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The Discursive Construction of the National Project in the Shkodër Press (1913–1920)

Dr. Isida Hoxha

University of Shkodra, “Luigj Gurakuqi”, Albania

Dr. Ermira Alija

University of Shkodra, “Luigj Gurakuqi”, Albania

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Abstract

This study analyzes political discourse in the Albanian press published in Shkodër between 1913 and 1920, with the aim of examining how newspapers and periodicals of the period constructed national identity, legitimized political rights, and articulated the project of the Albanian state. The study draws on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), combining Ruth Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach with Teun A. van Dijk's approach to ideological polarization and the construction of the relationship between the “us” and “them” groups. The corpus comprises leading articles and editorial texts published in *Besa Shqyptare*, *Taraboshi*, *Shqypnia e Re*, *Hylli i Dritës*, *Lidhja Kombëtare*, *Posta e Shqypniës*, *Populli*, and *Koha e Re*, which are analyzed in relation to the historical and political context of the period. The analysis shows that political discourse is articulated through themes related to the political present and future, strategies for the construction of national identity and historical legitimation, as well as polarization between the “us” and “them” groups. National identity is constructed through unity, history, language, territory, and collective memory, while the relationship between the “us” and “them” groups is structured around the defense of independence, sovereignty, and national interests. The study argues that the Albanian press of 1913–1920 functioned not only as a historical source or a means of information, but also as a discursive practice that contributed to the construction and legitimation of the Albanian political project. In this way, the article seeks to contribute to research on the history of the Albanian press by offering an interpretation of it through the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Keywords: Albanian press; Critical Discourse Analysis; national identity; political discourse; discursive strategies; national project.

1. Introduction

In social theory, the media are regarded not only as a means of communication but also as an institution that participates in the production and circulation of ideologies. According to Althusser (2014), the media constitute part of the ideological state apparatuses through which values, beliefs, and social representations are reproduced. From this perspective, the media are not limited to transmitting information but function as a space in which meanings are produced and circulated, influencing the organization of social and political life. The Albanian press has played an important role in the political, cultural, and social development of the country. In their analysis of the period 1848–1912, Boriçi and Marku (2007) argue that it fulfilled fundamental functions, including promoting the national idea and the creation of the Albanian state, transmitting and shaping cultural values, cultivating a readership, and stabilizing the language of communication. According to the authors, although it developed under extremely difficult conditions, the Albanian press successfully fulfilled this role, establishing some of the most important models of Albanian journalism. The importance acquired by the press and Albanian-language publications in the process of shaping national consciousness is also attested by Dom Ndoc Nikaj, one of the most active figures in Albanian publishing in the early twentieth century, who was associated with the publication of the newspapers *Koha-Bashkimi* and *Besa Shqyptare*. In his memoirs, he emphasizes that, under the conditions of the time, “the only work that could be done was the writing and publication of works in the mother tongue,” which would reach Albanian families, nourish the “spirit and mind” of younger generations, and strengthen the “love of the homeland and the desire for Albanian freedom and self-government” (Nikaj, 2003). This assessment demonstrates that the press was conceived not only as a means of communication but also as an instrument of national education and the formation of political consciousness. For the first period of the Independence-era press, Zelka (2006) proposes a division into three phases: the period 1913–1915, when the center of the Albanian press shifted to the homeland and attention focused on issues related to freedom of the press, its relationship with the state, the functioning of editorial offices, and the social role of newspapers; the period 1916–1918, characterized by questions of self-government and national sovereignty amid the interplay of foreign interests; and the period 1919–1920, when the press acquired an increasingly important role in the political life of the country. Within Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse is not treated simply as text or an act of communication, but as a social practice. As Fairclough and Wodak (1997) argue, there is a dialectical relationship between discourse and social structures: discourse is shaped by situations, institutions, and social structures, while at the same time contributing to their formation. From this perspective, the press constitutes not only a source for the study of historical developments but also a discursive practice through which political meanings are articulated and circulated.

