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The Albanian Diaspora in Budzhak and Priazovye: A Problem of Language and Identity

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Abstract

The article analyses the problem of language and identity among the Albanian diaspora – an ethnic minority living along the Black Sea coast in the Budzhak region and the Azov Sea area in the Priazovye region. The paper outlines the history of Albanian settlements in Eastern Europe and traces various strategies for self-identification and the nuances of being an Albanian during different historical periods. In the last two decades of the 21st century, the Albanian diaspora has experienced a big rise in interest in the Albanian language, culture, and traditions. This surge has brought new group initiatives, a search for connections to the historical homeland, new ways of marking ethnic identity, and efforts to preserve the native language. Based on the author's field data, the research focuses on local ethnic activism and contemporary communication and “recognition” between representatives of the Albanian diaspora and Albanians from the Balkans. Particular attention is paid to the issue of the Albanian dialect and standard Albanian, which plays a significant role in the policy of integrating the Albanians of Budzhak and Priazovye into the transnational diaspora space.

Keywords: *Albanian diaspora; Ukraine; Albanian language; ethnic activism; ethnic identity; language and identity*

Introduction

Albanians are one of the ethnic minorities living along the Black Sea coast in the Budzhak region and the Azov Sea area of the Priazovye region. Representatives of the diaspora live in four villages: Karakurt (known as Zhovtnevoye before 2016) in the Bolgrad district of the Odessa region, and the three villages of Georgievka, Devninskoye, and Gammovka in the Priazovye district of Zaporozhye region. The Albanian minority is a part of the historical Albanian diaspora which migrated from southeastern Albania around the end of the 15th and the turn of the 16th centuries. The history of this migration, which lasted for five centuries, has placed the present-day Albanian diaspora in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions in a unique cultural environment that combines linguistic, ethnic, and social dimensions. During this period, they lived first in eastern Bulgaria and later within the borders of the Russian Empire, the USSR, and Ukraine. Until 2022, the Albanian villages were located in the territory of southern and southeastern Ukraine. Due to the ongoing military conflict between Russia and Ukraine, state borders have been changed and part of the Zaporozhye region has been adjoined to the Russian Federation. As a result, three Albanian villages in Priazovye region are now located within the Russian-controlled area.

According to the most recent official statistics from the All-Ukrainian 2001 Census, there were approximately 3,308 Albanians in Ukraine, with 892 in the Priazovye region and 1,862 in the Budzhak region (Vseukrayinsky peregys naseleennya, 2001). The last census conducted by the Soviet Union in 1989 estimated that there were approximately 5,000 Albanians living in the Ukrainian SSR (Naulko, 1998). However, this number is approximate and it can be difficult to accurately determine the exact number of Albanians based on field research, taking into account both people's self-identification and official data. Additionally, the significance of being Albanian, as well as attitudes towards ethnic identity, has varied over time depending on political, economic, and cultural factors.

Despite the long-term separation from their Balkan native land, the Albanian diaspora has preserved the Albanian language, which is actively used at home but remains unwritten. According to the main phonetic, phonological, and morphological features, the dialect of the Albanian diaspora corresponds to the Northern Tosk dialect type within the dialectal Albanian landscape (Novik et al., 2016a, 421-506). The dialect is affected by more prestigious languages such as Russian and Ukrainian and could potentially become endangered. However, the Albanian language is a main marker of ethnic identity for Albanian people in Budzhak and

Priazovye, used to distinguish themselves from others and signal their group affiliation.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the Albanian diaspora has experienced a remarkable increase in interest in Albanian language, culture, and traditions, inspired by their involvement in Albanian official diaspora projects. This has brought new group initiatives, a search for connections with the historical homeland, a rethinking of their ethnic group's significance, new ways of marking their identity, and attempts to preserve the native language. Similar phenomena took place not only among the Albanians, but also among other ethnic minorities living in southern Ukraine (Bulgarians, Gagauz, Moldovans, Greeks, and others) during the post-socialist period of the 1990s, which was defined as a time of “ethnic renaissance” (Anastasova, 2012).

The study is based on field data collected by the author in Albanian villages in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions in Ukraine during a series of annual expeditions from 2006 to 2013 with the research team of anthropologists and linguists from St. Petersburg State University and the Russian Academy of Sciences (Novik et al., 2016; Novik et al., 2016a). After 2014, field research in the Budzak and Priazovye regions was temporarily halted due to the worsening of Russian-Ukrainian relations and the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine that broke out in close proximity to Albanian-speaking villages. The research expeditions were annual trips that lasted between two weeks and a month, taking place during the summer breaks for students. For many years, these expeditions involved a summer internship for students from the Faculty of Philology at St. Petersburg State University. Due to the linguistic specialization of the team members, there has always been a special interest in collecting linguistic data, particularly the Albanian dialect. We recorded vocabulary, texts, and expressions in the Albanian dialect related to various aspects of life that were the focus of our ethnographic studies. The collection of data was mainly carried out through interviews and surveys (thematic ethnolinguistic questionnaires). When studying the issue of identity, we avoided direct questions and tried to conduct guided, structured interviews, allowing the informants to speak freely on the topic with digressions, without limiting them only to the topic of conversation. However, there were also situations where the method of participant observation during free communication outside the recorded interview provided the most valuable material. These included, for example, planned or spontaneous visits to informants' homes for celebrations, informal conversations (rather than interviews), and assistance with preparing food or helping around the house. Some field materials were also collected through observations of the activities of ethnic activists, museum workers, public organizations, and musical ensembles.

