

# History: On Illyrian Geopolitics and Balkan Highlanders

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*Since the 1878 League of Prizren onward, any Albanian program on the creation of a Greater Albania was supported by unproven claims that the Albanians are direct descendants of the ancient Balkan Illyrians.*

## What was Illyrian?

*While the Serbs who lived on the territory of present-day Serbia had already achieved the national consensus of their identity, other South Slavic ethnicities were still striving for this end. In particular, Slavic-speaking people living in then Austria-Hungary undertook steps to identify themselves and thus gain some kind of autonomy or even independence.[i] These efforts were partly in concordance with the aims of the Serbs, both from Serbia and not, but at many points in the clash with them. In particular, the Croats were very eager to contrive their own nationality, for which they sometimes used a number of extreme arguments and means. Renowned Serbian linguist, ethnologist, and historian, Vuk Stefanović-Karadžić used to say ironically, within the context, that the Croats had everything, except land, people, and language.[ii]*

*Present-day Croatia was under Austro-Hungarian rule, with land consisting of Croatia proper, Slavonia, and Dalmatia, with a vague determination of the nationality of people living in these regions. The language was also poorly determined, and among several dialect options, the Croat cultural leaders chose the so-called Štokavian dialect, the variant of the Slavic language spoken in Serbia, Slavonia, Dalmatia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina.[iii] That nationalism often has nothing to do with anthropology and race shows the case of the most prominent leader of the Croat cultural renewal, the so-called Illyrian Movement.[iv] This leader, Ljudevit Gaj (Ludwig Gay) was of German origin (both parents were purely ethnic Germans). The term Illyrian deserves, however, our particular*

attention.[v]

In attempting to define, or determine their national identities, the principal aim of nationalistic leaders is usually to display the presumed antiquity of their presumed nation. The political-cultural leaders of the Illyrian (in fact, the Croat) movement have been no exception. It is known, in passing, that this passionate striving for antiquity was not the romantic era invention. For instance, around the New Era, disputes between the Jewish community in Alexandria and the Greeks and the Egyptians over “cultural supremacy” took the form of the Jewish claims of their supreme antiquity. A Jewish writer Joseph Flavius wrote the book entitled *Jewish Antiquity* (a kind of remake of the *Old Testament*)[vi] and dedicated another treatise specifically devoted to the disputed “Jewish supremacy” regarding the antiquity of the nations in the region.[vii] These claims appear as conspicuous attempts to substitute present (feelings of) inferiority by alleged “past superiority” (like, for instance, in the Croat and Albanian cases since the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to today).

Now, what was “Illyrian” in this Croat claim? It is generally believed that the coinage was aimed at disguising a genuine political ambition (as a part of a general nationalistic movement) in cultural clothing.

But a more thorough analysis reveals that the matter is far from tactical moves. The temptations of the “call of remote past” were so appealing, that some historians took the “Illyrian hypothesis” seriously, claiming that all Slavs are of Illyrian descent.[viii] These claims were particularly popular among the South Slavs from the 16<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and even some authors from Poland and Russia accepted them for genuine historical truth, but, however, those claims have been, in fact, founded in several authentic historical sources.[ix] According to these claims and sources, the South Slavs were descendants of the Balkan Illyrians and are thus autochthonous populations in the region. These Slavs were recognized by the surrounding nations, like the Greeks, as the Illyrians. In the early Middle Ages, one group of these Slavs migrated to Central Europe (West Slavs), whereas one group moved to East Europe (East Slavs).

According to some medieval authors, South Slavs descend from the Illyrians, Thracians, and Macedonians. Hence, Alexander the Great, Constantine the Great, Diocletian, and St. Hieronymus were nobody else but Illyrian Slavs. This line of thought was particularly popular among Renaissance, Reformation, and Counter-Reformation South Slavs. Vinko Pribojević from Hvar (the island in the Adriatic Sea) wrote that all Slavs speak one common “our”, “Illyrian”, or “Slavic” language.[x] Mavro Orbini from Dubrovnik (Ragusa), a renowned author of his time (*De Regno Sclavorum*, 1601), and Bartol Kašić from Dalmatia (*Institutionem Linguae Illyricae*, 1604) also championed the thesis of the Illyrian origin of all South Slavs.[xi]

**Count Đorđe Branković** (1645–1711), a Serb nobleman from Transylvania,[xii] was first accepted by Austria as the heir of Serbia’s Despots Brankovići, but when he tried to found an independent Serbian state on Austrian territory he was dismissed as an imposter.[xiii] Đ. Branković wrote 1688 a political program for the South Slavic unification into a semi-independent state which he called the Illyrian Kingdom.[xiv] It is interesting to note that M. Orbini’s treatise was translated into Russian in 1722. Finally, as we mentioned above, the Croatian national renewal movement in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century was launched under the name of the Illyrian Movement.[xv]