Building on this approach, the study treats the Albanian press not only as a historical source but also as a discursive practice. Within this framework, Critical Discourse Analysis

provides an appropriate theoretical framework for examining political discourse in the Albanian press between 1913 and 1920. Specifically, the study analyzes how newspapers and periodicals of this period construct national identity, legitimize political positions, articulate the political present and future, and represent political actors within the discourse of the period.

2. Theoretical Framework

Within Critical Discourse Analysis, one of the most important approaches to the study of national identity is the Discourse-Historical Approach, developed by Ruth Wodak and her co-authors. The Discourse-Historical Approach is based on the principle that discourses cannot be interpreted in isolation from the historical, political, and social contexts in which they are produced. Accordingly, the analysis examines the interaction between discursive practices and historical processes that influence the construction and reproduction of social meanings (Wodak et al., 2009). From this perspective, national identity is regarded as a discursive construct that is continuously constructed and reformulated through practices of public communication.

According to Wodak et al. (2009), the discursive construction of national identity is achieved through the articulation of a shared history, culture, political present and future, as well as through the construction of a shared community of reference. These thematic contents constitute domains through which national identity is discursively articulated. Through them, discourse contributes to the production and reproduction of narratives related to the nation, belonging, historical memory, and political legitimacy. For the analysis of these processes, Wodak et al. (2009) distinguish four categories of discursive strategies: constructive strategies, which aim at creating and consolidating collective identities; strategies of perpetuation and justification, which are concerned with maintaining and legitimizing national identity; strategies of transformation, which aim to reformulate collective identity in response to new historical and political circumstances; and strategies of dismantling, which call existing identity constructs into question.

In addition to Wodak's model, the study also draws on Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, particularly the concept of the ideological square and the polarization between the "us" and "them" groups. According to van Dijk (1998), ideologies influence the way discourse represents social actors by emphasizing the positive characteristics of the "us" group and the negative characteristics of the "them" group, while minimizing the negative aspects of the in-group and the positive aspects of the out-group. Consequently, the way actors are represented in discourse is not neutral but contributes to the legitimation of particular ideological positions.

In this study, Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach constitutes the main theoretical framework for the analysis of political discourse in the Albanian press between 1913 and 1920. In accordance with this model, the analysis examines the political present and future as a thematic dimension of the discursive construction of national identity, constructive strategies, as well as strategies of perpetuation and justification, which in the

corpus are manifested primarily through the use of history as a source of legitimation. Alongside these, van Dijk's approach is used to examine ideological polarization and the way the relationship between the "us" and "them" groups is constructed in the political discourse of the Albanian press.

3. Methodology

The study is based on qualitative discourse analysis and examines a corpus of the Albanian political press published in Shkodër between 1913 and 1920. The corpus comprises a selection of newspapers and periodicals with political, cultural, and religious profiles, including *Besa Shqyptare*, *Taraboshi*, *Shqypnia e Re*, *Hylli i Dritës*, *Lidhja Kombëtare*, *Posta e Shqypniës*, *Populli*, and *Koha e Re*. The selection was based on the role of these publications in articulating political debate and on the presence of leading articles and texts of a programmatic and political nature. The analysis draws on Wodak's Discourse-Historical Approach to examine the thematic contents and discursive strategies through which national identity is constructed and legitimized. Alongside this approach, van Dijk's model of ideological polarization is used to interpret the way the relationship between the "us" and "them" groups is constructed. The analysis is conducted across three dimensions. The first dimension examines the political present and future as a theme of discourse through which political objectives and a vision for the Albanian state are articulated. The second dimension analyzes constructive strategies and strategies of perpetuation and justification, which in the corpus are manifested primarily through the use of history as a source of legitimation. The third dimension examines the polarization between the "us" and "them" groups, as well as the representation of political actors in discourse. The interpretation of the findings is grounded in the historical and political context of the period under study.

