

UDC: 327.8(436:496.5)"18/19"

THE UNIFICATION OF THE ALBANIAN ALPHABET AND THE ROLE OF AUSTRIA

Kozeta Sala, PhD

Elvira Shaplo, PhD

Faculty of Education and Social Sciences, "Eqrem Cabej" University, Gjirokastra, Albania

Abstract:

In the second half of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century, Austria, known as Austro-Hungary since 1867, became Albania's most powerful and supportive ally in the in the demanding process of establishing the Albanian state, the efforts to achieve its independence as well as to protect its territorial integrity within the boundaries settled by the London Conference of Ambassadors in 1913.

The attitude of Austro- Hungary towards the Albanian national issue was a logical result as well as an integral part of a consequential policy adopted by them since centuries ago. Ultimately, this attitude would help Austro-Hungary to achieve one of its objectives as a political power with definite interests in the Balkans.

The Albanian policy of Austro-Hungary in the second half of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century was a major factor, which positively influenced the developments of the time at the most significant moments for Albania and the Albanians.

One of those noteworthy moments was the Austro-Hungarian support and the exceptionally positive approach to the issue of the Unification of the Albanian Alphabet.

Concerning the issue of the Unification of the Albanian Alphabet, Russia together with other chauvinistic Balkan countries on one side and Austro-Hungary on the other side had two diametrically opposed attitudes.

Introduction:

Austria, also known as Austro- Hungary since 1867, became the most powerful encouraging ally and at the same time the most decisive supporter of the Albanians in their state formation process, in the struggle for the Albanian independence as well as in their efforts to protect the territorial integrity of the country as acknowledged by the London Ambassadors' Conference in 1913.

The Austro-Hungarian policy concerning Albania was a very decisive factor which played a vital part in the most important events concerning the future of Albania and its people.

The approach to the Albanian issue adopted by the Austro-Hungarian policy aims at judging it from a new, fairer viewpoint, regarding its impact as a key factor, which continuously supported the successful and certain development of the Albanian National Movement.

Besides the above mentioned, the Austro-Hungarian policy played a crucial role in another significant historical moment for all the Albanians namely in their efforts for the unification of the alphabet of the Albanian language at the end of XIX century and the beginning of XX century.

The impact of external factors in the Albanian education

The issue of defining a unique alphabet for the Albanian language, which raised strongly especially in the last years of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century, was considered by our Renaissance men as a problem as linguistic and cultural as it was political, because by creating favourable conditions for the development of the Albanian language and the advance of culture, it also served directly for the strengthening of the national unity and for the political union of the Albanian people.

As it is known, Austria-Hungary was the most influential external factor, which positively contributed to the cultural development of the Albanians, which in turn was viewed as a means for strengthening and consolidating the national awareness. Particularly by the mid- nineteenth century, but beginning long ago, Austria-Hungary played a very important role in the recovery of the Catholic church and the school on a National basis not only in Northern region, but also in other areas of Albania by using the right of Cultural Protectorate. Vienna was also engaged, among other things, in the events related to the solution of the issue of the Albanian Alphabet.

It is a well known fact that the use of various alphabets for the writing of the Albanian language rather than using a unique ABC Book, was not only a result of numerous external obstacles but also due to the lack of understanding within the national

movement itself. This feeling was instigated by local interests of different Albanian cultural groups and associations fed on inherited regional divisions.¹¹⁵ The city of Shkodra was one of the places where such disagreements related to the issue of the alphabet surfaced. The city was at the same time a very important place where the Austro-Hungarians took an active interest in the local social and political life. The debates, which had started in Shkodra since 1899 and kept growing until 1908, over which alphabet should be used in schools to write the Albanian language, became the object of a special attention of the Austro- Hungarian authorities.

This entire issue is related to the fact that in 1899, under the initiative of the Bishop Preng Doçi, the Abbot of Mirdita, an organization named “The Organization for the Unification of the Albanian Language” also known by the name “The Union” was established in Shkoder. This organisation took it upon itself to create a single alphabet with Latin characters. Such an alphabet was approved by the organization. It constituted not only of the known Latin characters, but it was supplemented with some diagraphs to represent the special sounds of the Albanian language.

Once the general Austrian consul in Shkoder, T. Ipen learned about the establishment of this organization and of its goals to introduce a new alphabet for the writing of the Albanian language, he informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Vienna on the 20th of April, 1899.

