Looking toward the 2012 centennial

By Stephen Schwartz

The Albanian people stand at the threshold of their first centennial of independence as a modern nation. The year 2012 will be the hundredth since the raising of the red and black double-headed eagle of Skenderbeu in Vlorë, by a band of patriots led by Ismail Qemali.

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The Albanian ethnos and its Illyrian forebears have occupied the Western Balkans since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. But the Albanians were later subjugated by the Ottoman empire, for half a millennium. Yet while the majority of Albanians became Muslim and officially accepted the authority of the Sultan, their ardent sense of national identity was not submerged in the imperial social system. The Albanian language, custom, law (kanun), and clan and family relationships remained intact throughout the period of Turkish domination. Paradoxically, notwithstanding their strength and communal development, Albanian traditions and culture were unknown, and to a great extent remain obscure, to outsiders.

Many Albanians served the Ottomans loyally and bravely, but the whole people learned by the late 19th century that the Turkish regime would not grant Albanians the rights they desired, particularly that of education in their own language. The campaign for Albania’s national freedom gained force with the founding of the League of Prizren in 1878, led by Bektashi Shishkeli and Frasheri brothers, who excelled as Albanian patriots and Ottoman envoys.

The effort benefited from the participation of the Catholic figure Pashko Vasa, and Leopoldo Rovena, who went to the Latin court as Ismail Kemal Bey.

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compare his and his movement’s militancy with the civic advocacy visible in the now-fading “Arab Spring” and in the conservative Tea Party and leftist Occupy movements in the U.S. and, in the last case, other Western countries. Vetëven- dojse honed its mass mobilization tactics when the Arab land hunger protests in the U.S. and, Western Europe were still anesthetized by authoritarianism in countries like Egypt, and by an il- lusory economic boom in the de- eveloped states. Kosova was ignored. Now that the rest of the world is following a similar course as that of Vetëvendojse, unfortunately, Kosova continues to be left out of the global media and political dis- course, notwithstanding that Kurti and Vetëvendosje provide an ad- mirable example of how to make dissent effective through strong bonds with the ordinary people. Unlike the Occupy movements, Vetëven- dojse has always had clear program-matic aims and an organizational base deep within the Kosovars, and its methods are mobile, avoiding the trap of ongoing confrontations at specific places.

In Vetëvendojse newsletter number 273, issued on November 4, Shpend Ahmeti and Dardan Sejdiu analyzed the Kosova budget, warning, “the 2012 budget, as with the 2011 budget, is based on risky sources of income that are not guar- anteed, and which could bring Kosova to a fiscal crisis.” According to Vetëvendojse, money promised Kosova by the International Mone- tary Fund in 2011 will not be real- ized, and the European Commission has provided no funding for Kosova in 2012. “The rhetoric of this Gov- ernment and the numbers which it presents, are inconsistent. The number is indicate an economy based on custom income – the im- port of goods and export of our money,” Almeti and Sejdiu re- ported. This makes the security of the northern frontier, where cus- tomers are collected, as well as trade agreements with Kosova’s neigh- bors and partners, especially signif- icant, aside from the priority of bor- der integrity as an aspect of sovereignty.

Under the current administration, led by the Partia Demokratike e Kosovës (PDK or Democratic Party of Kosova) and prime minister Hashim Thaçi, according to Almeti, budget expenditures for construction, and especially for highway building, amount to 12 times that allocated for other projects. This includes a pay- ment of Euro (€) 240 million, which Vetëvendojse denounced as “a blank check,” to Bechtel & Enka (a U.S.-Turkish partnership) for the Kosova section of the new motorway from the Albanian Adriatic port of Durres through Mitrovica on the Kosova-Albania border to Arllat in Glogove, rather than all the way to the Merdare cross- ing, as the Serb border, as was intended. Ahmeti also argued that “In the Ministry of Education about 024 million will be spent on con- structing new public schools, but existing schools has not affected an improvement in the quality of educa- tion. And, almost all capital projects in other ministries are in buildings. A palace of justice will be built, a new ministry – building, which on economic development is minimal. This is a budget of personal profit, because all capital projects are projects which make possible massive personal profit, corruption and a lack of transparency and there are no proj- ects which will increase economic development. I remind you that a promise given by Prime Minister Thaçi… was that the agriculture budget would be 5% of the budget and it is 0.8%, the priority of the budget, 5% is about 45 million Euros, and this is not allocated to the Ministry of Agriculture this year.” In his interview with, Kurti crit- icized Kosova’s political class for lacking vitality, except when pressing their positions, and, by contrast, emphasized that Vetëvendosje, although stubborn in its principles, cultivates political dynamism. Its parliamentary deputies receive the standard monthly salary of 12 times that allocated for other projects. Meanwhile the average wage of a Kosovar worker hovers around 700€, about twice what it was in 2001. “Members of parliament should not view their political work as a profession,” according to Kurti. Vetëvendosje deputies to the parlia- ment do not use the jeeps and body- guards provided to members of the legislature, petitions that Kurti con- demned for “distracting the represen- tatives from the people.”

Vetëvendosje’s leader is also con- cerned about the poor character of the U.S.-NATO-Kosova alliance. “The alliance is technical and financial rather than national and strategic,” according to Kurti. who emphasized Kosova’s need for “national-strategic alliances.” Sustaining Kosova statehood requires “democracy, but also the two elements still lacking: a defense force and eco- nomic development. In Kosova, capital circulates but does not accumulate” – that is, money comes into the country, but does not increase the income of the populace. “There are roads and petrol stations everywhere but no fac- tories,” Kurti pointed out. “It is a desert of asphalt.” Laughing, the Kosova- yarn intellectual whose sense of post- modernist irony is one of his best- known characteristics suggested, “maybe we are supposed to all live in vans and be constantly travelling.”

Comparing Kosova with its troubled near-neighbor Greece, which has led the European Community to the edge of collapse by its profligate spending and uncontrollable tax evasion, Kurti observed, “Greece is an abnormal country but is treated as a normal country. Kosova is a normal country but is treated as abnormal.” Kurti continued, “conflict resolution has been replaced by conflict management, simi- lar to intensive care in a hospital.” With the coming of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which has governed the republic since the end of the Kosova Liberation War in 1999, Kosova “left the Serbian prison and entered the European hospital. Prison guards were replaced by doctors and nurses.” But, Kurti said, the time has come for Kosova to be released from hospital.

The Albanian nation, then, requires permanent vigilance by its people and their friends, to avoid repetition of its past episodes of sacrifice – under the Ottomans, the monarchist Serbs, and Vetëvendosje. Supports from the people."