Before we go on with “Illyrization of the Balkans” a few words on some features of the “Illyrian” hypothesis are in order. What is the common characteristic of the claims just mentioned? First, the efforts to establish the South Slavs not only as an autochthonous Balkan population but also as the progenitor of all Slavs.[xvi] Another important point is to be noticed. All authors mentioned did not belong to the core of the Slavic territories at the time but came from its margins. All of them, in fact, have been part of the surrounding, more culturally advanced regions, some of them at least partially foreign to the proper Slavic populations. As we shall see immediately, this pattern of “Illyrization” will be followed closely by ethnic Albanians, in their endeavor to establish an Albanian nation and endow it with the territory and language.

## **The Illyrians, Dinarids, guns, and banks**

The Indo-European Illyrian population inhabited the West Balkans and some regions to the northwest of the Balkan Peninsula.[xvii] They never developed the letter and thus did not enter history by their own means. Almost all we know about them came from the Greek and Roman testimonies – names of tribes, rulers, kings, and queens.[xviii] They were regarded as hardy and violent people, engaged mainly in plundering lowlands and Adriatic Sea piracy. The Romans raised several times massive offensives in order to suppress piracy.[xix] When they conquered the Illyrians, the Roman emperors used to make use of them as a military barrier against other barbarians. Henceforth, the entire *Illyricum* (Roman Prefecture in the Balkans) served as a bulwark against attacks from Central and East European peoples. Because they played a prominent role in the military sector of the Roman Empire (they were employed as a praetorian guard, for instance),[xx] during turmoil times, when military leaders used to seize power, a number of these emperors, like Diocletian, were of Illyrian origin.[xxi]

When in the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, according to the mainly forged official historiography of the Slavs, they invaded Balkan Peninsula from the north, and they pushed the local population into mountainous regions, which we call today the Dinaric area. Present-day Dinarids (Yugoslav and West Balkan highlanders), Slavophone and Albanophone alike, are supposed to be of Illyrian origin, although it comes mainly by implication rather than by direct evidence.[xxii] In the absence of material artifacts that may be attributed to Illyrians with certainty, what remains in making links with this ancient tribal population appears inevitably of conjectural nature. In particular, the mental structure of modern Dinarids matches closely the anthropic features one attributes to Illyrians. Language and religious differences among Balkan Dinarids are of minor importance, compared with the principal common attributes just mentioned. One of these features is their notorious stubbornness and inflexibility. As many psychiatrists testify, in particular those dealing with convicts, it appears practically impossible to “reach their mind”, unlike other patients.

Mixing of reality as it is and as they want to be (as they fancy). One of the ensuing effects have been numerous demands in politics and otherwise, based on false images of history or actual political situation. The lack of appreciation of the state as an institution. This has come as a consequence of their millennia of living at the margins of existing states, foreign or not. They never experienced states as their own and always tried to take advantage of their marginal position and profit maximally, without feeling any responsibility for the common welfare. There is an extreme impulse for striving for power among all Balkan Dinarids including Albanians as well. Since the male population of Dinarids, as the dominant familiar and social factor, was never engaged in production and used to be

engaged in plundering and stealing, they feel strong repulsion towards manual work and always try to rule the surroundings instead.

Weaponry cult is strongly present among Dinarids and appears particularly prominent with ethnic Albanians. This cult of guns deserves particular attention, for it will play a decisive role in the coming historical events. It can be quoted a few examples as an illustration of the point. For instance, when the Serbian soldiers, in their retreat from Serbia in the autumn of 1915,[xxiii] before the powerful German, Austro-Hungarian, and Bulgarian armies, were crossing Albania,[xxiv] many of them lost their lives because they carried guns. Not only they were killed by Albanians while the exhausted soldiers were crossing Albanian mountains, but some of them were assassinated while sleeping in Albanian houses. The latter instance bears particular weight to the point, bearing in mind the Albanian traditional hospitality, in particular, their cult of protecting guests.[xxv] When receiving guns at the beginning of their military service in the Yugoslav People's Army (the YPA), many ethnic Albanian conscripts used to kiss the rifle.[xxvi] The rifle is considered by the ethnic Albanians as a precious tool and almost the best friend. The same tradition was present among the Montenegrins too, as the many instances in the dramatic mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century poem *Mountainous Wreath (Gorski vijenac)* by the Montenegrin ruler Petar II Petrović Njegoš testify.[xxvii]