In a note sent to his superiors, he expressed himself by saying that he supported the organization and the alphabet approved by it. Moreover, T. Ipen petitioned the Austrian government to subsidize the use of this alphabet to write the Albanian language in all the schools.

“We”, he expressed himself among other things in his note, “don’t have any reasons to oppose the supporters of this unifying book.” We must support the alphabet which is going to have more supporters and chances to become the most widely accepted alphabet¹¹⁶. He was himself convinced that the alphabet of “The Union” applied initially in Shkodra would be met with great approval and that was the reason why he unequivocally supported its use in the text books financed by Vienna. “If we don’t offer

¹¹⁵ Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, V. II, Tirane 2002, pahe. 391.

¹¹⁶ Werniche, A., Theodor Anton Ippen-Tin Osterreichischen diplomat und Albanienfarscher, Wiesbaden, 1967, cituar sipas perkthimit nga gjermanishtja, page. 44 - 45.

our support,” he wrote in a note on the 27th of April, 1899, “than we will regret it later, when they will blame us for the failure of an enterprise which would pave the way to national unity¹¹⁷. However, according to a later report of Ipen, dated 15th of July, 1899, we notice that within “The Union” organization there were also people who opposed the use of the new alphabet in the new textbooks, while all the people were of the opinion that the alphabet of the old writers of the North should not be used anymore. Regarding this issue T.Ipen, explained that bishop Doçi, thanks to his influence was able to counter the arguments of the other side, thus creating the impression that the new alphabet was supported unanimously by all the members. This can be clearly seen in one of the affirmations Doçi issued to Ipen, saying that the unity needed couldn’t be achieved due to the opposing spirit of the Albanian people, although he was sure that the union of the Albanians would naturally be achieved in the course of time.¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, Ipen proposed arranging another meeting of the organization to Doçi so as to reach a final decision, which he approved of, promising that he would try to get the approval not only of the members of “The Union”, but also that of the secular school Directors, who according to Doçi, had their reservations as to the use of the new alphabet in schools.¹¹⁹

The next meeting of the organization didn’t bring any new changes. However, the decision that the new alphabet would be used in all of the publications and schools was made. He got the approval of all the secular school teachers to use the new alphabet. Those teachers, as it became clear later, had their reservations not so much due to objective reasons as to the fact that their professional egos were hurt, because they were not asked. The readiness to use the new alphabet in their schools was expressed by the Franciscans and the Jesuits. But the rules regarding the new orthography which were implemented in this case created difficulties in the writing of many Albanian words.¹²⁰

In 1902 a new alphabet was published in Shkodra. Its author was Ndre Mjeda, a member of the literary organization “the Dawn” at the time.

This alphabet also was composed of Latin characters, but contrary to Doçi’s alphabet, it used the principle: a single letter for each sound. This alphabet was approved

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, page. 45.

¹¹⁸ Ibidem, page. 46.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Ibidem, page. 46-47.

by the International Congress of the Orientalists held in Hamburg, (Germany), 1902, and was supported by the Catholic Bishopric of Shkoder and the majority of Clergy.¹²¹

The publishing of the new alphabet called, “The Alphabet of the Dawn” placed it against the well known alphabet named “the Alphabet of the Union”. So in this way a rivalry was born between them, which made the Austrian authorities uneasy. Due to its political importance, the issue of the Albanian writing forced Vienna to avoid staying indifferent or neutral. Austria- Hungary was interested in creating a unified Albanian alphabet for the cultivation of the national language in schools, a unified alphabet for both dialects (Tosk and Gheg). Each achievement in this direction was seen by the Austro-Hungarians as another opportunity to consolidate their influence in Albania. The Austrian government was of the opinion that Mjeda’s “The Dawn” alphabet was nearer to the alphabet of Istanbul and was better than that of “The Union”. Moreover, Mjeda’s followers of and those of the alphabet of Istanbul had the tendency to give way to achieve a unified alphabet, a tendency that was missing in Doçi, the Abbot of Mirdita.

