

## Relations Between Albanians and Croats Across the Centuries

Naile Demiri

### Abstract

The Balkan Peninsula is part of South Eastern Europe, with a surface area of 550 square kilometers and a population of nearly 55 million inhabitants. This is a corner of the Earth with a very attractive geography. It is shaped like a triangle and goes deep into the Mediterranean Sea. This peninsula is bordered with the Adriatic Sea, Ionian Sea, Marmaris Sea, Aegean Sea, and the Black Sea, whereas on the other part with Central Europe. The Balkan Peninsula is, or serves, as a connecting bridge between Europe and Asia. The countries of the Balkan Peninsula are: a part of Turkey, Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and part of Croatia (up to Sava River).

**Keywords:** Relations, Albanians, Croats, Centuries

### Introduction

According to historical data, the becoming of Croatia started sometime by the middle of the second millennium A. D., when the Christian Church was separated into the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Catholic Church has played a decisive role in the formation and awareness of the Croat people that was in the making.

Croatia, the Croatian population in the same territories as nowadays were endangered under the attack of the Ottoman Empire forces, and later of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austro-Hungary ruled Croatia until the beginning of the second millennium A. D. namely until the establishment of the first Yugoslav state, the Serbo-Croatia-Slovenian Kingdom.

Under the Austro-Hungarian rule, Croatia was almost a state in its own, as it preserved its language, culture, religion, and all other characteristics of the Croatian people. It followed its own development of the times along with other progressive peoples of the Western Europe.

Croatia faced a slowing down, a stagnation of the economic, political, spiritual and cultural development during the times of first Yugoslavia in 1918-1939. Many times under this government Croatia went through social unrests where people expressed dissatisfaction with the tendencies of the Serbian hegemony.

At the beginning of World War Two, the intellectual and state elite decided to be aligned with the Axis Countries. In 1941 Croatia was proclaimed an independent state and remained such until 1945.

With the capitulation of Hitler's Germany, Croatia again became part of second Yugoslavia, i. e. the communist Yugoslavia, however without settling down with this until 25 June 1991, when it was proclaimed an independent and sovereign state.

*Some geographical and statistical data about today's Croatia*



<b>National Anthem</b>	<i>Lijepa naša domovino (Atdhey ynë i bukur)</i>
<b>Capital City</b>	Zagreb
<b>Official Language</b>	Croatian
<b>Independence</b>	25 June 1991
<b>Membership to UN</b>	22 May 1992
<b>Government</b>	Parlamentarian Republic
<b>President</b>	Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović
<b>Prime Minister</b>	TIHOMIR OREŠKOVIĆ
<b>Surface Area</b>	Ranked 126
<b>Total –</b>	56. 594 km <sup>2</sup>
<b>– % ujë</b>	1,09
<b>Population (2011)</b>	Ranked 128
<b>– total</b>	4. 284. 889 inhabitants
<b>– density</b>	75,8 inhabit/km <sup>2</sup>
<b>GDP (2015)</b>	59,911 billion USD
<b>GDP per capita</b>	13. 994 USD
<b>Currency</b>	Kuna (HRK)
<b>Time Zone</b>	
<b>– usual</b>	UTC+1
<b>– summer</b>	UTC+2
<b>Pcountry code</b>	+385
<b>Internet code</b>	. hr
<b>ISO 3166-1 Code</b>	HR

The Albanians in the Balkans, who make up nearly 7 million, are an autochthonous people, whereas the other peoples of the peninsula were mainly formed by the middle of medieval times and later following the Slavic invasion and the remaining autochthonous population.

According to recent historical data published by the Albanian historian Jusuf Buxhovi "Kosova ", volumes I-V, Prishtina, 2012 and by Orhan Rexhepi, 2012, "Pelagian-Dardans from Atlantis to the Moon, Troy, Rome and the Albanians" with 458 pages, it is evident that from the antiquities to nowadays Albanians belong to one single tree, to one DNA; they are a people who has lived – at times free, and at times under occupation, in this corner of the globe, which is one of the most attractive places on Earth.

