanovac, there is only one class with 20 students in the Albanian language.

“Smaller in number and weaker in quality” – are the words of a teacher who has been working in this school for 35 years.

To sum up, the Albanian language in Preshevo Valley is sanctioned as an official language at the local level, with equal use, especially in the formal domains of life, but the practical need for using Serbian as a first language is obvious and becomes discriminatory in relation to Albanian. Other communities are not encouraged to learn Albanian at all. Consequently, such a legal structure creates the necessity for bilingualism in social life and therefore makes the status of Albanian a poor second in a region where the majority of population have declared themselves to be Albanians.

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Sytuacja i status języka albańskiego w Dolinie Preszewa

Tematem artykułu są sytuacja i status społeczny języka albańskiego w dwóch powiatach południowo-zachodniej Serbii – Preszewo i Bujanovac, w których Albańczycy stanowią większość. W obu powiatach język albański jest obok języka serbskiego jednym z dwóch oficjalnych języków. Sytuację języka albańskiego pokazano na przykładzie konkretnych prawnych sytuacji i tych faktycznych, skonfrontowanych z obowiązującymi ustawami. Przytoczono także dane z badań innych autorów, dotyczące głównie społeczności albańskiej, jak również rezultaty anonimowych ankiet przeprowadzonych wśród uczniów szkół ponadpodstawowych w obu powiatach. Język albański w Dolinie Preszewa jest formalnie drugim oficjalnym językiem o zasięgu lokalnym. Ma status języka równoprawnego, zwłaszcza w oficjalnej sferze życia, jednak oczywiste względy praktyczne sprawiają, że to język serbski

znajduje się na pierwszym miejscu, spychając albański na plan drugi, mimo zagwarantowanej ustawowej równoprawności.

Słowa kluczowe: Dolina Preszewa; regulacje; dwujęzyczność; języki mniejszościowe; miejscowe dialekty

The Position and the Status of Albanian in the Presheva Valley

The present paper aims at describing the position and the social status of the Albanian language in the two municipalities of south-western Serbia – Preshevo and Bujanovac, where the majority of the population is Albanian, and where the Albanian language, together with Serbian is the official language on the territory of these two municipalities. The status of Albanian is dealt with by giving evidence of legal sanctions and describing the practical situation, based on application of the laws in force.

In order to reflect the status of Albanian in this region more precisely, other data, mainly deriving from a survey conducted with Albanian citizens from the two municipalities was given. In addition essays and anonymous questionnaires with high school students from these two municipalities have been used. The Albanian language in Preshevo Valley is sanctioned as an official language at the local level, with equal use, especially in the formal domains of life, but the practical need for using Serbian as a first language is obvious and results in intolerance towards Albanian. Regardless of the fact that it is sanctioned as an equal language to Serbian, in practice Albanian is a language of second rank.

Keywords: Preshevo Valley; municipality; bilingualism; minority languages; local dialect

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