In 2019, I led a field expedition with my colleague, the linguist M. Morozova, to the

Budzhak region (the village of Karakurt and the cities of Izmail and Bolgrad). In addition to interviews and participant observation in the local community, I also attended several ethnic festivals that were taking place in Bolgrad, Izmail, and Karakurt at that time. I also had the opportunity to take part in a forum “*Preservation and Development of the Historical and Cultural Heritage of Albanians in Ukraine: Problematic Issues and Ways of Solving Them*” organized by diaspora activists in Karakurt. The forum was attended by an official delegation from Albania that came to the village to launch the program for familiarization and learning about the culture of the diaspora. This allowed me to observe the official process of establishing relations between Albania and the diaspora, as well as the ways in which they perceive each other.

After 2019, my research focus shifted to analyzing social media content, mainly on Facebook.com, that addressed the topic of Albanian ethnic activities. Most interviews were held remotely with representatives of the Albanian diaspora. After the 2020 pandemic and the outbreak of military conflict in 2022, field trips were not conducted. Online communication with members of the Albanian diaspora in Budzhak and Priazovye does not involve personal interviews for safety reasons.

During field trips to Priazovye and Budzhak, the total number of informants exceeded 200 people, most of whom were native speakers of the Albanian dialect and were residents of Albanian villages who had been born and lived there for their entire lives. Most informants were middle-aged or older and actively used the Albanian dialect in their daily lives. However, the attitude of the younger generation towards the language was also important for analysis, so we conducted interviews with them as well. All expedition materials, including audio and video recordings, and handwritten field notes, are stored in the Archive of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the Russian Academy of Sciences. This study is the result of many years of observations and the accumulation of interviews with various informants. Some of the most illustrative quotes from these interviews are included in this article.

Thus, the presented ethnographic materials collected in the first two decades of the 21st century aim to examine the language, culture, and identity of the Albanian diaspora in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions from the perspective of a minority group in a multiethnic environment. This article discusses the linguistic situation, ethnic activism, and self-identification strategies of Albanians in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions, as well as communication and “recognition” between the Albanian diaspora and Albanians of the Balkans. More specifically, the paper outlines the history of Albanian settlements, and the

nuances of the prestige of being an Albanian during different historical periods. Particular attention is paid to the issue of the Albanian dialect and the standard Albanian language, which is involved in the policy of inclusion of the Albanians of Eastern Europe in the transnational diaspora space.

1. Overview of historical background

The Albanian population in Budzhak and Priazovye belongs to the historical Albanian diasporas which were formed as a result of migratory movements from the Balkan peninsula in various directions between the 15th and 19th centuries. In contrast to the “modern” Albanian diasporas, formed from labour migrations to Western Europe, South America, and the United States in the late 19th and in the 20th century, earlier resettlements were due to the Ottoman conquest of the Balkan territories and the tendency to leave the occupied territories for political, religious, and economic reasons (Arsh, 1992, p. 134; Ivanova, 2006, p. 81, p. 301). The Arnaut population movement, or mass resettlement of Albanians, Bulgarians and Vlachs from western Macedonia and central and southeastern Albania into Bulgarian territories, refers to the migrations that occurred from the 15th to the 19th centuries. The term “Arnauts” has been applied to various ethnic groups originating from Albania and western Macedonia (Sharapova, 1990, p. 114; Ivanova, 2006, p. 301).

The first, large-scale wave of this population movement at the end of the 15th and the turn of the 16th centuries involved a mass exodus of Orthodox Albanians and Slavs from the areas of Devoll, Vithkuq, Korçë and Kolonjë to Bulgaria. Among these were apparently the ancestors of the Albanians who nowadays live in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions (Desnitskaya, 1968, p. 475; Sharapova, 1990, pp. 117–118; Novik et al., 2016). Due to migration, numerous settlements were established in eastern Bulgaria, mainly within the borders of present-day Varna region. From these areas, the ancestors of the Albanians, Gagauz, and Bulgarians living in Ukraine moved to the Russian Empire in 1809–1810. The resettlement of Orthodox communities from the Ottoman Empire to Russia has been a continuous process since the late 18th century. During the Russian-Turkish war of 1806–1812, the southern part of the Dniester–Prut interflaves, called Budzhak, was most intensively populated by Bulgarians, Albanians, and Gagauz from the northeastern regions of Bulgaria (Ivanova & Chizhikova, 1979; Sharapova, 1990; Ivanova 2006, p. 302). The Balkan natives received the name of “Danube colonists”ⁱ. Yet official statistics did not separate Albanians and Gagauz from the mass of Bulgarians (Ivanova & Chizhikova, 1979, p. 5). The village of Karakurt was founded

in 1811 near the center of the Bulgarian colony of Bolgrad, and was settled by a numerically dominant group of Albanians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz people.