In May 1902 other meetings on this issue were held on the initiative of the High Catholic Clergy and the decision to use Mjeda’s alphabet was made. The Austrian government, which initially had financed the textbook publications in the Albanian language using “The Union” alphabet, switched sides by preferring the alphabet put forward by “The Dawn” and Mjeda. Consequently, several textbooks were published using this alphabet.¹²²

Anyway, the disagreements continued to exist and the rivalry between “The Union” and “The Dawn” kept going, but it was more pronounced in the region of Shkodra. Consequently, it had little impact on other parts of the country where the alphabet of Istanbul was used. Under such circumstances and those that followed later on, when the efforts put on by Austria didn’t bring any positive results, Vienna acted carefully and was trying to keep both sides appeased with the aim of overcoming such disagreements.¹²³

The problem of the alphabet had a great importance for Austria, because it was directly related to the activities of the Clergy, considering the fact that the alphabet of

¹²¹ Skendi, St., Zgjimi Kombetar Shqiptar, Tirane 2000, page. 136.

¹²² Ibidem, page. 135-136 and 250-251.

¹²³ Ibidem, page. 252.

“The Union” was supported by the Franciscans, whereas the alphabet of the “The Dawn” was supported by the Bishopric of Shkodra and the majority of the Catholic Clergy.

The successor of Ipen in Shkoder, Consul A. Kral, who took office in 1903, tried, in the following years, to reconcile both sides and to assure the unification of the alphabet, in so doing bringing peace to the Bishopric of Shkodra. In the previous years, A. Kral had served as a Consul in Manastir, where he had also dealt with problems regarding the alphabet.

In two notes that he sent from Manastir to Vienna, we clearly see the preoccupation of the Albanian patriots to coordinate their activities, especially “to achieve the approval of a single alphabet”.

In these endeavours, as Kral expressed himself in a note dated 16th of July, 1900, “the Albanian patriots sought the support of the Austro-Hungarian government and petitioned to have the mediation of the Austrian consulates in their relationship”¹²⁴.

Whereas in a note dated 14th of July, 1901, Kral stressed an interesting fact according to which the Albanian patriots carried a great conviction that the issue of “the future common alphabet would be decided upon in a meeting of well known patriots, with delegates sent by them.”¹²⁵ Kral continued to address this issue carefully, even when he was transferred to Shkoder, strictly following the instructions sent from Vienna. This was a period where the discussion on the issue of the alphabet had acquired pan-national importance. The focus of the Austro-Hungarian authorities was on the levelling of disagreements within Shkodra district. This can be seen by a report that Kral sent to Vienna in March 1906, in which he wrote that the unification of the alphabet was a pressing issue so much for linguistic reasons as for national reasons. Besides this, he called it a necessity which was directly related to Austrian politics in general and to the ecclesiastical policy of Vienna in particular. Kral underlined that it would be difficult to keep peace in the Albanian Catholic Church and to peacefully conduct lessons in the Austrian schools in Albania. He concluded that the resolution of disputes between

¹²⁴ Haus und Hof Staats Archiv. Politisches Archiv, Wien Kart. 390, Filmi A-775, dosja 4/8.

¹²⁵ Njoftim i konsullit Kral nga Manastiri per Vjened, cituar sipas Xh. Lloshi, Njoftimet per Kongresit e Alfabetit, në 95-Vjetori i Kongresit te Manastirit, Shkup 2005, page. 197.

opposing parties, would be very beneficial to the consolidation of Austrian influence in Albania¹²⁶.

The impact of internal factors in the Albanian education

The interest and the efforts of the Austrian government to resolve the issue of the alphabet had placed Vienna in the center of the attention of the Albanian patriots. Many of them held the strong belief that soon a congress, in which the issue of the alphabet would be discussed, would be held in Vienna. Although the existence of such an idea can't be proved, a letter sent to Kristo Dako from Bucharest on the 26th of June, 1906, includes the following: "in the Congress of Vienna, where the issue of the alphabet would be discussed, we should also send a representative".¹²⁷

No matter what the truth about this issue is, the spread of such ideas expressed the conviction that Vienna had, by then, become an important factor supporting the Albanian cause.

The issue of the alphabet had become a problem of national importance whereas the inability to decide on a single alphabet not only on a national, but also on a regional scale, as in the case of Shkodra, constituted a serious obstacle to the consolidation of national unity.

Such a situation was overcome in 1908 by the Congress of the Alphabet or the Congress of the Unification of the Alphabet held 100 years ago in Manastir. This congress approved the proposal made by the special commission whose duty was to find the solution to the unification of the writing of the Albanian language. The commission was headed by Gjergj Fishta who represented "The Union" organization. Among other members of this commission were Ndre Mjeda, who represented "The Dawn" organization and Mit'hat Frasherri, who represented the alphabet of Istanbul.

The spirit of understanding which characterized the proceedings of the commission and of the Congress in general, made it possible for the Congress to duly resolve those issues of national importance, crucial issues which it was entrusted to resolve.

