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REFLECTION ON THE EVENTS OF 1981 AMONG ALBANIANS IN MACEDONIA

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Abstract

The 1981 protests marked a pivotal moment in the dramatic events of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), occurring a year after the death of President Tito. These protests represented the initial step toward dismantling the foundations of the Avnoist federation, a process that ultimately culminated in the complete collapse of the Zhablak creation, led by the KLA. These events reverberated globally, generating significant media, political, diplomatic, and multilateral attention. Their impact extended not only within Kosovo but also across Albanian communities worldwide. In Albania, the dictatorial Enverian regime responded forcefully, issuing public denunciations of the Yugoslav Titoists.

Meanwhile, Albanians in the diaspora organized protests in front of embassies in powerful nations, raising awareness and drawing international attention to the Yugoslav reprisals against Albanians.In Kosovo, the federal government unleashed its full force, terrorizing the civilian population through violent measures such as mass arrests, deportations, political purges, job dismissals, and other harsh crackdowns. The Yugoslav regime dealt ruthlessly with dissent, targeting individuals during protests, tear gas escapes, and even military service. Anti-Albanian repression extended beyond Kosovo to other Albanian-populated regions, particularly Macedonia.

Key figures behind these actions included the two Lazars (Mojsov and Kolishevski), Krste Crvenkovski—a close ally of Ranković—and other Macedonian officials within the Yugoslav federation. Their main objective was to displace the Albanian population, initiating provocations such as closing Albanian high schools, demolishing homes, altering place names, and stripping Albanians of their right to use their national flag. In response, Albanians organized a series of protests, which were met with further arrests, injuries, and even fatalities.

Key words: The 1981 protests, Kosovo, SFRY, Macedonia, Albanians.

Introduction

The 1981 student protests in Kosovo marked a pivotal moment in the history of Albanian resistance within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). These protests not only exposed the deep-seated grievances of Albanians but also underscored the complex geopolitical, social, and cultural dynamics of the time. Rooted in the Albanian National Movement's enduring struggle for freedom, these protests highlighted the dichotomy between the visible, controlled public life of Albanians and the hidden, underground reality of their persistent resistance. The protests emerged as a significant response to the systemic repression, inequality, and denial of rights that Albanians faced, not only in Kosovo but also in Macedonia and other regions of Yugoslavia.

This paper delves into the geopolitical and historical context that shaped the 1981 protests, examining the Albanian resistance movement's continuity and the dual socio-political realities

experienced by Albanians in Yugoslavia. It also explores the influence of global Cold War dynamics, the role of Macedonian communist leaders in implementing anti-Albanian policies, and the orchestrated violence targeting Albanians in Macedonia. Furthermore, the paper highlights the active participation of Macedonian Albanians in the protests and their shared aspirations with Kosovo Albanians for greater autonomy and recognition.

By tracing the events surrounding the protests and their far-reaching impact, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the systemic challenges faced by Albanians under Yugoslav rule, the enduring legacy of their struggle for equality, and the broader geopolitical forces that shaped their experiences. Ultimately, this examination aims to shed light on the historical significance of the 1981 protests as a watershed moment in the Albanian pursuit of freedom and self-determination.

The geopolitical context of the 1981 protests

The Albanian National Movement has maintained an unbroken continuity throughout every historical period. Regardless of the political and administrative circumstances faced by Albanians in the Balkans, their unwavering patriotic efforts for national freedom persisted. Albanians in the former Yugoslavia experienced two distinct socio-political realities. In one reality, everything appeared to function smoothly on the surface, but genuine freedom and the dignity of equal citizenship were absent. In the other, a hidden reality was emerging, preparing the ground to challenge the facade of the first. This second reality was not immediately visible but palpable, like the growing roar of a stream destined to merge into a larger river.