The second wave of intense migration from eastern Bulgaria to Russia occurred between 1823-1834 and was largely linked to the military actions of the Russian-Turkish war of 1828-1829 (Sharapova, 1990, p. 120; Ivanova, 2006, p. 302). According to data published by A.V. Shabashov based on historical documents, the number of Albanians living in the village of Karakurt increased from 637 in 1816 to 700 in 1827 and 1,151 in 1847 (Shabashov, 2002, p. 278).

Part of the population of Karakurt, as well as a significant number of Bulgarian and Gagauz people from Budzhak, migrated to Russia between 1861 and 1862. They settled in the Berdyansk region of the Taurian province (now the Priazovye region). This was after a part of southern Bessarabia had been incorporated into the principality of Moldavia under the terms of the 1856 Paris Treaty (Islami, 1955, p. 163; Ivanova & Chizhikova, 1979). As a result, the Bulgarians founded villages along the Azov coast and in the Crimea, while the Albanians established three other villages near Melitopol: Devninskoye, Georgievka, and Gammovka, replacing former Nogai settlements. The former Nogai names of these villages – Taz, Tyushki, and Dzhandran - are still used by the residents of the Albanian villages to this day. Thus, there are currently four Albanian villages in the Northern Black Sea region: Karakurt in the Budzhak area, which has a mixed population of Albanians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz; and three villages in the Priazovye area, only one of which, Gammovka, was resettled by Albanian and Gagauz dwellers.

2. Albanians in Ukraine: Self-identification strategies and local ethnic activism at different times

Budzhak and Priazovye are polyethnic regions with compact settlements of Balkan minorities such as Albanians, Bulgarians and Gagauz. These ethnic groups live in close proximity to Ukrainians, Russians, and Moldovans, among other ethnic groups. Some researchers have argued that these ethnically mosaic regions should be considered a single cultural entity due to their obvious integration and close intercultural relations (Ivanova & Chizhikova 1979, p. 9; Ivanova 2000, p. 47). The long-term cohabitation of Albanians, Bulgarians, and Gagauz gave rise to common features in their traditions, customs, languages, and household practices. Until now, most Albanians also speak Gagauz and Bulgarian, in addition to their native language (Zhugra, Sharapova, 1998, pp. 117–151). Some of them do so due to everyday

communications, economic and social ties. Others do because of inter-ethnic marriages. To illustrate, in Karakurt, located in the Budzhak region, Albanians, Gagauz, and Bulgarians have settled in neighbouring quarters of the village, which has inevitably influenced various inter-ethnic relationships. Even a minimal amount of information about the ethnic composition of a family reflects the mixed nature of kinship ties throughout different generations. For example, respondent A.D. (born in 1957, female) considers herself Albanian. She does so because her father and mother are Albanian, her paternal grandmother is Bulgarian, and her maternal grandmother is Gagauz. The example of E.M. (born in 1924, female) also shows ethnically diverse family ties. Her parents are Bulgarians, her stepmother was a Gagauz, her husband is an Albanian, and her children consider themselves Albanians (Author's fieldwork materials, Karakurt village (Ukraine), May 2013).

Despite the tight and clear ethnic boundaries, the Albanians have always had a strong sense of belonging to "their" community. The main marker of belonging is still the language, and self-identification comes from using the native language (*jonë gluhë* 'our language'). Still, the inhabitants of Albanian villages in southern Ukraine did not identify with Albania or the Albanian people until the early 20th century. Furthermore, their ethnicity was not always clearly defined for them (Novik et al., 2016, p. 306). Dwellers of Albanian villages used the ethnonym *ga tántë* 'of our people/ours' and linguonym *si néve* 'our way/like us', which most probably originated while they lived on Albanian territoryⁱⁱ. These nomenclatures did not always allow Albanians in Budzhak and Priazovye to identify with the Albanians on the Balkan peninsula, even though they preserved a language that was quite different from those of their closest neighbours. One possible reason for this was the ethnopolitical image of Balkan settlers, which was created by the government at the early stages of their migration to the Russian Empire. Albanians, Gagauz, and Bulgarians were seen as "Orthodox colonists" from the Balkans. More specifically, they were considered to be colonists from Bulgaria, and as a result, they were offered subsidies and tax exemptions for the development of land.

According to studies by Y.V. Ivanova, who has regularly conducted ethnographic expeditions among Albanians in Ukraine since 1948, the inhabitants of the Albanian-speaking villages of Budzhak and Priazovye only learned about their ties with their homeland on the Balkan peninsula and their language being Albanian in the first decade of the 20th century. This was thanks to the fieldwork of the Russian scholar, N.S. Derzhavin. While studying Bulgarian settlements in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in the 1910s and 1920s, Derzhavin "accidentally" discovered villages where Albanian was spoken, and he informed the villagers that they were Arnauts (Derzhavin, 1948). Derzhavin's writings became widely

known among both the scientific community and intellectuals from the Albanian diaspora. Since the 1930s, the ethnonym “Arnauts” has been frequently used. As a result, academic interest in Albania and the Albanians specifically in Ukraine began to grow. During the latter half of the 20th century, Soviet researchers and then (after the breakup of the USSR in 1991) researchers from the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Belarus carried out academic studies on Albanian language, history, and traditional culture.ⁱⁱⁱ The “Albanians” have inevitably gained popularity among the Albanian community in Ukraine, along with the spread of knowledge about their historical past, language, and identity.