4. The Political Present and Future

In addition to constructing national identity and legitimizing it historically, the Albanian press also articulates a vision of Albania's political present and future. In the corpus under examination, this theme is developed through the articulation of political objectives, the mobilization of public opinion, and the orientation of collective action toward the defense of national interests. The theme of the political present and future begins to be articulated in the first years following the declaration of Independence. In the historiography of the Albanian press, *Shqypnia e Re* has been regarded as one of the most active political publications of the early Independence period during the years of its publication. In his analysis of its activity, Jup Kastrati describes it as "the most militant organ among those published within Albania," emphasizing its stance against division, foreign intervention, and the chauvinist governments of neighboring countries, as well as its commitment to national unity and the political issues of the time (Kastrati, 1976). In *Shqypnia e Re* (1913–1914), the vision of the future develops in line with the orientation expressed in its programmatic formulations. In the article "The

New Albania" (no. 1, 15 June 1913, p. 1), the discourse is not limited to interpreting the political developments of the moment but is oriented toward the responsibility of Albanians for the fate of the newly established state. The appeal addressed to "Albanian brothers" shifts the argument from political analysis toward the mobilization of the reader, presenting Albania's future as the result of the awareness, unity, and engagement of Albanians themselves in the national interest.

This theme is articulated even more directly in *Lidhja Kombëtare* (1915), published during the First World War. In the leading article "The First Word" (no. 1, 29 March 1915, p. 1), the achievement of national objectives is linked to "unity of thought," "moral and material support," and "joint effort," presenting the political future as the result of the organization and mobilization of Albanians themselves. The discourse is not limited to formulating political aspirations but projects a model of action based on collective responsibility and national commitment.

In 1919–1920, when Albania's future was closely linked to the decisions of the Peace Conference, the theme of the political present and future is articulated more directly in *Populli*. In the article "From Independence to Autonomy" (*Populli*, no. 14, 12 March 1919, p. 1), autonomy and independence are presented as two different models of political organization, guiding the reader toward the conclusion that autonomy cannot constitute an alternative to independence. Through historical and political comparisons, the article legitimizes independence as the only solution capable of guaranteeing the existence of the Albanian state. In this way, the discourse shifts from interpreting reality toward formulating a political program in which independence is presented as a process requiring continuous political defense and active diplomacy.

A similar articulation can be found in *Koha e Re*, where the article "On the Road to Liberation" (*Koha e Re*, no. 1, 1 January 1919, p. 2) presents independence as a difficult path marked by obstacles, sacrifices, and responsibilities. Through the metaphor of the "road to liberation," the author directly appeals to the reader not to surrender in the face of difficulties, arguing that independence is not achieved by itself but must be won through perseverance and action. In the conclusion, the opposition between the figures of the hero and the traitor transforms the text into a mobilizing discourse in which Albania's political future is linked to the engagement and responsibility of Albanians themselves.

Overall, the theme of the political present and future shows that the Albanian press does not limit itself to interpreting the political developments of the time but constructs a political vision oriented toward the defense of independence, sovereignty, and national interests. Through the mobilization of public opinion and the formulation of shared objectives, newspapers articulate the political future as the result of the collective engagement and responsibility of Albanians themselves.

5. Constructive Strategies of National Identity

Constructive strategies occupy a central place in the political discourse of the Albanian press between 1913 and 1920. In the corpus under examination, national identity is

constructed through the interplay of historical, linguistic, cultural, territorial, and symbolic elements, which are articulated as constitutive components of a shared national community.

One of the clearest articulations of constructive strategies can be found in *Besa Shqyptare*, where national identity is linked to the idea of unity in the face of the threats confronting Albania. Its leading articles repeatedly refer to Albania, the nation, the flag, freedom, and the Albanian language, while the defense of national rights is presented as the responsibility of Albanians themselves. Another aspect of the construction of national identity appears in the section "News," where "love and unity" between Muslims and Catholics is presented as a condition for national unity (*Besa Shqyptare*, no. 6, 27 May 1913, p. 2).