When the scandal of the so-called pyramidal bank affair took place in Albania in 1997, it caused such a revolt of the deceived Albanians that the Government of Sali Berisha was on the brink to collapse. The latter then decided to resort to the ultimate means in the attempt to save the Government (and life, for that matter). The Government decided to have the army magazines open and the crowd rushed in and took all the weaponry out. The regime was saved, and the majority of the weaponry found its way to KosMet where it was used against Serbia's authorities by a notorious terrorist organization - the Kosovo Liberation Army.[xxviii]

During these riots, Albania was practically deprived of the state as an institution for several days. After the riots were over, the state was reinstated formally, but practically it has never recovered again. In principle, a society with armed civilians cannot have a real state, as is the case with the USA,[xxix] for instance, for the very reason that the Government in such cases possesses no real control over its (armed) citizens. As for the revolt of the gamblers towards their authorities, it was partly justified. What concerns the authorities, they not only knew what was going on with those quasi-banks but in all probability, the authorities have been directly involved in the organized robbery of their naïve citizens. This was certainly the case with S. Milošević's regime in Serbia, which played the role of the partner both to Dafina Milanović's Dafiment Bank and Jezdimir Vasiljević's Jugoscandic Bank. The gray eminence behind Dafina Milanović turned out to be certain Clara Mandić, an obscure figure,[xxx] with close relationships with the Milošević's family. She made the company to Marko Milošević, son of Slobodan Milošević, when he was visiting Israel. It was surely part of the whole scheme, for both Dafina Milanović and Jezdimir Vasiljević fled from Serbia to Israel, with the money, of course.[xxxi]

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## Notes

[i] On this issue, see more in [R. A. Kann, *A History of the Habsburg Empire 1526–1918*, Berkeley, US–Los Angeles, UK: University of California Press, 1980].

[ii] About the 19<sup>th</sup>-century ideas of the Serbian nationhood and statehood developed by Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and Ilija Garašanin see in [V. B. Sotirović, “Nineteenth-century Ideas of Serbian ‘Linguistic’ Nationhood and Statehood”, *Slavistica Vilnensis*, Kalbotyra 49 (2), 2000, 7–24].

[iii] I will not dwell on this issue here, but direct interesting readers to my comprehensive article [V. B. Sotirović, “National Identity: Who are the Albanians? The Illyrian Anthroponomy and the Ethnogenesis of the Albanians”, *Liaudies Kultūra*, Vol. 3, № 84, Vilnius, 2002, 31–43].

[iv] See [V. B. Sotirović, “The Croatian National Revival Movement (The “Illyrian Movement”) and the Question of Language in the Phase from 1830 to 1841”, *Наслеђе*, year III, № 4, Kragujevac, 2006, 101–116].

[v] On the ethnic identity from the anthropological perspective, see in [M. Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions*, London, UK: Routledge, 1996]. In this book, the author outlines the major anthropological and sociological approaches to ethnicity, focusing on traditional paradigms of British and American anthropologists, the notion of “ethnos” developed by the Soviet anthropologists, and UK’s and US’ case studies.

[vi] J. Flavius, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, J. Flavius, *Complete Works*, London: Nelson & Sons, 1859, 27.

[vii] J. Flavius, *Against Apion*, J. Flavius, *Complete Works*, London: Nelson & Sons, 1859, 784. On Jewish history, see in [Д. Џ. Голдберг, Џ. Д. Рејнер, *Јевреји: Историја и религија*, Београд: Клио, 2003]. On the history of Greece and Hellenism, see in [Џ. Бордман, Џ. Грифин, О. Мари (eds.), *Оксфордска историја Грчке и хеленистичког света*, Београд: Клио, 1999].

[viii] The Illyrians were the ancient inhabitants of the Balkans well-known to the Greek and Roman historians and geographers. See in more detail on them in [A. Stipčević, *The Illyrians: History and Culture*, Noyes Press, 1977]. About Illyrian-Roman relations, see in [J. R. Abdale, *The Great Illyrian Revolt: Rome’s Forgotten War in the Balkans, AD 6–9*, Barnsley, UK–Pen and Sword Military, 2019].

[ix] One of them is a chronicle by monk Nestor: *Povest’ vremennyh let*. The chronicle was written in the final form in 1113 based on previous writings. It is the most important source of ancient Russian history [J. Anisimov, *Rusijos Istorija nuo Riuriko iki Putino. Žmonės. Įvykiai. Datos*, Vilnius: Mokslo ir enciklopedijų leidybos centras, 2014, 46].

[x] V. Pribojević, *On Origin and History of the Slavs*, 1532, Venice.