Despite the strong awareness of Albanian identity and increasing interest in the diaspora's ethnic history, the value of “being Albanian” and identification strategies have changed and shifted in different historical periods. During World War II, known in the former republics of the Soviet Union as the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), representatives of peoples who fought on the side of Germany were not recruited into the army or the front. This decision mainly affected the Bulgarian people in southeastern Ukraine, as Bulgaria was part of the Axis Powers. The Albanians and Gagauz, who had close territorial and cultural ties to the Bulgarians, were also not drafted for active military service. Unlike the Bulgarians in Ukrainian SSR, Albanians were not affected by repression or ethnic oppression, but in the postwar period they preferred not to openly declare their ethnicity due to fear of possible persecution (Novik et al., 2016, pp. 42–45).

The ethnic consciousness of Albanians was overshadowed by Soviet reality and the official desire to create a “new community of Soviet people”. Many minority diaspora representatives did not consider it important to identify with any specific ethnic group. In this case, Soviet identity prevailed over ethnic identity, and ignoring ethnic diversity led to the use of unification strategies in official documents. Exploring rural household books uncovers another noticeable trend. In the mid-20th century, children from inter-ethnic families were labelled by their parents as Russians or Ukrainians, emphasizing the importance of belonging to the “titular” groups. A similar phenomenon occurred when residents of Albanian villages declared Ukrainian identity in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of life in a new independent country. Many Albanians stressed their affiliation with the Ukrainian state, and often registered their children under the Ukrainian ethnicity (Novik et al., 2016, p. 55).

However, since the mid-1990s, the Albanians in Ukraine have become more active in declaring their Albanian ethnicity through collective initiatives, public organizations, and cultural activities. In Karakurt, a public organization, “Rilindja” (‘rebirth’, ‘renaissance’) was

founded, created by local residents to develop and promote Albanian culture. Alongside this, a newspaper, *Rilindja*, was published that featured folklore texts in the Albanian dialect. This was one of the first significant efforts to codify an unwritten language, despite previous attempts to create an alphabet and system of rules. The Albanian community also engaged in various creative activities. Two dance and singing groups were created: *Ruzha a verde* ('yellow rose') in Priazovye region and *Lule* ('flower') in Karakurt village. Fyodor Dermentli, a native of Karakurt, has written a book about the history of his village, which was published in Russian and then translated into Albanian (Dermentli, 2003; Dermentli, 2004). It is important to note that in the 1990s and early 2000s, belonging to the Albanian cultural community did not provide any advantages for individuals (economic, educational, etc.), as the Albanian diaspora was not officially supported in any way by the Albanian government. In contrast, the Bulgarian, Gagauz, and Greek communities in southern Ukraine have been actively involved in the diaspora politics of Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey. The declaration of ethnic identity by Albanians in Budzhak and Priazovye has been supported solely through local initiatives.

In the second decade of the 21st century, after late 2013 and early 2014, Albanians in Ukraine have experienced a renewed interest in their language and culture. With the new Ukrainian government's focus on European integration, the emphasis on one's ethnic and cultural identity has become more pronounced through new ethnic initiatives and the promotion of local practices. Contemporary social and cultural activities are not only run by local intellectuals, but are also promoted by local village governments. For example, the village administration in Karakurt has created a separate space in the "House of Culture" - the main building for public events in the village center - for the "Centre of Albanian culture". Additionally, an "Albanian museum" has started to function actively in the village school library, with items donated by local residents.

Above all official activities, a real "window to Albania" opened for Albanians in Ukraine through the Internet and social media, and especially thanks to Facebook. This platform has become a dynamically developing communication tool for many minority groups around the world (Georgiou, 2013). In fact, Facebook is a place of reflection, cultural and social connections of almost all Albanian diasporas (Kadriu, 2017, pp. 296–301). Online communities created by Albanian people in Ukraine on Facebook^{iv} cover events from their diaspora life, such as holidays, initiatives, and media news. They allow Albanians in Ukraine to showcase their lives and receive supportive reactions from Albanian-speaking followers all over the world (like "Respekt!" ("well done!") or "respekt për njerëzit e gjakut tim në Ukrainën e largët" ("I respect you, people of my blood in faraway Ukraine!"). This strategy primarily

attracts Albanians who come from abroad, including those from the Balkans and migrants from Albanian-speaking countries (Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, etc.) in Europe and the United States. Also, communities on social media platforms like Facebook serve as channels for information on events in Albania and cover various cultural traditions within the country. In addition, Facebook has also attracted the attention of Albanian sponsors, who financially support the Albanians living in Ukraine by providing textbooks, books, and laptops for learning standard Albanian, organizing trips to Albania for educational purposes, and sending items with Albanian symbols such as state flags, badges, and traditional costumes.

