

UDK 323.173(=18)(497.11)"1981"
323.269.3/.6(=18)(497.115)"1981"

DOI <https://doi.org/10.31212/minorities.2024.28.mos.249-280>

Boris Moskovib^{*}

“IT MUST BE SOME GREAT HATRED”:
YUGOSLAV LEADERSHIP AND THE
DEMONSTRATIONS IN KOSOVO IN 1981^{*}

Abstract: Demonstrations in Kosovo in March and April 1981 were an unpleasant surprise for Yugoslav politicians, an unprecedented challenge. The paper analyzes the reaction of the representatives of the then federal leadership (i.e., mainly of the Presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and the Presidency of the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia (CC of UCY) to these events. Their arguments and behavior were studied in the context of the functioning of the collective leadership that was the basic principle of the post-Titoist system of government.

Keywords: Yugoslavia, Kosovo, protests, political elite, collective leadership, inter-ethnic relations

* Faculty of Arts, Charles' University, Prague, moskovib@ff.cuni.cz

* The article came about as part of the project no. 21-14095S “Krise – reforma – (ne)stabilita. Jugoslávský socialistický systém v aktérské perspektivě (1980–1986/1987)”, financed by Grantová agentura České republiky.

When on May 4, 1980, only a couple of hours after the death of Josip Broz Tito, Lazar Koliševski took over the office of the chairman of the Presidency of the SFRY, a completely new period in the history of socialist Yugoslavia began. The transition into the epoch without the undisputed leader was an unprecedented challenge for the federal political elite – members of the Presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia (CC of the UCY). Although they have been preparing for that “X-Day” for several months, i.e., at least since the beginning of 1980 when Tito was admitted into the Clinical Center in Ljubljana and when the state of his health (despite several operations) became increasingly critical,¹ taking over responsibility for “Tito’s legacy” was considered a severe task, and even as a matter of crucial importance for the future of the whole socialist system and of the Yugoslav state as such. All these tasks were understood by Tito’s heirs not as personal challenges but as part of the broader responsibility they had as members of the collective leadership. In this context, the reaction of Tito’s heirs to the Kosovo demonstrations in 1981 should be seen not just as a string of surprises, procrastination, and wrong moves.

However, the existing historiography still lacks attempts, based on archival documents, to look at the Koso-

1 On Tito’s illness and doctors’ attempts to save him cf. Milomir Stanković, *Tito između života i smrti: poslednji dani Josipa Broza po dnevniku ličnog lekara*, (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2018).

vo demonstrations of 1981 in the context of the political strategy and activities of the then-federal leadership. Therefore, we will outline the situation in the highest spheres of Yugoslav politics, where the events from March and April 1981 were received as an unexpected and extremely dangerous shock. In our contribution to the research of the so-called Kosovo crisis, we shall glance at those reactions from the “actors’ perspective” to understand which obstacles and dilemmas Tito’s heirs gradually faced. Therefore, to describe the events in Kosovo, we use only the contemporary official documents available to the most powerful men in Yugoslavia at that time. Our focus is on the opinions and arguments of the leading Yugoslav communists, based on which we will try to determine broader motives for their political actions, as well as the way the post-Titoist system of government functioned.

*The Kosovo Unrests and the First Reactions
of Tito’s Heirs (March-April 1981)*

As it is well known, the unrest in Kosovo broke out on March 11, 1981, in the student village in Priština. First, an alleged incident in the mess occurred when an Albanian student threw the tray with food, allegedly unsatisfied not only with the slow issuing of meals but also with the food quality and the general situation. Soon, he was joined by other students who started demolishing the equipment. In the meantime, a group of students and youngsters began gathering in the city center. Police forces that arrived in the student village prevented some 2.000 students from leaving the mess. In that way, any contact was precluded

with their colleagues in the center of Priština, who started breaking car and bus windows in protest. They stubbornly refused to talk with the leading officials, representatives of the University, or professors. Instead, they clashed with the police officers, 16 of whom were injured – one even by a pistol shot. The police used tear gas against the protesters, managing to disperse the most stubborn groups only around 2 A.M.²

The next day, March 12, 1981, the latest events in Kosovo were discussed by the Council for Protection of the Constitutional Order. Vladimir Bakarić, one of Tito's closest aides, chaired this body in the purview of the Presidency of the SFRY. Although the seriously ailing Bakarić rarely attended the Council's meetings, it was clear that his authority and influence were undisputed. For that reason, the views and opinions voiced at the meetings of this body, regardless of Bakarić's actual participation, were considered an earnest contribution to the explanation of the current security and political situation in the country at that moment, which could not be ignored. The meeting at which the members of the Council attentively and in detail discussed the demonstrations in Priština should be regarded in that light.

2 Here we on purpos follow exclusively the version the expert services of the Presidency of the SFRY later summarized for the federal leadership's use, because we are focused on the reaction of the members of the ruling elite that was based on exactly such reporting on the Kosovo unrests. We will not analyze the causes, the development and the general consequences of these events themselves (Arhiv Jugoslavije (AJ), holding 803, Predsedništvo SFRJ, 14. sednica Saveznog saveta za zaštitu ustavnog poretka, 17. 4. 1981, Hronologija kontrarevolucionarnih događaja u SAP Kosovo, 1–2).

With the exception of the indisposed V. Bakarić, members of the Presidency of the SFRY Lazar Koliševski and Vidoje Žarković, federal prime minister Veselin Đuranović, defense minister General Nikola Ljubičić, foreign minister Josip Vrhovec, and member of the Presidency of the CC of the UCY Stane Dolanc took part at the meeting mentioned above on March 12. Since the situation in Priština was still unsettled at the time of the meeting, deputy minister of the Interior Dimitrije Kreigher also took part. Thus, some of the most essential Yugoslav officials discussed the events in Kosovo only a couple of hours after the first wave of protests was quenched.