[xi] About more details, see for instance in [J. И. Деретић, Д. П. Антић, С. М. Јарчевић, *Измишљено досељавање Срба*, Београд: Сардонија, 2009; М. Милановић, *Историјско порекло Срба*, Друго допуњено и проширено издање, Београд: Вандалија, 2011].

[xii] He claimed to be the heir of the Brankovićs dynasty, the last Serbian (vassal) ruling family, before the final fall of the Serbian state to the Ottoman Empire in 1459. The last Branković in power ruling

Serbia before the Ottoman occupation was Lazar (1456–1458) [С. Станојевић, *Сви српски владари*, Београд: Отворена књига, 2015, 75–76].

[xiii] It was at this time that Austria launched the false thesis that Vuk Branković, the progenitor of Branković dynasty, betrayed duke Lazar during the 1389 Kosovo Battle.

[xiv] About Count Đorđe Branković and his time see in [J. Radonjić, *Grof Đorđe Branković i njegovo vreme*, Beograd, 1911].

[xv] Vladislav B. Sotirović, “National Identity: Who are the Albanians? The Illyrian Anthroponomy and the Ethnogenesis of the Albanians”, *Liaudies Kultūra*, Vol. 3, № 84, Vilnius, 2002, 31–43.

[xvi] Today, many historians claim that the “Illyrian” hypothesis of the Slavic origin is based on relevant historical sources of the time. See, for instance [J. И. Деретић, Д. П. Антић, С. М. Јарчевић, *Измишљено досељавање Срба*, Београд: Сардонија, 2009].

[xvii] An Illyrian tribe occupied territory close to the present-day Vienna.

[xviii] A. Stipčević, *Iliri: Povijest, život, kultura*, Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1989, 7–14.

[xix] М. Ростовцев, *Историја Старога света. Грчка и Рим*, Нови Сад: Матица српска, 1990, 268. There were two “Illyrian Wars” launched by the Romans: The First (229–228 B.C.) and the Second (219 B.C.)

[xx] On one of the Albanian websites it is proudly (and out of context) stated that Albania provides military support to Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq.

[xxi] This situation will repeat many times during the Balkan history, in particular during WWII and civil wars in Yugoslavia (1991–1995).

[xxii] However, there is no single evidence in historical sources that present-day Balkan Albanians are of any Illyrian origin as they came to the Balkans only in 1043 from Sicily. Originally, they are from the Caucasus where in ancient times they had their state – Caucasus Albania. On this issue see the book [*Кавкаски Албанци лажни Илири*, Београд: Пешић и синови, 2007].

[xxiii] The estimate is that around 350.000 Serbians, soldiers, and civilians alike, lost their lives during this retreat through Albania. The crossing is known as the Serbian Golgotha [P. R. Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, Revised and Expanded Edition, Seattle, US: University of Washington Press, 2002, 123].

[xxiv] With permission of the Albanian local Muslim leader Essad-pasha, a great friend of Serbs, whom the latter had helped in his political activities in Albania [Д. Т. Батаковић, *Косово и Метохија у српско-арбанашким односима*, Друго допуњено издање, Београд: Чигоја штампа, 2006, 201; М. Radojević, Lj. Dimić, *Serbia in the Great War 1914–1918*, Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga–Belgrade Forum for the World of Equals, 2014, 194–204].

[xxv] In some cases, the Serbian soldiers retaliated for these murders, like setting houses to fire.

[xxvi] When a captain asked such a conscript why he kissed the gun, he obtained this remarkable answer: “I will need it some-day”.

[xxvii] The last chapter of the poem, which concerns the broken gun of Vuk Mandušić, is a true

apotheosis of weapons. About Petar II Petrović Njegoš and his works, see in [Проф. Др Лазо М. Костић, *Сабрана дела. Четврти том:Његош и Српство*, Београд: ЗИПС СРС, 2000 ].

[xxviii] It has been estimated that about 700.000 weaponry was “taken over” by “revolting civilians”, with the majority of them sold to Kosovo “civilians”. About the Kosovo Liberation Army from the Western political perspective, see in [J. Pettifer, *The Kosova Liberation Army: Underground War to Balkan Insurgency, 1948–2001*, London: UK: C. Hurst & Co (Publishers), Ltd, 2012].

[xxix] On this issue, see more in [T. Diaz, *Making A Killing: The Business of Guns in America*, New Press, 2000; L. A. Eargle, A. Esmail (eds.), *Gun Violence in American Society*, Lanham, USA: University Press of America, 2016; D. J. Campbell, *America’s Gun Wars: A Cultural History of Gun Control in the United States*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019].

[xxx] She turned out to be nymphomaniac.

[xxxi] They both returned to Serbia and were arrested. D. Milanović died of cancer in 2008.

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