The rise of ethnic self-consciousness among Albanians in Ukraine, along with their search for their Balkan roots and the expansion of their local community, was eventually supported by Albania itself. In 2018, the National Agency for Diasporas in Albania, under the guidance of Minister Pandeli Majko, visited the village of Karakurt for the first time. After the delegation's visit, several representatives from Ukraine, including the head of Karakurt village and the honorary consul for Albania in Ukraine, attended the Diaspora Summit in Tirana. This rapid inclusion of Albanians from Ukraine into diaspora programs has affected all relevant resources involved in “producing” ethnicity. To this end, in the summer of 2019, the Albanian Agency for Diasporas organized an excursion for young members of the vocal and dance groups in Karakurt to visit Albania. In June 2019, specialists from the Albanian Folk Ensemble (Ansambli Kombëtar) and the Albanian Folk Opera and Ballet Theatre (Teatri Kombëtar i Operas dhe Baletit të Shqipërisë) were sent to the village to teach locals how to dance and sing “true” Albanian traditional music. Two teachers appointed from Tirana taught standard Albanian to schoolchildren for two weeks in September 2019.

Such a state policy of familiarizing the Albanian diaspora with the culture of their “historical homeland” inevitably led to new manifestations of ethnic movements. Community activists attempted to unite local public organizations from four Albanian villages in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions, which had existed independently, through the creation of the “Association of Albanians in Ukraine”. A new public organization, *Oborr shqiptar: Izmail'skaya albanskaya obshchina* (Обор шиптар: Измаильская албанская община ‘Albanian yard: Izmail Albanian Community’), was established by activists from Karakurt who live in the city of Izmail, located nearby. The activities of the organization include several different directions: bringing together local intellectuals and enthusiasts in order to preserve Albanian culture and language, creating a museum of Albanian culture, studying the standard Albanian language. Additionally, the organization aims to promote Albanian culture in the region, to establish cultural contacts with Albania, Kosovo, and the Albanian diaspora

worldwide, as well as to make business relations and to provide financial support for the diaspora. The Izmail State University of Humanities, where the Oborr Shqiptar community was founded, has hosted academic forums and conferences on the Albanian language and culture, bringing together social elites, university staff, rural intellectuals, and representatives from the Albanian diaspora around the world.^v

After having first-hand contacts online through social media, whether in real life with Albanians from the Balkans or with state representatives, “being Albanian” has become a collective trend among Albanians in Ukraine. Community members from ethnically-mixed families, as well as those who “remembered” or “discovered” their Albanian roots, declare their belonging to the Albanian ethnic community. These phenomena were often observed in diaspora and ethnic minority communities during the post-Soviet period in the 1990s. In the case of Ukraine, these refer to the successful integration of Bulgarians, the closest neighbours of Albanians, into the cultural and economic life of their historical homeland (Koch, 2016). For Albanians in Ukraine, this process began two decades later, but it was also influenced by external factors in national politics. Defining ethnic identity based on personal values continues to be a strictly individual process, but today it is greatly supported by the dynamic transnational diaspora policies of European countries (Shohamy, 2006, pp. 36-37). The ongoing processes of globalization and cross-border mobility indicate the increasing significance of self-identifying with the Albanian ethnic community, which requires a new declaration of its vitality amidst the long-term “aboriginal” existence.

Meanwhile, ethnicity is only one of the many identities that characterize individuals or groups in the case of the Balkan minority communities in southern Ukraine (Hristov, 2014). It is a complex and dynamic process, realized through social interaction, which becomes more significant under certain conditions and circumstances. In addition to ethnic identity, which is largely influenced by the boundaries of a language community, the identity of Albanians in Ukraine was closely linked to their sense of national belonging and the idea of Ukrainian statehood. This could confidently be said before the outbreak of military conflict in 2022 between Russia and Ukraine, and the territorial division of the Albanian population in Budzhak and Priazovye regions within the borders of the conflicting states. The regional component also plays a significant role in defining cultural identity due to the established cultural “enclave” of Budzhak and Priazovye regions as polyethnic territories of southern Ukraine (Kisse, Prigarin, & Stanko, 2014). Finally, this identity’s most obvious aspect is determined by the linguistic affiliation with the Albanian-speaking community, which is now reinforced by new ties with Albania, as well as the development of relationships and gradual mutual recognition.

Interestingly, until recently, Albanians in Ukraine had a vague idea of Albania as a country in the Balkan peninsula and an imaginary homeland (Novik et al., 2016, p. 234). Today, thanks to researchers, the internet, and media, almost all educated representatives of the Albanian diaspora are aware of their origins in southern and south-eastern Albania, including the towns of Korça and Voskopoja, and the Devoll region. This understanding of belonging to the Albanian world and a sense of “ethnic kinship” has developed due to the language. The slogan “Një komb, një gjuhë” (‘One nation, one language’) is widely reproduced in academic and media discourse in Albania.^{vi} It has become popular among Albanians in Budzhak, Priazovye, and the Albanian diaspora around the world.

3. Language and identity: a problem of the Albanian dialect

The issue of language and ethnic identity has been addressed in the context of various theoretical approaches and research traditions (e.g., Fought, 2006; Fishman and García, 2010, 2011). While the relationship between language and ethnicity may vary as far as “ethnicity itself is perspectival and situational, and therefore variable in saliency” (Fishman, 1997: 330), language is one of the main components of self-determination for any ethnic community. In most cases, language is used to define group membership, create boundaries, or exclude others, but it is also an instrument in social practices that affect the expression of ethnicity. In the context of ethnic minorities in Budzhak and Priazovye, the Albanian dialect is the key marker of Albanian identity, as self-identification with the community is built through speaking and using this language.