The year 1981 marked the dividing line between these two realities. On one side was public, institutional, and legal life; on the other, underground patriotic activities that, over time, shaped significant changes within Albanian society. The student demonstrations of 1981 carried the mark of this hidden reality, as did the events that followed, culminating in the Kosovo Liberation Army, which embodied the centuries-old ideals of freedom and self-determination through armed resistance. These events also deeply resonated with the Albanians of Macedonia, who have historically identified themselves as inseparably tied to Kosovo.⁶²

All constitutional rights granted to Albanians—whether fully, partially, or not at all—were imposed by those in power, not secured by the Albanians themselves. Albanians aspired not only to enjoy these rights but also those promised to them during the struggle for the creation of Macedonia as a state, both before 1972 and after 1988. Despite this, they were subjected to continuous repression, highlighting their persistent but futile demands for their rights. Their fate always depended on the will and needs of the ruling party, as well as the government's strategic interest in Albanians, which was influenced by the broader military-political context in the Balkans. This led to a brief period of relative tolerance for Albanians in Yugoslavia, particularly in Macedonia, lasting roughly a decade.

By 1988, however, as the Macedonian communist government began signaling intentions to curtail and eliminate Albanian rights, Albanians in Macedonia turned their attention to Kosovo. There, preparations were already underway for large-scale pan-Albanian protests aimed at raising awareness—both nationally and internationally—about the dire situation of Albanians across Yugoslavia.⁶³

The student protests of 1981 are widely recognized as a continuation of the Albanian people's expression of dissatisfaction—not only with their treatment under the Yugoslav Titoist regime but also with the ongoing historical injustices that deepened after World War II. These

Botërore, Prishtina, 2000, p.221.

 ⁶²⁶²Skender Asani,Sevdail Demiri,Besnik Rameti, Emin Azemi, Sali Islami, Zhvillimet Kulturore-Historike te
Shqiptarët në M aqedoni gjatë shekujve XIX-XX,Skopje 2023, p.261.
⁶³Gëzim Ostreni, Shpresa dhe Zhgënjimi i Shqiptarëve në Maqedoni gjatë dhe pas Luftës së Dytë

included the fragmentation of Albanian territories and the exclusion of large portions of Albanian lands from the core of their mother state, leaving them divided among neighboring countries. The repercussions of the reprisals following these events impacted every aspect of life—political, economic, social, cultural, and even sports.

What is less discussed, however, is the fact that these events unfolded within the highly complex global context of the Cold War. The bipolar tension between the superpowers, the USA and the USSR, undeniably influenced the significance and complexity of addressing the Albanian issue, adding another layer of geopolitical weight to the struggle for a resolution. The events occurred a year after Tito's death, leaving the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) without the authoritarian figure who had maintained control and was perceived, to some extent, as a neutral arbiter.

This power vacuum allowed Serbian political hegemony to assert greater dominance in decision-making. The situation was further complicated by the oppressive Enverian regime in Albania. The paradoxical and often absurd nature of power in Tirana left the Albanian majority abroad clinging to misplaced hopes in a dictator—a so-called "superman"—who bore the immense burden of implementing a communist utopia. This dictator had declared war on the imperialist and "so-imperialist" world but wielded zero influence on Kosovo's international standing.

Ironically, many Albanian activists in exile remained ideologically loyal to the dictator and his regime. Despite living in Western countries, they opposed Western ideals, going so far as to organize protests against the fall of the Berlin Wall. These dynamics provided Belgrade's regime with ample material for anti-Albanian propaganda, which it disseminated globally. Meanwhile, Albanian diplomacy, stifled by internal isolation, limited itself to one-sided political monologues broadcast through Radio Tirana. Taking advantage of this disarray, the Yugoslav regime launched an aggressive anti-Albanian campaign, targeting not only Kosovo but also all Albanian-populated regions. The student protests of 1981 in Kosovo had a ripple effect among Albanians in Macedonia, where many students from Macedonia were actively involved in the protests and organizational efforts.

Possible Macedonian 'influence' from Moscow

Little is known about the fact that a Macedonian, Georgy Malenkov, briefly served as the leader of the USSR for two years. After the death of Joseph Stalin on March 5, 1953, Malenkov, one of Stalin's closest associates, assumed the role of head of state. On the same day, he was appointed chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, taking over the responsibilities of the "father of nations." However, Malenkov's authority was neither as absolute nor as unrestricted as Stalin's had been. Malenkov continued to oversee the Soviet energy sector for some time, but his political career came to an abrupt end after his failed attempt to oust Khrushchev from power in 1957.