Although members of the Council still did not voice suspicion concerning the reactions of the Kosovo leadership because it was too early to give a “political classification” to the Priština demonstrations, they were not satisfied with the claims of Kosovo politicians that the unrest was just the expression of social discontent and simple juvenile frustration. The Council concluded there were simply no relevant reasons for such behavior because, during the previous two years, there had been no increase in prices in the mess or accommodation in the student village. In the opinion of the members of the Council and others present, the conditions at the University of Priština were no worse and in no way more particular than student accommodation at any other university in the country where similar anomalies and shortcomings could be observed. For that reason, they refused to believe in claims that the motivation of the protesting students was social and economic. The students’ slogans (“Some in arm-chairs, others with no bread”, “We want better con-

ditions”, and “Deeds, not words”) were considered a planned action with the aim of spreading the protests beyond Priština, i.e., to other towns and municipalities in Kosovo. With the view of the later interpretation of the Kosovo unrest, the main point is that the participants at the Council meeting openly pointed to the influence of the “enemy forces” that strove to use the demonstrations for their ends. The leading Yugoslav politicians were dissatisfied with the extenuation of the situation in the autonomous province and asked, in that context, how it was possible that the socio-political and security organs did not uncover the plans for demonstrations in which several hundred students took place. Because of that, they expected at that moment the Kosovo leadership to come up not only with an analysis of the latest events but also with a credible explanation for the public.³

For the Kosovo leadership headed by Mahmut Bakalli, the events in Priština presented an embarrassing complication. Many members of the Kosovo ruling elite had personal experiences with the demonstrations that broke out in the fall of 1968 – M. Bakalli was even the chairman of the City Committee of the UCY in Priština at the time.⁴ Less than 13 years after those unrests, similar protests were repeated (although, for the time being, without clear

3 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 12. sednica Saveznog saveta za zaštitu ustavnog poretka, 12. 3. 1981, zapisnik sa sednice, 1–4. Since minutes from that meeting do not survive we cannot establish exactly who of those present members of the political elite presented which arguments and views.

4 See: Jan Pelikan, *Novim putevima: Kosovo 1958–1969.*, (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2022).

political slogans). The significant change was in context. Unlike the fall of 1968, when Tito's authority was to the most considerable degree decisive for the political situation in the country, in the spring of 1981, the country was headed (for less than a year) by the collective leadership for whom matters of security and political situation were of utmost importance, being decisive for their political legitimacy. Nevertheless, they had limited possibilities to react or intervene, even when the situation in one of the federal units threatened to become dangerous for the country as a whole. Because of the shape and structure of power in the post-Titoist period, the representatives of the federal power center had to respect the prerogatives of the respective republic or province leaderships and were, therefore, at the mercy of their possible strategy, tactics, or even manipulation. Exactly that element of the political reality in post-Titoist Yugoslavia that made itself manifest with vengeance during the first phase of the Kosovo crisis in the spring of 1981.

M. Bakalli, as an experienced and pragmatic politician, tried from the first to play down the danger from the events that took place in Priština and their “enemy” background. At the meeting of the Presidency of the CC of the UCY on March 24, he reiterated that there had been no chanting of politically unacceptable slogans. To underpin his arguments, Bakalli claimed that the demonstrations were condemned not only by party organizations in the province but also by most Albanians. With all that he wanted to convince his colleagues that the situation in Kosovo was more or less stable and that on the whole, the Provincial leadership was in full control of the situation in

the region. Despite these reassuring claims, Bakalli had to admit to some unpleasant facts, such as that in the group of students that probably organized the first wave of demonstrations, several persons were under surveillance due to their inimical activities. However, not even this fact was enough for Bakalli to doubt the basically a-political nature of the unrest in Priština. M. Bakalli said it had yet to be checked and verified if the demonstrations were misused for hostile goals.⁵

Such tactics on Bakalli's part were quite logical under the circumstances. The Chairman of the Provincial Committee of the Union of Communists of Kosovo did not want the latest events to cause mistrust in him personally and in the whole Kosovo leadership and other cadres in the Province. It seems he did not want to allow federal officials or representatives of some other organs and institutions to interfere with the investigation of the causes and actors. However, such an approach could have met with success only if everything had ended with the events of March 11 which would be remembered only as an isolated, even accidental protest of Albanian students in Priština. As it was, already on Wednesday, March 25, new excesses occurred, this time in Prizren. A group of some 20 students burst into the medical and technical secondary schools and tried to talk other students and pupils into joining them in the new wave of protests. When they failed in this, they went downtown and started smashing

5 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/304, 83. sednica Predsedništva CK SKJ, 24. 3. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Mahmuta Bakalija, 123–128.

shop windows and making other excesses. Already there the protesters clashed with the police unit and one policeman was injured. The unrest in Prizren was clear proof that the eruption of dissatisfaction of the Albanian population was in no way confined to the provincial capital. The students in Priština could hardly wait for such an incident. Already on the next day, on March 26, a group of them burst into the students' dormitory and threatened the managers that they would set up barricades there and then. On that occasion, they once again demanded improvement in the conditions of the mess and the students' village as a whole. Soon, a new gathering of protesters ensued, and this time, almost 1.000 protesters were present. On this occasion, it was quite easy to notice slogans with clear political demands (“We want the republic”, “We are Albanians, not Yugoslavs”, “Unification of Albanian areas”). The police intervened again, holding the students blocked with tear gas and preventing them from reaching the center of Priština. Despite dozens of injured during these protests, they were not dying down. After the maneuvers of the police, the protesters managed to gather into larger groups again.⁶