Taraboshi follows a similar line. In the leading article "Austria and Albania," which addresses international political developments, the newspaper concludes with an appeal for the unity of Albanians, presenting national unity as a necessity in the face of the political circumstances of the time (*Taraboshi*, no. 61, 26 November 1913, p. 1).

A similar articulation appears in *Posta e Shqypniës*. In the leading article "The Path We Should Follow," regional divisions are presented as one of the main obstacles to the construction of national identity, emphasizing that: "The Albanian's state or homeland had not been conceived as the broader Albanian territory across the four vilayets, but rather as his own local region". In response, the article proposes a model of identification based on blood, language, social relations, civilization, education, infrastructure, and the press, which it regards as a means of disseminating ideas and strengthening national consciousness: "...through an honorable press, useful books and well-reasoned periodicals should be distributed among the people" (*Posta e Shqypniës*, no. 2, 8 December 1916, p. 1).

The construction of national identity is based not only on political arguments but also on the moral and emotional dimension of belonging. This is evident in the article "Why Is the Homeland Necessary?", where love of the homeland is presented as a natural feeling arising from the individual's attachment to their birthplace. In this way, national belonging is constructed not only through historical and political arguments but also through solidarity and responsibility toward the national community (*Populli*, no. 14, 12 March 1919, p. 1).

Overall, constructive strategies demonstrate that the Albanian press of this period does not present national identity as a given category, but as a discursive construct shaped through unity, language, history, collective memory, and shared belonging.

6. Historical Legitimation Strategies

In the corpus under examination, strategies of perpetuation and justification, as described by Wodak et al. (2009), are manifested primarily through the use of history as a source for legitimizing Albanian national identity and political rights. For this reason, they are analyzed here in terms of historical legitimation, as one of the ways in which the Albanian press supports contemporary political claims. Historical legitimation strategies

occupy an important place in the political discourse of the Albanian press between 1913 and 1920. In the corpus under examination, history serves not only as a form of remembrance of the past but also as a source of argumentation through which national identity and the political rights of Albanians are legitimized. One significant example can be found in *Besa Shqyptare*, where the figure of Skanderbeg is used as a symbol of national unity and resistance to external threats. In the leading article "Albanian Besa," the appeal "Skanderbeg's voice calls upon all Albanians today to come together..." does not merely evoke a historical figure but transforms Skanderbeg into a symbolic authority that legitimizes the need for Albanian unity in the face of the threats of the time. Through this articulation, the unity of "Ghegs and Tosks" is grounded in the symbolic authority of Skanderbeg and is presented as a necessity in the face of contemporary challenges (*Besa Shqyptare*, no. 26, 1 July 1913, p. 2). Another form of historical legitimation appears in At Gjergj Fishta's article "The Whole World Is One Village," where the defense of national identity is constructed through the contestation of negative stereotypes about Albanians. By comparing violence in Albania with episodes from European history, the author argues that Albanians cannot be characterized as more savage than other European peoples. On the contrary, he legitimizes the actions of Albanians by emphasizing that when an Albanian "has fired a gun, he has most often done so for honor," whereas other peoples "kill one another mostly out of egoism." In this way, history is used to challenge stigmatizing discourses and restore a positive moral image of Albanians (*Posta e Shqypniës*, no. 6, 23 December 1916, p. 1). The same logic can also be observed in *Koha e Re*, where history and cultural heritage are employed to legitimize the Albanian nation. In the article "Illustrious Albanians. Albanian Literature," the author presents an overview of Albanian historical, political, religious, and cultural figures, including, among others, Pope Clement XI, Muhammad Ali Pasha, Skanderbeg, Sami and Naim Frashëri, Pashko Vasa, Faik Konica, At Gjergj Fishta, Dom Ndoc Nikaj, Mustafa Qulli, and Nikoll Ivanaj. The article also highlights the activities of literary societies, the Albanian press, and the Albanian cultural diaspora in Europe and America as evidence of the intellectual development of Albanians. Through this articulation, a narrative is constructed that presents the Albanian nation as a community characterized by historical continuity, cultural tradition, and an established intellectual elite, arguing that a people with such a heritage cannot be denied recognition as a political subject. In this way, history, culture, and the contribution of the Albanian elite become sources for legitimizing national identity and the right of Albanians to international recognition (*Koha e Re*, no. 5, 19 January 1919, pp. 1-2). Overall, historical legitimation strategies show that the Albanian press uses history, national figures, and cultural heritage as sources of argumentation through which the historical continuity of the nation is supported and Albanian political claims are legitimized.