¹²⁶ Cituar sipas Skendi. St., Veper e permendur, page. 251.

¹²⁷ Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit i RSH., Tiranë, F. 99, d. 103, page. 3.

The words of Gjeorgj Fishta are a meaningful testimony to this. In the Congress he declared: “I have come here to support neither of the alphabets, but I’ve come here to join you in the efforts to adopt an alphabet that the Congress will decide upon as the most convenient for the prosperity of our people.” The people present were deeply moved by the words of this Franciscan friar, and the Muslim imam Hafiz Ibrahim, who had come from Skopje, shook hands with Fishta when he got down from the podium his eyes were full of tears . This scene in the presence of more than 300 people, three-fourths of whom were Muslims, left a deep impression on the participants.¹²⁸

Based on the decision taken in Manastir and other Congresses held in 1909 and 1910, the Albanian patriots opened many Albanian schools and increased their efforts to spread written Albanian language throughout the country although facing many difficulties caused by the traditional adversaries of the Albanian schools, mainly by the Turkish and Greek authorities.

Such difficulties were more conspicuous in Central and Southern Albania, and also in the Vilajet of Kosovo. Consequently, the struggle for the Albanian alphabet was fiercer in those regions whereas in Shkodra we can say that this issue didn’t generally constitute a major problem. The Albanian language teaching and publications in Albanian were conducted without any difficulties and in a favourable environment. The cultural and educational institutions established long ago and supported by the Austro-Hungarian Empire accounted for this development. As well as that, the interventions of the Ottoman Administration could not affect this area to the same degree as it had done the other ones.

The results achieved in the Congress of the Alphabet were not only greeted by Vienna, but they were followed by increased efforts on the part of the Austrian government to support the development of the Albanian education and culture in general in other areas including Manastir.

Referring to the report of the Austrian Consul in Manastir, P. Postlin, on the 14th of December, 1908, an organization which aimed at publishing intensively in the Albanian language was established in Manastir “for the inspiration of national

¹²⁸ Cituar siper Skendi St., ibidem, page. 337.

aspirations". This is the reason why he recommended the financial support of this organization by the Austrian Government.¹²⁹

Conclusion:

Defining a unique alphabet for the Albanian language was, at the beginning of XX century, in the focus of attention of the Albanian National Movement, which did not simply consider it as a linguistic and cultural issue, but as an important political and national matter.

Because of its political significance, the unification of the Albanian Alphabet and the wide use of this language made the Austro-Hungarian authorities avoid remaining neutral and indifferent to the problems and challenges that accompanied the whole historical unification process at the beginning of XX century.

The issue of a unique alphabet of the Albanian language was considered, by the Austro-Hungarians as another opportunity to consolidate their influence over Albania.

The alphabet unification issue was considered to be of paramount importance for Austro-Hungary, among other factors, due to its direct relevance to the Austrian religious activity in Albania. The Austro-Hungarian interest and efforts to sort out the matter of the unification of the Albanian alphabet placed Vienna in the focus of attention of the Albanian patriots.

References:

- Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, V. II, Tiranë 2002, pahe. 391.
- Werniche, A., Theodor Anton Ippen-Tin Osterreichischen diplomat und Albanienfarscher, Wiesbaden, 1967, cituar sipas perkthimit nga gjermanishtja, page. 44 - 45.
- Skëndi, St., Zgjimi Kombetar Shqiptar, Tirane 2000, page. 136.
- Haus und Hof Staats Archiv. Politischus Archiv, Wien Kart. 390, Filmi A-775, dosja 4/8.
- Njoftim i konsullit Kral nga Manastiri për Vjenën, cituar sipas Xh. Lloshi, Njoftimet per Kongresit e Alfabetit, ne 95-Vjetori i Kongresit të Manastirit, Shkup 2005, page. 197.
- Cituar sipas Skëndi. St., Vepër e përmendur, page. 251.
- Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit i RSH., Tirane, F. 99, d. 103, page. 3.
- HHStA, PA, Albanien Nr. 81, raporti i konsullit P. Postlin, Manastir me 14 dhjetor 1908, cituar sipas Xh. Lloshi, veper e permendur, page. 197-200.

¹²⁹ HHStA, PA, Albanien Nr. 81, raporti i konsullit P. Postlin, Manastir me 14 dhjetor 1908, cituar sipas Xh. Lloshi, veper e permendur, page. 197-200.