After the new wave of protests that, unlike those on March 11, the police could not permanently disperse and re-establish order, Bakalli's optimism and self-assuredness of the days before started to wane. Because of that the leadership of Kosovo had reasons for panic – apart from di-

6 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 14. sednica Saveznog saveta za zaštitu ustavnog poretka, 17. 4. 1981, Hronologija kontrarevolucionarnih događaja u SAP Kosovo, 3–5.

sorders in Prizren and Priština, on March 30 excesses occurred also in Obilić, just some 10 km from the provincial capital. Here too it all started with the protest of a smaller group of students who chanted “enemy” slogans. Although the police tried to de-escalate the situation, young protesters sought shelter with the workers of the construction company “Ramiz Sadiku”. The workers took them under their protection and demanded that the police immediately stop pursuing the protesters. The situation was eventually resolved by local officials who talked to the workers, so those present started dispersing.⁷ However, the very fact that the protesters who acted from “the enemy platform” were overtly supported and protected by the “working class” was more than alarming for the political leadership.

Under pressure from the latest events, the chief of Kosovo communists had to admit some very embarrassing or even dangerous facts that he tried to deny and refute just a couple of days ago. At the meeting of the Presidency of the CC of the UCY on March 31, M. Bakalli had to admit that the protests were well organized and planned by enemy forces and that to all appearances they were not socially or economically motivated. He also had to admit that although Kosovo law-enforcement agencies conducted an investigation (in which experts of the Federal Ministry of the Interior also took part), thus far they could uncover neither the network of enemy activities nor the headquarters of the illegal organization that led the action. Thus, only the “perpetrators” of these activities ended up

7 Ibid., 7

in custody, not the leaders of the movement. Bakalli knew all too well that such statements could easily lead to the conclusion that the Albanian population was in revolt or even in open rebellion against the ruling system and the Yugoslav state. In order to calm down tensions and convince his colleague of the lasting loyalty of the Albanians to Yugoslavia, he personally resolutely refuted all such insinuations. He tried to adduce a couple of convincing pieces of evidence such as that the “Youth Estafette” [in honor of Tito’s birthday] passed through Priština with no major incidents, and that workers, secondary school teachers, or members of the intelligentsia did not directly join the protesters. Bakalli correctly foresaw one other thing amidst the flare-up of protests – a rise in anti-Albanian sentiment and passions – so he tried to convince his colleagues of the need to combat such phenomena energetically in society.⁸

After Bakalli’s talk in which he acknowledged the seriousness of the situation but still without self-critique, it seemed the federal Party leadership would accept all proffered information with understanding and confidence. In that sense, the leaders of the UCY would follow the routine rules of procedure in the spirit of respect for the decentralized power system that left the main decisions and the decisive part of responsibility with the leaderships of republics or provinces. However, in March 1981 the situation in Kosovo seemed not only completely unusual and un-

8 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/305, 84. sednica Predsedništva CK SKJ, 31. 3. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Mahmuta Bakalija, 2–12.

certain but also very dangerous for the security and stability of the whole socialist system. This was on the minds of those Yugoslav officials who openly contested some of Bakalli's claims.

While federal defense minister N. Ljubičić and Macedonian official Angel Čemerski were skeptical toward the claim that the "working class" had been immune to the ongoing demonstrations, it was Stane Dolanc who severely criticized not only Bakalli's concrete conclusions but the whole inefficacious reaction of the Kosovo leadership. It should be kept in mind that during the late Tito era Stane Dolanc was one of the most influential federal top officials. For a while, he had even been considered a possible heir to the throne, until Tito himself had removed him from the post of secretary of the Presidency of the CC of the UCY.⁹ Despite this elegant but obvious and clear demotion, Dolanc remained at the top of the Yugoslav political hierarchy. Although after Tito's death, Dolanc respected the principle of "collective work" and apparently, did little to increase his formal power, because of his experience, influence, and intelligence, it was by no means unimportant which views he espoused and in which way he imparted them to his colleagues.

S. Dolanc concluded in the very beginning that it was only then, three weeks after the first protests in Priština that Bakalli finally informed the federal Party leadership of the real situation in the Province. In that way, Dolanc actually expressed doubt in the veracity of all expositions

9 Jože Pirjevec, *Tito i drugovi*, (Zagreb: Mozaik knjiga, 2012), 616–620.

of the chief of Kosovo communists thus far. From the most responsible officials in the Province he demanded self-critique, in-depth analysis of the measures that had been undertaken until then, and to reflect on their own responsibility for the situation that had arisen. Dolanc even dared comment on the way Kosovo provincial authorities informed the leading federal institutions about the ongoing situation. In his opinion, the most powerful men in Belgrade knew precious little about the number of protesters or of the slogans launched at the protests. Even if they did receive some data, they were mostly confusing and spurious. He himself adduced an example of one such misunderstanding. While Bakalli protested during the first phase of the unrest that the protesters did not use slogans with political or even inimical content, almost at the same time, during the talks with the chief of Serbian communists Tihomir Vlaškalić, the chairman of the Presidency of Kosovo Xhavid Nimani discussed chanting of political slogans as an undisputed fact. In that way, Dolanc not only disputed the reports of the Kosovo leadership until then but also their capability for coordinated action and even their unity.¹⁰