Following this, he withdrew from politics entirely. ⁶⁴While there is limited information about Malenkov's direct influence on Yugoslav or Macedonian politics, his rise to power after Stalin's death and his role in normalizing relations between the USSR and the SFRY remain significant. These aspects provide important context for understanding the presence of this Macedonian figure at the helm of one of the world's superpowers at the time.

Macedonian communist leaders in Belgrade

According to academic Vlado Popovski, the anti-Albanian policies in Yugoslavia began as early as 1979. At that time, Tito received intelligence suggesting that Western powers,

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⁶⁴Милошевски, Милош, august 9, 2021:https://infomax.mk , 'Pak dihetpëropinionin se 'maqedonasi' icilidyvjetishtenëkryenë BRSS'

anticipating his death, were planning to dissolve the federation. The concern was that if Yugoslavia remained intact after Tito's passing, it would likely forge even closer ties with the USSR. Viewing Albanians in the SFRY as a potential security threat, Tito decided to impose military administration in Kosovo. This led to the deployment of military and police forces from all the federal republics into the region.

The military administration triggered a wave of arrests across Kosovo, targeting anyone who attempted to demand their rights or oppose the new measures. These actions later escalated further, as widely documented. Recently declassified stenograms released last year shed light on Tito's decision-making process, revealing when and how this anti-Albanian course was initiated. Over time, particularly under the influence of Serbian political interests, this policy intensified and gained significant traction in Macedonia as well.⁶⁵

The anti-Albanian policies and the alignment of Macedonian politics with Serbian political agendas were significantly influenced by prominent Macedonian figures holding high-ranking positions within the leadership structures of the SFRY. Key individuals such as Lazar Kolishevski, Lazar Mojsov, Krste Crvenkovski, KiroGligorov, and Vasil Tupurkovski played notable roles in this regard. A brief review of the positions held by these Macedonian leaders is enough to reveal the extent of their influence. Lazar Kolishevski held numerous influential positions throughout his political career.

He was a delegate to the Second Meeting of AVNOJ and served as a member of AVNOJ, as well as a delegate and member of the first meeting of ASNOM, where he was later elected chairman. In 1944, he became an MP in the People's Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia. By March 1945, he was unanimously elected as the first chairman of the People's Government of the Republic of Macedonia. On December 19, 1953, he assumed the role of chairman of the People's Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia.

Kolishevski also served as secretary of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia for Macedonia. After the formation of the Communist Party of Macedonia in March 1943, he became its secretary, a position he held until 1963. From 1963 to 1967, he served as chairman of the Federal Council, and from 1967 to 1972, he continued as a member of the Federal Council. Between 1972 and 1984, he was a member of the Presidency of the SFRY, briefly serving as Chairman of the Presidency after Tito's death. 66

Lazar Mojsov, the former chairman of the Presidency of the SFRY, was a central figure in the federation. He began his career in journalism, serving as the editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Nova Makedonija" in 1953 and later as the editor-in-chief of the Belgrade newspaper "Borba" in 1962. Mojsov's diplomatic career began in 1958 when he was appointed ambassador to the USSR and Mongolia. He went on to serve as ambassador to Austria in 1967 and as the permanent representative of the federation to the UN in 1969.

In 1974, he was elected chairman of the 32nd session of the UN. From 1982 to 1984, he was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the SFRY, and in 1988, he became chairman of the

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⁶⁵Bojan Jovanovski, August 22, 2021, TV Nova, https://novatv.mk/gligorov-beshe-pod-vlijanie-i-somentalitet-na-belgrad

[[]It is also important to note that "since the end of World War II, the repression, terror, and genocide imposed on the Albanian population by the UNČJ and OZN units began" (Shatri, Muhamet, Kosovo in the Second World War 1941–1945, Tirana, 1997, p. 164). To further subjugate Kosovo, on February 8, 1945, Josip Broz Tito, under the pretext of combating a 'counter-revolution,' established a military administration in Kosovo led by Sava Derlević. Following this, terror and genocide against Albanians escalated in many Albanian regions. With the new 1963 Yugoslav Constitution, Kosovo's status was significantly downgraded, reaching its lowest point. During this time, many Albanians were forced to leave their lands due to the oppressive policies enacted by the government. 65 (Institute of Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of Albanians-Skopje, 1968 Popular Protests in Tetovo, Skopje, 2018, p.20).]