The Albanians, once authors and bearers of the development of humanity's culture, in general from the antiquities to modern times, were under the Ottoman rule when the new era dawned, albeit they did not surrender or be desecrated. During the Ottoman rule from 1389 to 1912, there were many senior officials of the Ottoman Empire of Albanian

origin. During this five-century journey the Albanians had the opportunity to create friendships and enmities with other peoples of the civilized world, in particular within the Balkan Peninsula. Out of 292 Prime Minister of the Ottoman Empire, 45 were of Albanian origin. <sup>1</sup>

As a result of such historical actions, The Albanians were able to influence the situation of other peoples in the Balkans, while not finding a solution to their own problems. During this journey, it is a special characteristic that the Croats and

<sup>1</sup> Shyqeri Nimani "Mehmet Ali Pasha, the Albanian Captain who restored the dignity of Egypt" the paradox of the Albanian syndrome, Prishtina, 2012, pg, 20.

Albanians, amidst good times and bad times, established a decent friendship. This deep friendship would not have been possible save for the some common personal and social features both peoples have. It is likely that they have similar social thinking, body constitution, physiognomy, color, body movements etc, and almost similar material and spiritual interests, and even same enemies.



ALBANIAN ETHNIC POPULATION ON 2015 <sup>1</sup>.

In their historical and life journey the Albanians remained on friendly terms with the Croats. Throughout their history, the Albanians and Croats had the same destiny. Their mutual friendship and assistance intensified after the First and Second Balkan Wars, after World War One, the Versailles Congress in Paris in 1918, and in particular during World War Two, to culminate in the beginning of the third millennium when Croatia recognized the independent and sovereign state of Kosovo, being one of the first countries in the world to do so.

The Congress of Peace in Versailles laid the foundations of the conflict between the peoples of the Balkans, of Europe and beyond and was the cause of the World War Two and of the wars between the peoples of the Balkans in the last decade of XX century. Simply said: the great powers of the time were unable to understand the aspirations of the big Russian state that aimed to have hegemony over the peoples of the Balkans and then Europe; their aspiration to have access to warm seas that were naturally belonged to the Croats and Albanians. The Russian aspiration for access to warm seas became the cause for wars where millions died. In these situations of conflict the Albanians and the Croats continued to build bridges of cooperation, friendship and mutual assistance in all areas of life, from exchange of ideas thoughts, trade and bloodshed even to protect the national causes of each other. <sup>2</sup>

The Congress of Versailles recognized the annexation of the Albanian territories by Serbia, this ally of Russia. The Congress of Versailles insisted in establishing the Kingdom of SCS and permitted the prevalence of the totalitarian mentality of the on the Croatian population which had already developed the concepts of democracy, labor, and cultural development in general of the Hegel model and Catholic spirit, of democracy, managed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The mechanical transfer of the Croat will under the tutelage of the Serbo-Russian hegemony was never accepted by the Albanians or the Croats. The political movements of the Croat population in the second decade of the second millennium were brutally oppressed in bloodshed by the Serbo-Russian forces<sup>3</sup>. The military head of the Yugoslav Monarchy forcefully recruited many Albanian peasants in these forces, from all over the Albanian territories under the Yugoslav Monarchy in order to use them to subdue the Croatian revolt led by Stjepan Radic (11. 6. 1871 - 8. 8. 1928 ) and others like him who sought to have the independent Croatian state. Stjepan Radic was killed during an attempt on his life while he was addressing from the podium of the National Assembly by the chetnik Punisa Radic. Demonstrations ensued in many other cities of Croatia.

<sup>1</sup> <http://albastrima.fr.gd/HARTA--SHQIP%CBRIS--ETNIKE.htm>

<sup>2</sup> <http://zeri.info/dossier/33229/>

<sup>3</sup> [hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stjepan\\_Radic](http://hr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stjepan_Radic)

Albanians from Kosovo and other territories under the military command of the Yugoslav Monarchy were sent to demonstrations of Sisak, Mostar, Dubrovnik, Lepoglava and many other cities in Croatia to suppress the Croatian aspirations and will. The Albanian recruits, as soon as they landed on Croatian soil, expressed solidarity with the Croats and were attached to the Croats, stood stoically until the end. A large number of Albanian recruits returned to their country of origin only after they joined the German army at the beginning of the fourth decade of the second millennium.