Despite the long history of language contact, the Albanian dialect, which has remained unwritten, continues to develop in close interaction with Russian, Bulgarian, Gagauz, and Ukrainian (Morozova, 2016). This is in contrast to the skeptical predictions of its disappearance almost in the second half of the 20th century (Ivanova, 2000). Currently, in the villages of Budzhak and Priazovye, the Albanian dialect is mainly spoken by people aged 40 and over. Middle-aged people (40-50 years old) use the dialect when communicating with older members of their families, but they usually speak Russian or a mixed Ukrainian and Russian sociolect (*surzhik*) among themselves. Younger people use the dialect only when talking to older people or in situations where Albanian-speaking people do not want non-Albanian listeners to understand them (Kaminskaja and Novik, 2008).

Russian is still the main language of interethnic communication, and all residents of the Budzhak and Priazovye regions speak Russian. In the USSR, Russian was the language of

school and higher education, so its prestige remained important for many years. Parents in Albanian-speaking families sometimes intentionally spoke Russian with their children in order to make the learning process easier at school. Since the 2000s, Ukrainian, as the state language, has been used in teaching and administration. However, in Albanian-speaking villages, it was always opposed to Russian as the language of everyday communication. At the same time, neither Ukrainian or Russian completely replaces the role of the Albanian dialect. Young people who study in Russian or Ukrainian at school still try to speak the dialect with their children at home, with older generations, or with members of the local community (Dugushina & Novik, 2022).

For Albanians in Ukraine, language is perhaps the most significant challenge in this new phase of ethnic identity construction. In 2018, a delegation of officials from Albania visited Ukraine, and the Minister for the Diaspora, Pandeli Majko, delivered a speech to villagers in Karakurt. His message was in standard Albanian, which was interpreted into Russian despite the absolute vitality of the Albanian dialect. Due to the differences between the dialect spoken by Albanians in Karakurt and the standard language, the villagers found it difficult to understand the minister's speech. But, the last phrase he said made a powerful impact: “Gjaku nuk bëhet ujë” (‘Blood is not water’). Each word matched the dialect phonetically and lexically, and everyone understood it.

On the one hand, preserving the archaic dialect creates a positive image for the diaspora, both for Albanian and Ukrainian officials. On the other hand, learning standard Albanian facilitates direct contact with “homeland”. Moreover, language promotion is part of Albania's official cultural policy. According to institutional agreements since 2010, educational opportunities have been made available to people from Albanian villages in Ukraine. People can go to Albania for a short period to study the language or enroll in special courses in Tirana. For example, two teachers from the villages of Karakurt and Devninskoye, who were trained in Tirana during a special summer language seminar, are now teaching standard Albanian in schools. Some younger generations of Albanians in Budzhak and Priazovye have learned standard Albanian through the internet and books available online, as well as through communication with Albanians abroad through Facebook or Skype. They have easily mastered standard Albanian because of its linguistic proximity and their understanding of the everyday language, despite the significant difference in dialects. Let me take the example of a respondent's answer to the question about the language he uses to communicate with Albanians from Albania, and as to whether it is a dialect or standard language: *“I can do both, both Tosk dialect and Gheg, there are no problems. Yesterday, I had an interesting experience. I spoke*

with a gheg. *Ajdi vlla, foli me sot!* ('hey brother, talk to me now!') *I replied: "Atë folleshe ti, këtu unë zallahitem"* ('like this you talk, here I *zallahitem*'). *I understood them*" (A., 37 years old, born in Karakurt; from the author's fieldwork materials, from Karakurt village, Izmail city, Ukraine, May 2019.). This play on words presented by the speaker means that, in the Albanian dialect, the verb 'to speak' is denoted using a different lexeme, "*zallahitem*", which is not currently used in modern Albanian. In addition, the main Tosk and Gheg dialects of the Albanian language, which differ considerably both in grammar and pronunciation (Desnitskaya, 1968), turn out to have little significance. Apparently, Albanian is seen as a unified language of the imagined homeland, which stands in contrast to the local dialect.

The impressions of local Albanians who have been to Albania are full of attention to ethnographic details. However, they particularly highlight their understanding of the language and their ability to communicate. In the following excerpt from an interview with a native of the village of Karakurt, B. M. (female, around 55 years old, born in Karakurt) recalls her experiences of a trip to Albania in 1995 as a member of a folklore ensemble:

"...The bus stopped. And we all come up and look...And the children ran out of school and talked in Albanian.... God, how interesting it is! This is my language, it is so clear! Well, there were moments when I didn't understand them. ... The woman was sitting, knitting the same thing that we knit here. These homespun things look exactly like ours. There were embossed pillows and "çarçaf" ('sheet') on the bed... Well, look, it's like it's ours! This was in Saranda" (Author's fieldwork materials. Karakurt village (Ukraine), May 2019).