M. Bakalli understood Dolanc's critique as the strongest attempt at blaming the leadership of Kosovo for a number of wrong decisions. He was also aware that such critique, voiced in the middle of demonstrations that were not only not waning but were spreading into other parts

10 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/305, 84. sednica Predsedništva CK SKJ, 31. 3. 1981, izlaganje Staneta Dolanca, 24–27, 30.

of the Province, could have decisive importance and could significantly influence the political future of the whole Kosovo leadership should other officials of the collective leadership join it. Bakalli was enraged by Dolanc's talk. In his opinion, one had yet to discuss the responsibility of the Priština ruling team. In any case, this did not mean its members were not united or that they even clashed over coordination of common action. He understood Dolanc's remarks as an unprecedented attempt at forcing form without "differentiation" [i.e. internal purge] on Kosovo communists that would certainly lead to personal changes and other purges within their ranks. "You know, it seems it's his style to make differentiation among the cadres. You won't get away with it in Kosovo, comrade Dolanc, on my honor and my communist word [...] I assure you, there are no differences between me and Xhavid Nimani in the assessment and actions".¹¹ In that way Bakalli resolutely refuted such remarks aimed at the Kosovo leadership and let it be known to all that he simply would not tolerate such attempts at interfering in "internal affairs" of Kosovo, not even in crisis situation.

Although Dolanc tried later on during the discussion to refute the claims that with his remarks he wanted to create conditions for "differentiation" in the Union of Communists of Kosovo, the conflict between him and Bakalli laid bare the increasingly tense atmosphere that gripped the Yugoslav political top-brass under the pressure of events in Kosovo. As the new and much more massive un-

11 AJ, holding 507, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/305, 84. sednica Predsedništva CK SKJ, 31. 3. 1981, izlaganje Mahmuta Bakalija, 36.

rest flared up in early April 1981, such mood was logical and justified. On that occasion, demonstrations that took place in Priština were joined not only by students but also by groups of workers and high-school youths. It was quite obvious that not only the self-assurance of the protesters but also their radicalism increased daily. This time, the protesting masses (estimated at 10.000) were met not only by local police forces but also by those from other parts of Yugoslavia. The rebellion in the provincial capital was soon joined by the Albanians from Podujevo, Kosovska Mitrovica, Uroševac, and Vučitrn. In that way during April 1 and 2, the protests in Kosovo culminated, with active participation not only of students but of all social strata. In Priština and most other places, the police used tear gas. However, this did not prevent the protesters in these towns from wreaking havoc: smashed shop windows, car windows, damaged police vehicles and even burning cars were the scenes one could see in many places in Kosovo in those days.¹²

As in the case of the initial demonstrations of March 11, this time around it was again the Council for Protection of Constitutional Order that first tackled the now in many ways, crisis situation. The extraordinary circumstances were proven by the fact that the meeting was held on April 2 in Zagreb and not in Belgrade as usual. The reason was quite simple: the ill V. Bakarić, a Yugoslav official with the largest informal authority in post-Titoist Yugo-

12 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 14. sednica Saveznog saveta za zaštitu ustavnog poretka, 17. 4. 1981, Hronologija kontrarevolucionarnih događaja u SAP Kosovo, 9–12.

slavia could also take part at the meeting in Croatia's capital. It was vitally clear that given the situation in Kosovo, the Yugoslav leaders considered such a procedure quite necessary because Bakarić's presence lent the meeting, the opinions voiced during its course and the conclusions the badly needed authority, significance, and even reassurance. Members of the Council recommended that the Presidency of the SFRY declared a state of emergency, not only in Priština but in the whole territory of Kosovo. In their opinion, the Kosovo leadership gravely underestimated the danger of the demonstrations and the subsequent events. Without reserve, they branded the Kosovo demonstrations as "counter-revolutionary" giving them in that way the most odious label that would be very important for subsequent political and ideological interpretation of these events. Although the members of the Council left the key task of suppressing the "counter-revolution" to Kosovo organs (proving once again they respected the mechanism of the "federalized federation") the intervention of the police and other law enforcement agencies was to be supervised by Xhavid Nimani, the chairman of the Province's Presidency and not by M. Bakalli, the chairman of the PC of UC of Kosovo, and thus the most senior official in Kosovo. This was the clear signal that Bakalli had completely lost their confidence, which in many respects determined his political fate.¹³

Despite Bakarić's strong authority, the Council could directly decide on none of these matters, so everything re-

13 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 13. sednica Saveznog saveta za zaštitu ustavnog poretka, 2. 4. 1981, zapisnik sa sednice, 1-4.

mained a set of recommendations and donations, albeit very urging. The responsibility was on the shoulders of the federal top-brass, i.e. of the Presidency of the SFRY and the Presidency of the CC of the UCY as the key government organs. The members of the collective leadership gathered on April 2, at the joint session of the state and Party presidencies. According to the Constitution, declaring a state of emergency was the prerogative of the Presidency of the SFRY as the collective head of state. Most of the present soon accepted the idea. Only Fadil Hoxha, representative of Kosovo in both bodies, tried without success to convince his colleagues not to impose a state of emergency in the whole Province, but only in those municipalities where the worst demonstrations took place, as well as to await the return of federal minister of the interior Franjo Herljević who had been visiting Kosovo at the moment.¹⁴ However, Hoxha remained alone with such opinions. “There was no crisis this morning, but we don’t know what will happen this evening, and our whole discussion proves that we are always late. Because of that, I’m for reaching a decision now. I’m in favor on voting about it. Let’s stop dallying,” said Petar Stambolić, expressing thus the opinion of the majority of those present.¹⁵

When it became clear that a state of emergency would be declared, it remained to be decided who would be in charge of coordination and the way of directing the actions

14 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/306, Zajednička sednica Predsedništva SFRJ i Predsedništva CK SKJ, 2. 4. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Fadilja Hodže, 29–30.