At the beginning of World War II, both Croatia and ethnic Albania sided with Germany, in coalition with the Germans. The elites of the two countries were recognized by Germany, which recognized the independence of the states and offered material and military aid. Germany recognized Albania's independence, the ethnic map and neutrality<sup>1</sup>. The best researcher of the national question, Hajro Cini, in his paper "the collaboration and misuse of meaning of the word" writes: "Within two weeks, Germany beat Greece and Chameria joined Albania. For the first time the Albanian nation was in its ethnic borders. Not only that, but at the insistence of Mehdi Bey Frashëri, Germany accepted the neutrality of Albania. Albania was liberated on September 8, 1943, and in December 1943 was recognized as a neutral state. Unlike the Italian invasion, where Jacomon was representative of Victor Emmanuel - as chairman of the state - Albania already had as the chairmanship of the state a group of elders composed of one representative of each of the four main religions in Albania, among them the signatories of Albanian independence, great patriots, honored outstanding, honest, spotless and idealistic, Mehdi Frashëri and Lef Nosi. All four were Albanians.

In December 1943- November 1944 the Albanian Government has a Minister of Foreign Affairs. No other country invaded by Germany had a Foreign Minister<sup>2</sup>.

During World War II Albania had good relations in all fields of social life, but also friendship with the Croatian people. This friendship was created a long time ago, as mentioned above, a Croatian-Albanian friendship grow by arberesh towns Zadar. See this book "Traditional culture of arberesh of Zadar"<sup>3</sup>.

Cooperation and friendship between the two peoples grew, and strengthened during the second Yugoslavia, or the communist Yugoslavia of Tito.

Communism, as one of the most forged social systems, which included the second Yugoslavia (1945 - 1990) was imposed on the people of Yugoslavia by the hegemonic Russia, with the slogan that it would solve the national question. Communism did not solve the national issue, neither did it solve social or economic issues. On the contrary, it deepened contradictions, cultivated civil war, and poverty and made such a differentiation of social strata that in the last decade of the second millennium republics entered at war with Serbia supported hegemonic back from Russia, but now much weakened.

Once the communist regime in Croatia was established, an unprecedented genocide happened against Kosovo and other Albanian regions that remained in Yugoslavia by Serbia, against the unprotected Albanian population. Croats and Albanians were declared fascist collaborators of Germany and were punished. The penalty was the largest for the Albanian people, since the Albanian Communist Party was last in vassal Party Communist Yugoslavia respectively of the Communist Party of Serbia. Many Albanians and Croats were killed and imprisoned throughout the period of the communist regime in Tito's Yugoslavia. Suffice it to mention only tragedy Bar in the spring of 1945, where thousands of Albanians were executed by Serbian and Montenegrin forces, were Croatian officers - who announced Dalmatian Anglo-American mission to the actions of the Serbian and Montenegrin officers. Anglo-American intervention did to save hundreds of Albanian soldier from carnage to testify later the hellish horror they had experienced. Croatian officers never forgot the assistance of the Albanians<sup>4</sup>.

After World War II Serbs executed, imprisoned, exiled and displaced Albanians. Croatian People found themselves at all times protected by the Albanians.

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<sup>1</sup> Uran Butka" Massacre of Tivar and the Responsibility of the Albanian state, Tirana, 2012 page 20.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.telegrafi.com/lajme/kolaboracionizmi-dhe-kepperdorimi-i-kuptimit-te-kesaj-fjale-26-7788.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Aleksander Stipcevic "Traditional culture of the arberesh of Zadar", Prishtina 2012, page 1- 34.

<sup>4</sup> Azem Hajdini- Xani "Massacre of Bar, memoires, Prishtina, 1998, page 44.