A comment from the interview, which is cited below, illustrates a similar perception of the Albanian language by another resident of Karakurt, K.N. (female, 50 years old, born in Karakurt) who visited the city of Korça during her studies in Albania:

"When I went to Korça. For me Korça in general... God, they're talking ... An old woman is standing by me. I ask her how to get to the church, I know that I'm asking illiterately, but I'm asking. Well, that doesn't sound right, as they speak. Well, I ask her, let her explain, and she began to explain. And she starts telling me that "unë jam plakë" ('I am an old lady')... Her son brought her to live with him, her daughter didn't want to take her in, her son took her in, and her daughter-in-law says, don't go there, don't go here. I understood everything! I can't speak quickly like they do. But I understand them" (Author's fieldwork materials. Karakurt village (Ukraine), May 2019).

In online written communication, it can be difficult to determine whether communication is successful due to differences in the language competence of local users. There is no written tradition for the Albanian dialect. The Cyrillic alphabet, which is occasionally used by local users online, is not widely understood by members of the wider Albanian-speaking community. In online conversations on social media, it has been observed that Albanians from the Budzhak and Priazovye regions frequently use emoticons or abbreviations to replace words or phrases typically used in internet communications in Albanian (such as *flm vlla* instead of *faleminderit vëlla* ‘thank you, brother’) (Novik, Dugushina, Ermolin, 2019). Furthermore, writing in Albanian using the Latin alphabet and the use of online translation services is gaining popularity among Albanian residents from Budzhak and Priazovye.

However, speaking the Albanian dialect and representing it in written form using Cyrillic characters are an integral part of contemporary local ethnic activism. Public demonstrations of ethnic culture, such as festivals, fairs, concerts, or calendar feasts, often involve visual labelling, even for this unwritten language. For example, the dialectal expression «*Мирэ се вийни*» (‘welcome’) can often be observed on public invitations, banners, and posters. This strategy aligns with the tradition of using Cyrillic script in the Bulgarian and Gagauz dialects, which are both more functionally successful local languages in terms of school education and their use by all members of the communities. Additionally, there is a strategy to differentiate between the Albanian dialect spoken in Budzhak and Priazovye and standard Albanian, which is written in Latin.

Attempts to streamline the language system were made at different times by local intellectuals, such as poets, authors, and regional ethnographers, who published their work in the local dialect using the Cyrillic alphabet (Nikolskaya, 2010). However, these efforts remained for “home” use and were largely unknown to other members of the ethnic community (Novik, Dugushina, and Ermolin, 2019). As mentioned earlier, the editors of the newspaper «*Рилиндя*» / “*Rilindja*” (‘rebirth’, ‘renaissance’), which was published in Karakurt in the 1990s, published local Albanian folklore texts using standard Albanian or Russian transliteration. In 2016, Karakurt school teachers took the initiative to create a dictionary containing all of the languages used in daily life in Budzhak - Ukrainian, Russian, standard Albanian, Albanian dialect, Bulgarian, and Gagauz (Basysta and Zhecheva, n.d.). The small six-language dictionary contains various sections of vocabulary related to people, everyday life, materials, objects, food, clothes, animals, and more, as well as a short phrasebook containing the most common phrases and expressions in Ukrainian, standard Albanian and the Albanian dialect of Karakurt. In order to make the Albanian dialect more understandable for

different generations of speakers, the authors have used Cyrillic letters to write dialectal words. However, they have also used their own symbols to represent certain sounds that do not have a direct equivalent in the Cyrillic alphabet, such as interdental consonants. Despite various attempts to create an alphabet and a system of rules for the Albanian dialect, it has still remained unwritten.

Conclusion

From February 2022, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine has also affected the Albanian population. The redrawing and transformation of state borders caused three Albanian villages in Priazovye region – Gammovka, Georgievka and Devninskoye – to be on the territory under Russian administration. The city of Melitopol, which is the nearest to the villages, became the main urban centre in Zaporozhye region. The region was partially adjoined to the Russian Federation. These events led to a significant breakdown of the established regulation of political, economic, educational and cultural processes, and to the division of the Albanians of Priazovye and Budzhak regions.

Unfortunately, at this time, we do not possess complete information regarding the current living conditions in Albanian villages. The Albanians of the village of Karakurt in Budzhak are still united by several online groups, which were created with the aim of documenting the life of the Albanian ethnic community. Members of these groups continue to communicate actively on Facebook and Instagram with Albanians living in Ukraine and other countries, as well as Albanians in the Balkans. However, the situation in Priazovye differs. In 2022, the Russian government enacted legislation to block social networks owned by Meta, specifically Facebook and Instagram. Access to these platforms is only possible through the use of a virtual private network (VPN), which while complicating the process of accessing and posting content on social media, also violates the law. These new regulations have significantly restricted the ability of the Albanian community in Priazovye region to engage with social media. For this reason, Albanians in Priazovye do not widely use public social media platforms, both due to difficulties in accessing them and increased surveillance of communication in the context of the ongoing conflict.