15 *Ibid.*, izlaganje Petra Stambolića, 30.

that were intended to suppress the forces of “counter-revolution”. On this point, it was also easy to notice mistrust in the leadership of the Kosovo team headed by M. Bakalli. The already mentioned Dolanc again criticized the way in which the leading Kosovo communists had tried to stop the spread of demonstrations. He openly asked why they procrastinated with energetic political action and left the whole responsibility on the shoulders of law-enforcement agencies.¹⁶ Even blunter was federal minister of defense N. Ljubičić who said at that moment one could no longer count on the reaction of Kosovo organs since mastering the whole situation had obviously surpassed their real capabilities.¹⁷ It was Ljubičić who suggested to send to Kosovo an operative group in which members of the collective leadership would also be represented. Given his experiences, he demanded to be nominated “commander” of the group who would decide on the spot about all important questions, among others, on coordination of further actions with Army units that were not supposed to take an active part in clashes with the protesters but were supposed to be ready to intervene if things got out of hand. Ljubičić’s proposal was quite a logical idea under the prevailing circumstances. However, it was incompatible with the principle of “collective work” because if realized, one member of the federal leadership would be entrusted with powers that according to the Constitution and all written (and unwritten) rules belonged only to the institutions and organs with seat in Belgrade. To be sure, according to its statutes, the Presidency of the SFRY had the right to

16 *Ibid.*, izlaganje Staneta Dolanca, 45–46.

17 *Ibid.*, izlaganje Nikole Ljubičića, 56.

delegate some powers to one of its members. Still, amid the dramatic events in Kosovo during the SFRY's Presidency, such a scenario would have been counter-productive for several reasons. Firstly, such nomination would further weaken the authority of the Kosovo leadership because its work would now be supervised by someone who would be regarded as a commanding “commissar” from the federal center. Secondly, the very same commanding “commissar” would also diminish the esteem of the collective leadership that exactly in such critical situations should prove its capacity to act and decide effectively. For these reasons, it was finally decided to send the operational group but to reserve decision-making on all important questions and further actions for “collective” federal top brass.¹⁸

The measures undertaken after April 2 managed to calm down the situation, although the situation in Priština and some other towns remained insecure in many ways. Meanwhile, in the Province's capital heavy clashes between the police and the protesters occurred, all under the watchful eyes of Army units. According to the official data, nine persons died during these clashes, seven protesters and two policemen. Although there were gatherings in towns outside of Priština during the next days, law-enforcement agencies now had things under firm control. The Kosovo leadership also acted much more effectively than during the previous three weeks.¹⁹ However, not only Bakalli, but most other Yugoslav officials feared what

18 *Ibid.*, izlaganja Nikole Ljubičića, 60, 151; Vidoja Žarkovića, 146–147, 155; Lazara Koliševskog, 155; Cvijetina Mijatovića, 156.

19 Petar Ristanović, *Kosovsko pitanje 1974.–1989.*, (Novi Sad: Promej – Beograd: Informatika, 2019), 196–197.

would happen next because they were aware that, as two weeks before, uncontrolled protests could break out unexpectedly in any town or settlement in the Province.

After quashing the largest wave of demonstrations, the leading Yugoslav communists were left with a number of important questions, problems, and difficult dilemmas: what had actually caused this unexpected, intensive, and massive rebellion of the Albanian population in the territory of Yugoslavia? To what degree were the protesters encouraged in their resistance by political and social circumstances in which the country had found itself in the period after Tito? Finally, how to combat the forces and consequences of the “counter-revolution” in the future, and what necessary political conclusions could be drawn from these tumultuous events? Soon it turned out that the answers to all these questions were not the task only for the members of the then ruling elite, but for several future generations of politicians who, from now on, would face a completely new, Kosovo crisis. However, given the complexity of the problem, our focus will be only on one, initially the largest worry that was weighing heavily on Tito’s heirs during the first days after the demonstrations had been quenched: how to replace the chief of Kosovo communists without upsetting the balance of post-Titoist power system?

*The Fall of M. Bakalli as a Challenge and a Lesson
for the Post-Titoist Ruling Elite*

Already in late March 1981, it was clear that the events in Kosovo would not pass without significant political consequences. The focus of attention was understandably on M.

Bakalli, who was the most powerful political official in Kosovo. The stronger the protests became, the more uncertain the political future of the Province's first man grew. We have already mentioned the sharp critique S. Dolanc heaped on Bakalli at the meeting of the Presidency of the CC of the UCY on March 31. Since early April such expressions of mistrust and even condemnation became increasingly frequent among the Yugoslav communist top-brass because it was already obvious that Bakalli had fatally underestimated the perilousness of the situation. Vidoje Žarković who visited Kosovo on April 2 as a member of the Federal Party Presidency, informed his colleagues on his return to Belgrade that faced with the aggressive behavior of the protesters, Bakalli accepted all previous opinions on the enemy orientation of the protesters. The chief of Kosovo communists even admitted that the Province was at that moment subject to attacks from enemy forces whose goal was the destabilization of Yugoslavia. According to Žarković Bakalli realized only then that political action was useless and that the Kosovo leadership must oppose the protesting groups with all forces at its disposal.²⁰ However, mistrust of Bakalli among his colleagues among the federal top brass was by then so obvious and strong that the chairman of the PC of the UC of Kosovo was not even entrusted with addressing the fluttered public. Instead, speeches were held by Xhavid Nimani and Fadil Hoxha.²¹

20 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/306, Zajednička sednica Predsedništva SFRJ i Predsedništva CK SKJ, 2. 4. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Vidoja Žarkovića, 106, 111–112.