Regarding the good relations of friendship between Albanians and Croats in particular with Albanians who remained in Yugoslavia, ruled by chetnik - partisans it is believed that there are thousands of archived documents: ecclesiastical documents, works of sculpture and music, literary stories, written by the great minds of the time, concrete diplomatic and political actions all the way to the individual sacrifices for the cause of another.

A lot of arguments about the good relations and friendship between Albanians and Croats are given by Prof. dr. Fehmi Pushkolli in his book "Tome Berisha (life and work), Prishtina, 2005. Army officer General Tome Berisha, who reached the tops of martial arts, retired first time by Yugoslav military leader, arguing that Mr Berisha Tome was nurtured with Albanian nationalism and as such is a danger to the Yugoslav army<sup>1</sup>.

The prominent Albanian writer and historian Jusuf Buxhovi writes about these good relations and friendship between the Albanians, especially Kosovo Albanians, and Croats.

The erudite narrator confesses in the first case: "Such was the announcement that My Father, Naim Kosova, pilot of aviation of Yugoslav People's Army, and my mother Maria Pelevic, nurses, also employed in People's Army Yugoslavia, were liquidated by the military Intelligence service (KOS), although later we were told that it had been an accident (crash Mig-49), as was presented as an accident the going out of the way of the jeep in which my mother was travelling to Bilieqes hospital. Uncle Josip said that he had reliable data about this and had prepared those for me, to have them. He informed me that in the large leather envelope he had prepared a long time ago for me was a small, sealed document to be given in person to the first man of Kosovo only after that it became a state <sup>2</sup>.

The University of Zagreb, in collaboration with the University of Prishtina, has given a great assistance in raising, cultivating and strengthening relations between our two peoples. Cadres of the two sister-universities have channeled the flow of social-political processes and have brought it to the current state, the formation of new states in the Balkans and solving the national question for them, although Albanians have remained separate, and have not yet fully resolved the national question and have not yet finalized their national cause like the Croats have done, but nonetheless have laid good foundations towards achieving this goal.

The political-military cadre of these two friendly countries has played a crucial role to disconnect from the eighty-year-old Russian-Serbian hegemony. At the beginning of the last decade of the second millennium the Serb chauvinism had already forced the politico-military Croatian cadre to respond with military means to the Serbian aggression. In these difficult moments of life or death for Croats, the Coordinating Council of the Albanian political parties, operating in Croatia, led by Colonel Tome Berisha, urged the public that all Albanians recruited in the Yugoslav People's Army to defect from the army and possibly to join the Croatian army. Albanian recruits unanimously answered this call<sup>3</sup>.

"It is truly fortunate that no Albanians, either from Kosovo or Macedonia and Montenegro, participated on the side of the Serb aggressor. A large part of them have participated in the defense of the Republic of Croatia. Some of them later took part in the liberation of Kosovo. Most of the officers, who were Albanians, first acted within the Croatian Army, and later KLA."

One of the figures of the Albanian military, General Agim Ceku who responded to the call and joined the Croatian National Guard says, not only officers of Albanian soldiers in the decisive moments that joined the Croatian forces, but also Albanian businesses in Croatia were placed in the service of Croats involved in the war and contributed considerably.

In 1991 alone, there were 2801 Albanians who assisted with the struggle for independence for the Croatian people and state; they were clothed in military uniform. Of them 86 were martyred, 507 of them were injured and 41 are missing. Among these soldiers an enormous contribution was given by the Albanian soldier who did not have any military grades - Bekim Berisha. In Croatia he was known by two nicknames: Friend and Lightning, while in Kosovo he was known by the nicknamed Abeja.

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Fehmi Pushkolli "Tom Berisha (Life and work), Prishtina, 2005.

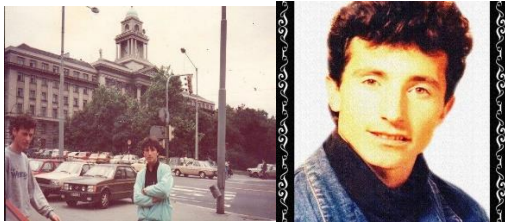
<sup>2</sup> Jusf Buxhovi, "Open Dossier" "Faik Konica" - Prishtina, 2014. Page 415.