However, we can observe some activities of the ethnic community in Priazovye under the new circumstances. Since part of the Zaporozhye region territory, including Priazovye, came under Russian jurisdiction, a new association of Albanians was established with its headquarters in the village of Devninskoye. Under the new administration, minority associations in the region, including those representing Albanians, Bulgarians, Gagauz,

Greeks, and others, were tasked with developing special programs to promote their native languages and ethnic cultures. In December 2023, the leader of the Albanian association attended the Congress of Representatives of National Minorities in Moscow.

Today, it is difficult to predict whether the Albanian dialect in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions will persist for centuries or whether it will disappear. Will the inhabitants of Albanian villages speak a dialect, standard Albanian, or a Russian-Albanian or Ukrainian-Albanian pidgin? Similarly, it would also be indiscreet to draw any conclusions about how attitudes towards ethnic culture will change and whether this will lead to the emergence of new group identities. In the current situation, relying on the field data collected over the past two decades, as well as available academic ethnographic research from the 20th century, we can draw conclusions about how the process of rapprochement with the historical homeland has influenced ethnic activism in Albanian villages and restructured attitudes towards language, culture, and identity in recent times.

It can be observed that the Albanian diaspora in the Budzhak and Priazovye regions has undergone an intensive process of rethinking its ethnic identity and constructing new forms of group identification. This process was accompanied by various ethnic initiatives, a re-evaluation of the significance of the ethnic group, the development of new ways to express ethnic identity, and efforts to preserve the native language. Throughout the post-socialist 1990s, similar phenomena have occurred not only among Albanians, but also among other ethnic minority groups in southern Ukraine, such as Bulgarians, Gagauz, Moldovans, and Greeks (Pimpireva, 2012). For Albanians, this experience began much later, in the 21st century, but it was also influenced by external factors in national politics as represented by Albania. The interest in language, identity, and culture increased after the inclusion of the local Albanians in official diaspora programs.

The mutual perceptions of the Albanians from the Balkan region and those in Budzhak and Priazovye are based on similar foundations. For members of the Albanian diaspora, Albania and modern Albanians represent a space of their native homeland and a new avenue to explore their ethnic roots and claim their identity. For Albanians in the Balkans, the historical diaspora in Eastern Europe also represents an embodiment of their ancestors, associated with an archaic language and culture. Presenting Albanians in Budzhak and Priazovye as a unique diaspora that has managed to preserve their language, culture, Orthodox faith, and identity for five centuries, the official diaspora policy, on the contrary, aims to integrate the minority into the unified system of national symbols, where standard Albanian plays an important role (Endresen, 2014). As a simplified and mutually recognized symbol, the standard language

works well for the intercultural communication of regionally isolated communities within the transnational diaspora space. However, the distinction between Albanians in Budzhak and Priazovye and those of the Balkan region is significant and is primarily supported by language. This distinction affects the position of the Albanian dialect, which remains marginal compared to the Albanian standard. The standard, being part of diaspora politics, gains prestige and potentially dominates over the dialect. In these circumstances, the Albanians in Budzhak and Priazovye have gone through a process of self-identification as part of the Albanian-speaking world. This has been followed by learning the standard Albanian language, preserving and maintaining the local dialect, and developing new strategies to construct their ethnic identity.

Notes

ⁱ Serbs, Greeks, Vlachs, Herzegovinians, Montenegrins, Poles, Transnistrian Moldovans and other groups also participated in the migration along with Bulgarians. The most numerous of the settlers were Gagauz and Albanians, who were also referred to as “Danube colonists” (Ivanova & Chizhikova, 1979, pp. 4–5).

ⁱⁱ The contemporary ethnonym *shqiptar* spread in the territories of the Balkan peninsula only in the 18th century. It denotes a person who speaks clearly, understandably, “in our way”, “our man” (Ivanova, 2006, p. 120).

ⁱⁱⁱ For details on the ethnographic and linguistic study of Albanians in Ukraine, see Novik et al. (2016).

^{iv} See, for example: *KARAKURT - 200 vjetori i ekzistences se Shqiptareve ne Urahine* (<https://www.facebook.com/shqiptareteukraines/>); *Bashkimi i shqiptarëve të Ukrainës*» (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/992507324266136/>).

^v Thus, the student conference “*Albania and the Albanians: History, Ethnography, Modernity*” was held on 19 April 2018. On 2 December 2018, Ismail State University of Humanities organised a round table “*Pages of the History of the Albanian Flag*” dedicated to the Flag Day of Albania, which was attended by university professors,

community activists *Oborr shqiptar* and rural intellectuals. The *Oborr shqiptar* organisation, Ismail State University of Humanities and the Bessarabia Development Centre organised an international forum “*Preservation and Development of the Historical and Cultural Heritage of Albanians in Ukraine: Problematic Issues and Ways of Solving Them*” on 5 May 2019. The forum was dedicated to St George's Day, or “*Kurban*”, as it is known in Karakurt.

^{vi} See, for example, the conference “Një komb, një gjuhë” held on 21 March 2022 between three institutions: the Academy of Albanian Studies in Tirana (Albania) (Akademia e Studimeve Albanologjike), the Albanian Institute of Pristina in Kosovo (Instituti Albanologjik i Prishtinës) and the Institute of Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of the Albanians in North Macedonia (Instituti të trashëgimisë Shpirtërore e Kulturore të Shqiptarëve).

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