21 Oštra osuda nacionalističkih ispada, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, 3. 4. 1981, 1-2; Djelo kontrarevolucije, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, April 4, 1981, 3.

Bakalli tried to calm down negative reactions toward himself and the whole Kosovo leadership. At the meeting of the Presidency of the SFRY on April 5, he explained in detail and defended the moves he made together with other members of the provincial leadership over the past few days. At that moment he could claim that, regardless of initial clumsiness, law and order were imposed, not only in Priština, but also in other places where demonstrations occurred. In that way, the enemy was, according to Bakalli, prevented from significantly changing the constitutional order and jeopardizing the existing system of power. On this occasion, the chief of Kosovo communists had to devote more attention also to negative phenomena. Thus, he openly talked about how hard it was for him to take the fact that the protests that were organized by “enemy forces” were also joined by representatives of the “working class”. Ineluctable was also the question of inter-ethnic relations in the province, which had been pretty upset by recent events. Bakalli was aware that most of his colleagues from the federal leadership took his talk, as well as all attempts at giving additional explanations, with skepticism and very reservedly. Nevertheless, he tried to convince them that despite mistrust of him personally, the information supplied by Kosovo organs and institutions should not be greeted in the same manner.²²

After almost four decades of the Communist Party’s monopoly, there were already several reckonings in the

22 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 68. sednica Predsedništva SFRJ, 5. 4. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Mahmuta Bakalija, 4-14, 40-41.

history of the Yugoslav socialist system, with individuals and groups of those who diverged from the Party line or opposed the ruling doctrine in some other way. However, all these reckonings – from adherents of the Informbureau and Milovan Đilas over Aleksandar Ranković to the representatives of the Croatian “Mass Movement” and the “Serbian liberals”²³ took place under the rule of Tito as the undisputed leader whose authority and will were in many ways decisive for the way and the consequences of all these political purges of once esteemed communists. In spring 1981 when such fate was to be also visited on Bakalli, as the main culprit for the break-out and massive spread of the “counter-revolution” in Kosovo, the main power in the country and the Party had been for a couple of months in the hands of the collective leadership. Its prerogatives and real possibilities for action were intended and defined so that none of its members could have the prerogatives and influence Tito alone once had. Although such a mechanism was quite understandable for the functioning of the political system of a multi-ethnic community with the power monopoly of the Communist Party, in tricky moments like the one when the possible dismissal of M. Bakalli and other members of Kosovo’s leadership was considered, such provisions proved to be a break for radical and effective moves.

Despite their disappointment in Bakalli, the representatives of the federal leadership still had to leave the

23 Za zvanično tumačenje svih tih slučajeva vidi: Dragan Marković, Savo Kržavac, *Zašto su smenjivani*, (Beograd: OUR Izdavačko-publicistička delatnost Beograd – Narodna knjiga, 1985).

decision to the Kosovo organs themselves, i.e. to the Provincial Committee of the UC of Kosovo, because in the circumstances of the post-Titoist government system, every other solution would seem as the brutal and very harmful imposition of will “from Belgrade”. However, for many officials, the Kosovo unrest was such an extraordinary and dangerous experience that they considered the problem of the whole country and its whole leadership,²⁴ and not only the Kosovo cadres. In that context, some voices put stress on the principle of democratic centralism that perceived the UCY as a unified organization whose members have the possibility to form opinions on any problem facing the Party and its members, regardless of the republic or province where the problem occurred.²⁵ Such views were not rare but were practically inapplicable in the case of the sacking of Bakalli and his collaborators given all (formal and informal) propositions of Party work, as well as because of the well-established procedures of the decentralized system of government.

Nevertheless, all the facts about the functioning of the post-Titoist system do not mean that members of the collective leadership had no possibility of indirectly directing the future course of events, including the final outcome of the political reckoning with M. Bakalli. Again, the opinion of the Federal Council for Protection of Constitu-

24 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/306, Zajednička sednica Predsedništva SFRJ i Predsedništva CK SKJ, 2. 4. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Jakova Blaževića, 69-71.

25 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/309, 88. sednica Predsedništva CK SKJ, 29. 4. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Voje Srzentića, 99.

tional Order headed by V. Bakarić was of key importance. To be sure, although this organ could not decide on personal changes in the Kosovo leadership, its analysis of the events in Kosovo could influence the mood of officials in the federal center and Kosovo cadres themselves. In the Council's document that analyzed in detail the events from March 11 to early April 1981, the Kosovo officials were severely criticized for slow reactions, underestimating the protest, as well as for completely misjudging their background, intentions, and even the number of participants. All this influenced the protesters' pertinacity and increased aggressiveness. In its study, the Council expressed another important accusation: in its opinion, the Kosovo organs had enough relevant data on the swelling of nationalism in Kosovo so that they could have better foreseen the stream of events. In light of this information, the protests in Kosovo came as no accident or surprise, as they were persistently repeated from the beginning by Bakalli and his aides. In the end, the Council gave an opinion on suppressing the “counter-revolution” and other activities with that aim, but it gave credits for it almost exclusively to law-enforcing agencies in whose work policemen from other republics and the Vojvodina also took part. The “socialist forces”, i.e. most provincial socio-political organizations and institutions acted extremely ineffectively and were caught napping. It was logical in that context that the document also addressed the question of the responsibility of all officials who were directly to blame for such an outcome of the situation in the Province.²⁶