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Dr. Fehmi Pushkolli "Tom Berisha (Life and work), Prishtina, 2005, f. 200.

Bekim Berisha's contribution has been immense in the final victory of the Croatian society.

### **Bekim Berisha: I am willing to defend Croatia**

BEKIM BERISHA- ABEJA was born on 15 June, 1966 in the village Shkozet ( former Grabovc ), the Municipality of Peja. His mother's name was Fahrije Berisha and his father's name was Fazli Berisha. He went to " Janko Joviqeviq " Elementary School in the village of Gorazdevac, Albanian. He went to Peja city to attend the high school. He completed the first two years of high school at the "Shaban Spahija " Technical High School where he attended the comprehensive programme. Then he transferred to "Ali Hadri" Commerce high School Tourism with a concentration on tourism. After finishing the high school in Peja, he attended his undergraduate studies at the University of Rijeka, Faculty of Hospitality in Opatija, from 1 October 1986 to 30 September 1989.



*Bekimi as a student in Opatija, Croatia*

From 1986 – 1991 Bekim Berisha left Croatia and traveled to different European countries, among which was The Netherlands and entered the Dutch Legion. Bekim Berisha arrived in Croatia in 1991 and joined the Croatian elite units against Serbs. He fought along with Croats for over 536 days and he was also acclaimed as a diver and took part in all the attacks that the Croatian army has organized.

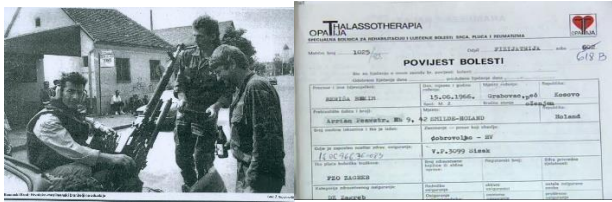
The General Ante Bobetko, The Commander of Battalion 57 "Marian Celjak"- Sisak, stated: Bekim Berisha told me ' I 'm ready to defend Croatia ', and, judging from his language, I noticed that he was not Croatian. Then he says that he is an Albanian from Kosovo and is voluntarily coming from the Netherlands to join Croatian army. I introduced myself as the commander and informed him about the risk that he might go through, including the loss of his life. He says, " I just want to fight, to defend Croatia, in the front line. Without having enough time to think, I decided to accept him in my Kumarevo brigade. This was the wisest decision I had ever taken throughout the war"<sup>1</sup>.

Whereas the Croatian media wrote: "After two decades later some other proofs were found in an old wooden house near the Komorovo Region in Sisak. a bag wrapped in plastic was found in deep under the rotten timber of this wooden house. There were petty money, photographs and documents which belonged to Bekim Berisha. There was also a train ticket that Bekim had taken to travel from Brussels to Zagreb on 7 August, 1991. The very same day he joined the National Guard, battalion nr 57, which heroically protected Komarevo" written in "Večernji List"<sup>2</sup>.

In May 1992, Bekim Berisha moved to Bosnia in Bosanski Brod in Derventa and joined Bosnia military army and fights in many harsh battles. By June 1992 he had been injured several times in Kotorsko, in Doboj. After being badly injured, Bekim was sent to hospital in Zagreb and then he went to Thalassotherapy spa in Opatija. From June 2009, even though hospitalized, he occasionally joined the military to fight.

<sup>1</sup> Documentary by Nuhi Bytyçi: "Kolosët e luftës", dedicated to the marthirs Bekim Berishës and Bedri Shalës.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vecernji.hr/hrvatska/bekim-berisha-dragovoljac-odlikovan-redom-hrvatskog-kriza-601758>, mw 20.9.2013.