⁶⁶https://sobranie.mk/prethodni-pretsedateli-ns_article-lazar-kolishevski.nspx

Presidency of the SFRY.⁶⁷ In an interview with Nova TV, academic Vlado Popovski openly stated, "The Macedonian leadership at the time abolished the use of the Albanian language in schools and special classes for Albanians. The Minister of Education, Slavo Klimovski, my colleague, referred to Albanians using the Belgrade model, calling them 'shiptari.' The removal of these classes and the rights Albanians previously had led to a revolt among Albanian professors, marking the beginning of the imprisonment of Albanians in Macedonia.

Only 6% of Albanian children were able to continue their secondary education. By the age of eight, it was clear how difficult it would be for them to integrate into society, prompting many Albanians to emigrate in large numbers. President KiroGligorov was the one who maintained some connections with Belgrade. This connection had been speculated for a long time and is now mentioned in the memoirs of Stojan Andov, the former speaker of the first independent Macedonian parliament. Andov recalls a conversation where Milosevic told him, 'Look over there in Macedonia; Gligorov already knows what you need to do, so head in that direction.' Unfortunately, Gligorov carried with him the mindset of the Yugoslav leadership, which ultimately contributed to the spread of war in Macedonia after the end of the conflict in Kosovo in 2001."

Orchestrated Serb-Macedonian violence against Albanians

Following the events of 1981, reprisals against Albanians outside of Kosovo were, in some respects, even more brutal and largely unreported by the media. The enemy had been clearly identified, targeted, and declared legitimate for confrontation. The Yugoslav public was convinced that any action taken against Albanians was justified, as it was portrayed as part of the fight against the so-called "irredentism and separatism of Albanian nationalism." Within this context, the actions of Macedonia's political elite, whose key figures had significant influence in Belgrade—such as Lazar Mojsov, Lazar Kolishevski, Krste Crvenkovski, Kiro Gligorov, and Vasil Tupurkovski—can be understood as part of this orchestrated campaign.

All anti-Albanian policies in Yugoslavia, particularly in Macedonia, clearly bear the imprint and influence of their architects. The directives, crafted in the intertwined Serbian-Macedonian political strategies, were both calculated and insidious, aiming to subtly yet effectively force Albanians from their homes. Systematic violence and relentless pressure were applied to make life for Albanians unbearable, driving them to gradually abandon their lands. Chronologically, it is evident—and supported by the sequence of events—that Macedonia served as the testing ground for Serbian experiments against Albanians, later implemented in Kosovo.

For instance, the closure of Albanian schools began in Macedonia immediately after the 1981 demonstrations, whereas similar measures were implemented in Kosovo nine years later. The suppression of flag usage followed a similar pattern: first in Macedonia, then in Kosovo. The pro-Serbian Macedonian authorities even demolished homes and yards with bulldozers, leaving casualties buried in the rubble and bloodshed marking the foundations. The Macedonian regime justified this brutal violence by citing Albanian participation in the 1981 demonstrations, though Albanians in Macedonia had also been actively involved in earlier movements, such as the protests of 1968.

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⁶⁷https://makfax.com.mk/makedonija/266564/

⁶⁸ Bojan Jovanovski, 22 gusht 2021, tv Nova, https://novatv.mk/gligorov-beshe-pod-vlijanie-i-so-mentalitet-na-belgrad

Participation of Macedonian Albanians in the 1981 protests

The Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia have always shared a deep bond of blood, kinship, and friendship that naturally connects them. As a result, events in Kosovo have consistently stirred strong emotions among Albanians in Macedonia, compelling them to take action. This was evident during the 1981 demonstrations, where, without hesitation and viewing Kosovo as their own homeland, students from Macedonia studying at the University of Pristina joined the student movement. From the large number of Macedonian students, we will highlight a few whom we interviewed: Teuta Bekteshi Ajeti, Fatmir Bekteshi, and Shenur Osmani. Dr. Teuta Bekteshi Ajeti (born in 1957) shared her experience of first encountering members of the movement through the Malaj family.