26 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, Vanredna sednica Saveznog saveta za zašti-

When almost all the most important Yugoslav politicians met at the joint session of the state and Party presidencies on April 29, 1981, they were already acquainted with the Council's analysis so they could use its arguments and proofs during the discussion with no reserves or dilemmas. In talks of V. Žarković, M. Minić, or C. Mijatović, who chaired the Presidency of the SFRY at the time, it was clearly stated that Bakalli's resignation was necessary for consolidation of the situation in the Province and the beginning of the so long-awaited "differentiation" among the Kosovo communists. Minić and Mijatović mentioned on that occasion that the Kosovo organs – in this case, the Provincial Committee of the UC – nevertheless had the final say.²⁷ Only Branko Mikulić openly asked if sacking Bakalli exactly at that moment was the convenient solution since not only Bakalli but also many other leading Kosovo communists were targeted by Albanian nationalists as traitors to the people.²⁸ However, this remark was not radical opposition to the proposal that Bakalli should, as soon as possible, leave the most important post in Kosovo.

The behavior of Fadil Hoxha was interesting (and for the then situation of Kosovo politicians in a way even emblematic) in that context. The experienced long-serving political official was at the time representative of Kosovo

tu ustavnog poretka, 22. 4. 1981, Ocene i stavovi o kontrarevolucionarnim događajima u Socijalističkoj autonomnoj pokrajini Kosovo.

27 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/309, Zajednička sednica Predsedništva SFRJ i Predsedništva CK SKJ, 29. 4. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganja Vidoja Žarkovića, 111-112; Miloša Minića, 192; C. Mijatovića, 161.

28 *Ibid.*, izlaganje Branka Mikulića, 195.

both in the Presidency of the SFRY and in the Presidency of the CC of the UCY which made his position among the Yugoslav top brass somewhat unique in the system of collective leadership and rotation of cadres. However, the events in the spring of 1981 put him in quite a new situation. Although because of the offices he held at that moment, he was not directly responsible for the situation in the Province, for most of his colleagues it was clear that his influence in Kosovo was neither nominal nor marginal (unlike that of Ali Shukriu who was considered a “Belgrade Albanian”).²⁹ During the 1960s he was one of the active and energetic leaders of the policy that strove to use the ongoing decentralization and thus, expand the autonomy of the Province’s organs and institutions. F. Hoxha, just like Veli Deva, Ilijaz Kurteshi, and other Albanian officials even realistically imagined that such tactics could someday lead to Kosovo becoming the seventh Yugoslav republic.³⁰ After the “counter-revolution” broke out, it created for F. Hoxha a completely new constellation in which he had to act politically.

At the two presidencies’ meeting on April 29, 1981, he tried to convince his colleagues of the good intentions of Bakalli who had already intimated the possibility of his own resignation. This, according to Hoxha, should be construed as an act of an “honest communist”. On that occasion, Hoxha mentioned a very important matter – the day before comrades from the provincial Party orga-

29 A. Shukriu was later on seen as an official who would “commit open treason – go over to Milošević’s side” (Azem Vlasi, *Kosovo – početak raspada*, (Sarajevo: Šahinpašić, 2016), 262).

30 J. Pelikan, *Novim putevima*, 193 i dalje.

nization urged Bakalli not to rush with his resignation.³¹ It is difficult to say, based on the available materials, if at the last moment, Hoxha wanted to embellish Bakalli's situation and his image as an official who still enjoyed the support of the Kosovo cadres or if he had other intentions. In any case, with this comment Hoxha signaled that Bakalli's suspension need not go smoothly and that one had to take into account, count the mood of Kosovo communists and (primarily Albanian) public in connection with this matter.

Although most Yugoslav leaders more or less deemed that Bakalli bore personal responsibility that the Kosovo protests had turned into a "counter-revolutionary" bugaboo and that he should relinquish all his duties as soon as possible, in the post-Titoist period not even such resolute opinions offered guarantees of immediate desired changes, because the opinion of the collective leadership did not carry the same weight as that of the late supreme leader. In late April and early May 1981, the highest Yugoslav officials did not believe in a simple denouement of the "Bakalli affair" because they found themselves in such an unpleasant political situation for the first time, so they had little, almost no experience in that respect. Nevertheless, the shock of the "counter-revolution" as well as the pressure from the federal center proved to be too strong and threatening to allow open rebellion or sustained resistance on the part of the Kosovo communists to demands for im-

31 AJ, holding 507, SKJ, Predsedništvo CK SKJ, III/309, Zajednička sednica Predsedništva SFRJ i Predsedništva CK SKJ, 29. 4. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Fadilja Hodže, 156.

mediate “differentiation”. During the session of the PC of the UC of Kosovo on May 5, 1981, Bakalli eventually resigned on his own will³² so Tito’s heirs could be satisfied - for the time being - to be rid of that largest political problem. Veli Deva was elected the new chief of Kosovo communists. He had already held that office between 1965 and 1971 (and was then replaced by Bakalli himself).