7. The Discursive Construction of the "Us" and "Them" Relationship

The relationship between the "us" and "them" groups occupies an important place in the political discourse of the Albanian press between 1913 and 1920. According to

van Dijk (1998), the representation of social and political actors is not neutral but is organized according to the ideological positioning of discourse. Within this framework, polarization between the in-group and the out-group is associated with the tendency toward positive self-representation of the “us” group and negative representation of the “them” group. In the corpus under examination, however, the relationship between these two groups is not constructed on the basis of a rigid division but is determined by Albanian national interests and by the political context in which the discourse is articulated. In the first years following the declaration of Independence, the “us” group is constructed as a politically and morally united community, in which regional, religious, and local differences recede in the face of the national interest. This is evident in the leading article “The Call to War and the Royal Word” in *Besa Shqyptare*, where Preng Bib Doda’s support for the Albanians of the South is presented as a national duty rather than as regional solidarity. The appeal that “The Prince of Mirdita calls upon the men of northern Albania to fight for their brothers and their country” expands the boundaries of the “us” group, incorporating Albanians into a single political community united in the defense of the country (*Besa Shqyptare*, no. 10, 14 May 1914, p. 1). During the same period, *Posta e Shqypniës* constructs a positive self-representation of Albanians. In an article by Emil Oplatka, Albanians are presented as a people capable of building functioning institutions and administering their own state, arguing that “with a strong and just system and an impartial government, the Albanian has every reason to be recognized as a people in Europe” (*Posta e Shqypniës*, no. 1, 5 December 1916, p. 2). Through this articulation, characteristics such as the capacity for self-government, responsibility, and political civilization are attributed to the “us” group, legitimizing the claim that Albanians are worthy of recognition as a nation and as a state. The relationship between the “us” and “them” groups also extends to the international sphere. In the leading article “When Will Albania Stand on Its Own?”, *Besa Shqyptare* analyzes the positions of the Great Powers and their resonance in the European press. Austria-Hungary and Italy are represented positively for their support of Albanian statehood, while France is criticized for its position and is quoted as considering Albania “an as yet unknown country that must first be placed under provisional rule” (*Besa Shqyptare*, no. 21, 22 June 1913, p. 1). In this way, international actors are categorized according to whether they support or oppose Albanian national interests. This demonstrates that the boundaries of the “them” group are not predetermined but are constructed according to each actor’s position toward the Albanian question. An even more direct articulation of this relationship can be found in At Gjergj Fishta’s article “A Dishonorable Comedy of the Twentieth Century,” published in *Hylli i Dritës*. In this case, the adversary is no longer limited to neighboring states but extends to European diplomacy, which is presented as responsible for the injustices committed against Albania. Through a lexicon charged with moral evaluations, Fishta portrays European diplomacy as dominated by “egoism,” “wickedness,” “betrayal,” and a lack of “honor” and “manliness,” describing it as “the disgrace, shame, and dishonor of all humanity” (*Hylli i Dritës*, no. 10, July 1914, pp. 297–303). In this way, the boundary between “us” and “them” is constructed not only around political interests but also