As a medical student at the University of Prishtina, she became actively involved and took an oath before the flag in 1978, officially joining the underground organization. She played a significant role in organizing the 1981 student protests in Prishtina. Dr. Ajeti recounted a pivotal moment: "On October 26, 1982, at noon on market day, we covered the only five-story building in the center of Suhareka with an eight-meter red banner bearing the slogan: 'Kosovo Republic—Here is death, here is freedom.' This action was carried out alongside my close friend, Shemsije Elshanin.

That same day, we were arrested and sentenced to two years in prison. After my release, I was free for only two weeks before being arrested again in Kumanovo. This led to a third sentence—one year in prison in Pristina, where I was detained along with Teuta Hadri, Naimie Maçestena, and Bujar Zeneli." In the courtroom's black benches, Albanian women stood with dignity, defending the people's right to freedom and equality. For them, the only court that truly mattered was the court of conscience. Among the activists was her brother, Fatmir Bekteshi (born in 1960), a student at the Faculty of Economics in Prishtina, who also took part in the 1981 student protests in Prishtina. Shenur Osmani, another student from Kumanovo at the Faculty of Economics in Prishtina, joined Fatmir in these protests.

Many other students from across Macedonia participated alongside their peers from all Albanian regions, with numerous participants facing imprisonment. The demonstrators rallied to demand that the Autonomous Province of Kosovo be recognized as a republic—a status reflecting the political aspirations of Albanians and granting them equality with other nations within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.⁷⁰

Reflection on the 1981 protests in Macedonia

The political repercussions of the student protests in Kosovo were quickly felt in Macedonia. In Kumanovo, on the evening of October 26 during the 1981/82 school year, a controversial announcement was posted on the building of the "Goce Delchev" high school. The notice declared the start of "ideological and political differentiation within the Albanian Communist Party." Subsequently, the Central Committee of the Albanian Communist Party decided to implement bilingualism in primary and secondary schools. This marked the beginning of a systematic targeting of Albanian educational staff, with the "Goce Delchev" high school in Kumanovo being the first to experience this discriminatory policy.

The impact dealt a severe blow to Albanian education.⁷¹. State authorities in Macedonia decided to ban education in the Albanian language, viewing it as a breeding ground for Albanian nationalism and irredentism and believing that such measures would strike at the heart of their perceived adversaries.

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⁶⁹Teuta Bekteshi Ajeti, interviewed in Kumanovoin March 20, 2021.

⁷⁰Dehari, Esat, Tërmete Politike 1981-2001, Prishtina 2021, p.13.

⁷¹Ademi, Minir, Arsimi shqip në Kumanovë e rrethinë (1945-1995), Kumanovo, 2012, p.169.

Professors who vocally opposed the injustices faced by the Albanian community were targeted with severe punishments, including job dismissals. Among the first to face these repercussions were Naim Ibrahimi, Avni Dehari (now a Kosovo MP), Esat Dehari, Feim Ramadani, and Hysni Shaqiri. These professors were not only removed from their teaching roles but were also sentenced to prison. The authorities used Albanian dissent as justification for ideological purges, which included the imprisonment of many young people. Following the dismissal of several professors in November 1981, some students were expelled under accusations of collaborating with their teachers to incite interethnic hatred.

Beyond educational institutions, many Albanians in Kumanovo and nearby areas lost their jobs and were imprisoned. This led to widespread protests, with students boycotting classes to demand the reinstatement of their professors, who had been unfairly dismissed and imprisoned. The situation was particularly troubling for fourth-year students at the "Goce Delchev" high school in Kumanovo, who frequently missed lessons and often spent entire days boycotting classes as part of their efforts to have their professors reinstated. These protests reflected the students' rightful frustration with the government's unjust actions.⁷²

The situation worsened significantly with the rise of Slobodan Milošević to power in Serbia in 1986, which had a direct impact on Macedonia. This oppressive policy culminated during the 1987/88 school year with the closure of all Albanian high schools. From that point on, Albanian high school students were compelled to attend classes in Macedonian, and Albanian teachers and professors were forced to use Macedonian when addressing their students. Those who resisted faced severe consequences, including dismissal from their jobs and imprisonment.