Bakalli’s downfall in May 1981 was just the first step of the “differentiation” among the Kosovo communists. Resignations of almost all high officials ensued: Dxavid Nimanjani, chairman of the Presidency, Dušan Ristić, chairman of the Assembly, Alsan Fazliu, chief of the Priština Party organization, as well as several ministers in the provincial government, left their posts.³³ However, as to the effects of these personal changes, the opinions among the leading Yugoslav communists were divided. Part of them accepted the resignations of these politicians as the adequate price these Kosovo cadres had to pay for the eruption of the “counter-revolution”, but there were also those who believed such reckoning insufficient and even harmful. Several months after the unrest in Kosovo had been quenched, officials like V. Žarković or P. Stambolić demanded that Bakalli be tried for criminal offenses. To that end they used plausible arguments that several hundred youths were sitting in prison for “enemy activities”, but the man who bore the main political responsibility for these events “moved” around freely and still carried the Party card.³⁴

32 *Politika*, 6. 5. 1981, 9.

33 Ristanović, *Kosovsko pitanje*, 223-230.

34 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 97. sednica Predsedništva SFRJ, 4. 11. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganja Petra Stambolić

The Kosovo unrests of 1981 have caused mistrust not only between some Yugoslav politicians and representatives of the former provincial leadership headed by M. Bakalli, but complicated to a degree their relations with other Kosovo-Albanian officials. The new chairman of the PC of the UC of Kosovo, V. Deva, was considered an “old hand” who enjoyed the confidence of the federal center and was expected, that as such, would be the guarantor of “differentiation” in Kosovo. However, Deva also did not want to allow the “comrades from Belgrade” to meddle into the personal and political situation in the Province. So when in November 1981 some commented with dissatisfaction that former chairman of the Kosovo Presidency, Xhavid Nimani was still a member of the Provincial Committee of the UC, Deva resolutely replied that such matters were “our [i.e. Kosovo communists’] responsibility”.³⁵ F. Hoxha found himself in an even more difficult position amid the struggle with the “counter-revolution”, because,

ća, 72 i Vidoja Žarkovića, 51–52; AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 90. sednica Predsedništva SFRJ, 15. 8. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Vidoja Žarkovića, 121. After his resignation Bakalli got the job in the provincial Self-Managing Interest Community for Science. He was evicted from the UC only in April 1983. He remained out of politics until the late 1990s, but already in 1998 he became member of the delegation of Kosovo Albanians at the Belgrade talks on peaceful resolution of the situation in the region. He also took part at the negotiations in Rambouillet in 1999. He was elected MP at the 2001 Kosovo elections as member of Ramush Haradinaj’s Alliance for Future of Kosovo. M. Bakalli died in Priština on April 14, 2006. Cf. Petar Ristanović, Mahmut Bakali – prilog za političku biografiju, *Baština* 61/2003, 379, 381–382.

35 AJ, holding 803, PSFRJ, 97. sednica Predsedništva SFRJ, 4. 11. 1981, Neautorizovane magnetofonske beleške, izlaganje Veli Deve, 111.

as we have mentioned, he was suspected by some (mostly) Serbian politicians that he, as a long-serving official, was responsible for tolerance of Albanian nationalism that erupted in spring of 1981. Although such accusations were still not turned into official claims and were articulated rather as tacit suspicions and mistrust toward one member of the federal center, they represented a blow to the unity the post-Titois elite.³⁶

In any case, after protests of the Albanian population in March and April 1981, the Yugoslav political scene entered a completely new phase in which, apart from economic and social problems, the Kosovo crisis would keep popping up. The events for which Yugoslav communists used the term “counter-revolution” during the next couple of years, became the watershed in the development of the Yugoslav society. This was seen above all in the fact that both strong repression and attempts to search for the “Yugoslav” solution to the Kosovo crisis were not sufficient to durably solve a host of problems of that part of the common state. All that proved that Tito’s successors did not face an abstract or hypothetical crisis, but a very real one, with concrete forms and threats that surfaced to the full during the protests in 1981.

Sources and Literature

Arhiv Jugoslavije: holding 507, Savez komunista Jugoslavije; holding 803, Predsedništvo SFRJ
Istorijski arhiv Beograda: holding Dragoslav Draža Marković

36 Istorijski arhiv Beograda (IAB), holding Dragoslav Draža Marković, k. 8, dnevničke beleške, 16. 5. 1981, 750.

- Jović, Dejan. *Jugoslavija – država koja je odumrla: uspon, kriza i pad Kardeljeve Jugoslavije (1974.–1990.)* Beograd: Samizdat B92; Zagreb: Prometej, 2003.
- Kohl, Christine von Libal, Wolfgang. *Kosovo: Gordischer Knoten des Balkan*. Wien: Europaverlag, 1992.
- Marković, Dragan, Kržavac Savo. *Zašto su smenjivani*. Beograd: OUR Izdavačko-publicistička delatnost Beograd – Narodna knjiga, 1985.
- Meier, Viktor. *Wie Jugoslawien verspielt wurde*. München: Beck, 1999.
- Nielsen, Christian Axboe. *Nismo mogli vjerovati. Raspad Jugoslavije 1991–1999*. Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2021.
- Pelikan, Jan. *Novim putevima: Kosovo 1958–1969*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2022.
- Pirjevec, Jože. *Tito i drugovi*. Zagreb: Mozaik knjiga, 2012.
- Ristanović, Petar. *Kosovsko pitanje 1974.–1989*. Novi Sad: Prometej; Beograd: Informatika, 2019.
- Stamova, Marijana. *Albanskiot problem vo Jugoslavija po Tito (1980–1990)*. Skopje: Makedonika litera, 2020. (Cyrillic)
- Stanković, Milomir. *Tito između života i smrti: poslednji dani Josipa Broza po dnevniku ličnog lekara*. Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2018.
- Vllasi, Azem. *Kosovo – početak raspada*. Sarajevo: Šahinpašić, 2016.

Politika (1981)

Slobodna Dalmacija (1981)