through a moral opposition between justice and injustice. The boundary between the “us” and “them” groups does not necessarily coincide with the division between Albanians and foreign actors. Depending on the political context, the “them” group also includes actors in Albanian political life when their positions or activities are represented as incompatible with the national interest. Figures such as Esat Pasha Toptani appear within this framework as part of a discourse that positions them in opposition to the project of independence, sovereignty, and national unity. This shows that national belonging does not in itself determine inclusion in the “us” group; rather, the decisive factor is the position that discourse attributes to actors in relation to the national project. The editorial position of *Populli* during the Peace Conference has also been discussed by Zelka (2001: 143–144), who singles out the newspaper for its opposition to the injustices inflicted on Albania by the Great Powers and for publishing articles and memoranda in defense of national rights. According to Zelka, some of these writings could not be published because of censorship imposed by the Entente military command. This orientation is also evident in the way the relationship between the “us” and “them” groups is discursively constructed during 1919–1920. During the Peace Conference (1919–1920), the relationship between the “us” and “them” groups acquires a new dimension. During this period, *Koha e Re* and *Populli* share the same editorial orientation in support of an independent Albania that would not be placed under the protection of any foreign power. In its polemic with the newspaper *Kuvendi*, *Koha e Re* challenges the idea that Italian support constitutes the only solution for Albania and emphasizes that “Albania is the home of the Albanians,” while demanding that “Albania, together with all the territories where Albanian is spoken, should stand on its own, that is, be independent” (*Koha e Re*, no. 8, 31 January 1919, p. 4). Along the same lines, *Populli*, responding to the same debate, emphasizes that newspapers are published in Shkodër that “defend Albania’s rights, showing the whole world that the Albanian nation wishes simply to stand on its own and be independent” (*Populli*, no. 4, 1 February 1919, p. 4). At this stage, the boundary between “us” and “them” is constructed not only through opposition to other states but also through positions toward the right of Albanians to self-determination and independence. Overall, the analysis of the relationship between the “us” and “them” groups shows that this opposition in the Albanian press between 1913 and 1920 is not based on a rigid division between Albanians and foreigners. Rather, the boundaries between the two groups are defined and reformulated according to the political and diplomatic developments of the period and the positioning of actors in relation to the national project. The “us” group is constructed through the affirmation of unity, the capacity for self-government, and the defense of the national interest, while the “them” group includes actors and discourses represented as threats to independence, sovereignty, and national interests, regardless of their national affiliation. In this way, polarization between the “us” and “them” groups contributes to structuring the ideological positioning of the newspapers and to legitimizing the Albanian national project.

8. Conclusion

The analysis of the Albanian press published in Shkodër between 1913 and 1920 shows that the newspapers and periodicals of the period were not limited to an informative function but operated as discursive spaces in which national identity, political rights, and the project of the Albanian state were constructed and legitimized. In the corpus under examination, this discourse is articulated through the theme of the political present and future, constructive strategies of national identity and strategies of perpetuation and justification manifested through historical legitimation, as well as polarization between the “us” and “them” groups.

The findings show that these dimensions do not function in isolation from one another but intersect in the articulation of the national project. The construction of a shared identity, the use of the past to legitimize political claims, and the formulation of objectives for the present and future create a discursive continuity between the nation as a community and the state as a political project. At the same time, polarization between the “us” and “them” groups shows that the boundaries of political belonging are determined not only by national affiliation but also by the positioning of actors in relation to this project. In this way, the press emerges not merely as a reflection of the political developments of the time but as an actor participating in the production and circulation of political meanings.

The main contribution of this study lies in the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to a corpus of the Albanian press from 1913 to 1920, demonstrating that an integrated analysis of thematic dimensions, discursive strategies, and ideological polarization enables an interpretation of the press of the period that goes beyond its function as a historical source. From this perspective, the study seeks to contribute to expanding research on the history of the Albanian press by approaching it also as a discursive practice through which the national project is articulated.

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