This was evident in the case of professors, students, and parents from Kumanovo and Gostivar, who were targeted after participating in peaceful demonstrations in August 1988. These protests, labeled as counter-revolutionary by the Macedonian authorities, led to the imprisonment of many Albanians involved. In addition to these measures, Macedonian Albanians were stripped of their right to use the Albanian language in public and state administration, as well as in primary and secondary schools. This further deepened the marginalization and repression of the Albanian community.

Under the leadership of the Communist League of Macedonia, the Albanian language was deemed undesirable for communication. A notable contradiction was the enforced change of toponyms, which had to be spoken in Macedonian in various contexts such as schools, administration, literature, and the media. For instance, a sentence in Albanian would require the toponym to be pronounced in Macedonian: instead of saying "He was born in the Çerkez village," it had to be phrased as "He was born in the çerkesko village," and similarly for other examples like "He works in Shkup" being changed to "He works in Skopje."

Additionally, Albanian songs were banned from the media, with the exception of traditional wedding songs. The use of books from Kosovo in schools was prohibited, and readings and works by Albanian authors, particularly those published in Kosovo, were removed from public libraries as well as school collections. This action was part of a broader effort, with special committees in education and culture directorates across municipalities, including Debar and others, tasked with implementing these restrictions.

Additionally, all educational materials, including photographs and graphic maps, were removed from schools if they originated from Kosovo or Albania. The content of Albanian language textbooks in subjects like history and geography was altered under the justification that they celebrated events and figures from Albanian history and culture in a way that fostered national "euphoria" with nationalist undertones. As a result, all such materials were removed from circulation.

⁷²Newspaper 'Rilindja', In Kumanovo, four Albanian professors are dismissed from their jobs, September 30, 1981, Pristina.

An organized campaign of revision, banning, and complete censorship of historical works was carried out. This effort included various measures such as:

- The prohibition of the Albanian national flag;
- Scrutiny of cultural, artistic, and educational associations, with reviews of their programs and names;
 - The downplaying of Albanian contributions to the fight against fascism and Nazism;
- A ban on using certain historical and symbolically significant names for children, with a list of prohibited names prepared by the authorities. A commission was formed to review proposed names, and notaries had the authority to reject those they deemed inappropriate;
 - The demolition of walls surrounding the courtyards of Albanian homes;
- Religious practices were also targeted in the anti-Albanian campaign, with Islam being labeled "fanatic Muslim fundamentalism" and compared to "Khomeini." The aim was to claim that "Allah had been used to serve Albanian nationalism and the concerns of the wider population."

Conclusion

Among Albanian intellectuals, there are two prevailing perspectives regarding the 1981 protests. The first is held by individuals who largely benefited from certain positions and privileges prior to the protests, such as Azem Vllasi and Kaqusha Jashari. They view the protests as unnecessary, arguing that they worsened the overall situation of Albanians and, even more troubling, may have been deliberately provoked by factions opposed to Kosovo's progress. According to this view, Kosovo was already at the height of implementing the rights guaranteed by the 1974 constitution in all areas.

The second perspective comes from the organizers, students, and the majority of Albanian intellectuals, who believe the protests were a timely and justified response to Kosovo's continued political and economic marginalization within the Yugoslav federation. For them, these protests represented a pivotal historical moment in raising awareness about Kosovo's struggle for independence. Additionally, these events had a significant impact on Albanians in Macedonia, who often served as a testing ground for policies implemented by the former SFRY leadership, particularly its Macedonian representatives, in preparation for broader actions in Kosovo.

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⁷³ Ostreni, Gëzim, Libri i Bardhë, Skopje,2018,p.227.