*Bekim Berisha in Bosanski Brod*

*A document taken from the Thalassotherapia archive in Opati*

In November 1993, Bekim Berisha officially became the resident of the Republic of Croatia. On 3 January 1996, the Minister of Defence Gojko Susak declared Bekim Berisha “an individual of the war of Croatia”

To honor Bekim’s merits and contribution during the war in Croatia, the then President of the the Republic of Croatia delivered the “Medal of War of Independence” and described his as the worrier how was worth 1. 000 soldiers.



*The medal from the President of the Republic of Croatia - Franjo Tuđman and The medal awarded by the president of the Republic of Kosovo - Fatmir Sejdiu*

In 11 March he returned to Kosovo and fought against the Serbian aggressors during which time he was killed on 10 August 1998 in Junik, together with other co-fighters such as Bedri Shala, Elton Xherka and Permet Vula. Initially the four of them were buried in Junik but Serbs removed their bodies and reburied them in the cemetery of Prizren. In 1998, the parents of Elton and Permet, Gëzim Zherka and Ilir Vula, managed to take the bodies of their sons and buried them in Gjakova. When the war ended and Kosovo was liberated by the Serbs on 12 June 1999, helped by Gëzim Zherka, Bekim’s sister Zyrafete Berisha- Tolaj returns his body in his hometown in Shkozet, and the state of Kosovo held a burial official ceremony, whereas Bedri Shala was buried in his hometown in Negroc.

On 10 August 2010, Bekim Berisha was officially attributed to title “National Hero” by the former President of the Republic of Kosovo, Prof. Dr. Fatmir Sejdiu for his merits and heroism during the combat against the hostile Serbian regime which lasted about a century in Kosovo.

In 2012, the retired colonel Ivica Pandža Orkan together with 15 other friends from the “Veterans’ Club of Croatia” took a motor ride in Kosovo, where among other things, visited Bekim Berisha’s tomb and his house in Shkozet, Peja.



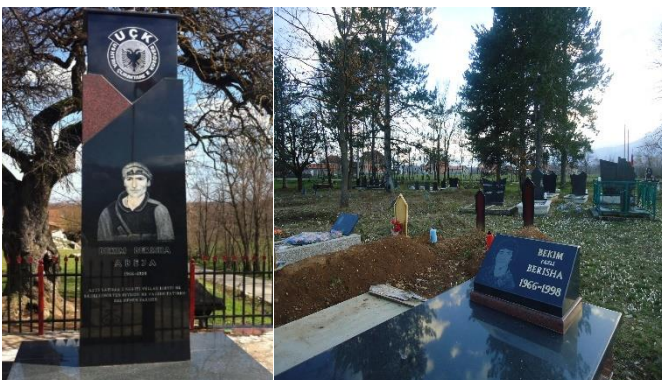
*The retired colonel Ivica Pandža Orkan together with other friends from the “Veterans’ Club of Croatia” during a visit at the tomb of Bekim Berishës- Abeja.*

On the occasion of the commemoration ceremony of the “Victory of the County and the Thanksgiving day to the Combatants of Croatia” on 31 June 2013, Bekim Berisha family members accepted the golden medal “Croatian Red Cross” from the President of the Croatia. The medal was accepted by Bekim’s sister, and his niece Bonita Tolaj.



*The medal awarded by the President of the Republic of Croatia- Ivo Josipović and The medal by the President of Albania- Bujar Nishani*

The president of the Republic of Albania, Bujar Nishani awarded Bekim Berisha the medal “Honor of the Nation’ on 16 February for special contribution in the war of Kosovo.





*The statue and the tomb of Bekim Berisha, in Shkozet, Peje.*

Today the body of Bekim Berisha rests in the cemeteries of the Shkozet, in Peja, the Republic of Kosovo.

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**Documents:**

A document taken from the Thalassotherapia archive in Opat

The medal from the President of the Republic of Croatia - Franjo Tudman

The medal awarded by the president of the Republic of Kosovo - Fatmir Sejdiu

The medal awarded by the President of the Republic of Croatia- Ivo Josipović

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Documentary by Nuhi Bytyçit.: “Kolosët e luftës”, dedicated to the marthirs Bekim Berishës and Bedri Shalës.