

## FROM OTTOMANS TO ALBANIANS: THE FIRST BALKAN WAR AND THE PROCLAMATION OF ALBANIAN INDEPENDENCE (OCTOBER–NOVEMBER 1912)

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper deals with the activity and interaction of the three subnational spaces (the Balkan, Ottoman and Adriatic space) and how the Albanian reaction and proclamation of Independence was shaped under their influence in the context of the First Balkan War. Alternatively, Albania's secession from the Ottoman Empire was closely related to state-building. In addition, the paper provides an analysis of the mechanisms employed by the Albanian political elite in the National Congress of Vlorë to give the self-governing institutions a national and supra-religious character. In this article, a variety of sources are used, offering an interdisciplinary approach, a diverse and balanced approach. The literature used, both Albanian and foreign, has been completed and specified by archival documentation.*

**KEYWORDS:** First Balkan War, Albania, independence, Serbia, Greece, Montenegro, Ottoman Empire, Adriatic Powers, self-governing institutions, supra-religious character

### Introduction

During the First Balkan War, Albanians' secession from the Ottoman Empire should not be viewed as *ex-novo*. As it had occurred earlier in the final moments in the process of creating new states in the Balkans, even in the Albanian case the developments produced on a micro-regional/national scale took place under the impetus and evolution of competitive or divergent dynamics developed in the Balkan and Ottoman space, simultaneously with them also in the European space or more narrowly in the Adriatic one. Geopolitical factors should not be separated from the involvement and interaction of local political actors with the Ottoman imperial authorities in the

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center and with the Adriatic Powers. They both participated in the dynamics of the creation of the national state. They thus contributed to the handling of the political action of the Albanian secession from the Ottoman Empire.

The article, as the title defines, focuses on the self-determination reaction of the Albanian political elite, of a secessionist nature from the Ottoman Empire, set over a short period of time of no more than two months (October and November 1912), starting with the beginning of the First Balkan War. In terms of content, it operates within three macro lines (Balkan, European, and Ottoman), each operating within parallel levels of analysis that combine macro and micro-Albanian developments, which is an interesting innovation. The finalization of Albanian self-determination in the National Assembly of Vlorë (Valona) is the last aspect analyzed in this article. This article places the secession also in the prism of the philosophy that the Albanian political elite as a representative in the National Assembly followed the creation of self-governing institutions. In studying these events, this article draws from diverse sources, offering a diplomatic approach and a balanced treatment. The extensive body of literature has been complemented and substantiated by archival documentation published, as well as well as unpublished ones. This was intended contribute to ongoing debates regarding the Balkan Wars history.

### **Balkan space and self-determination action of the Albanians**

The end of the Albanian uprising (April-August 1912)<sup>1</sup> and the agreement between the Albanians and the Sublime Porte, on August 18<sup>th</sup>, did not bring peace to the Balkans. For the first time since 1830, when the emergence of the Balkan national states had begun, in the conditions of the obvious Ottoman inability to quickly extinguish the Albanian uprising, as well as the quick takeover of Ottoman Libya by the Italians<sup>2</sup>, the Balkan states tried to secede politically from the Great Powers and created a new territorial order through a regional coalition, starting from March 1912.<sup>3</sup> Under the motto "The Balkans for the Balkans" they started to show off readiness not to leave the Balkan provinces in the hands of the Great Powers, part of the respective expansionist projects, as well as to prevent the creation of an autonomous Albanian state lying from the Adriatic to the borders of Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro and Greece, an extension that divides the Balkan

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<sup>1</sup> The Albanians requests were limited to the administrative territorial autonomy. They aimed to create a specific administration that should be built around local institutions "adapted to the customs and needs of the country". This specific administration would be made possible by creating a province (region) of Albania which should unite the provinces of Rumelia: Kosovo, Shkodra, Ioannina, and Monastir. *Arkivi i Institutit të Historisë Tiranë/Archive of History Institute – Tirana (AIH)*, Fondi: Archivio Storico e Diplomatico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASDMAE), Serie Politica P (1891–1916), Albania, Pacco 676. Report of the Italian consul in Skopje addressed to the Italian Foreign Minister, Sofia, September 14, 1912.

<sup>2</sup> About Italian-Turkish War over Libya see: Timothy W Childs, *Italo-Turkish Diplomacy and the War over Libya, 1911–1912*, (Leiden: Brill, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Bernd J. Fischer, Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Një histori e përmbledhur e Shqipërisë* (Prishtina: Artini, 2021), 124.

states like a wedge.<sup>4</sup> After strongly opposing this project in Istanbul and demanding the implementation of European reforms for Christians in the Macedonian provinces according to Article 23 of the Treaty of Berlin (1878),<sup>5</sup> at the end of September the Balkan Allies began to openly demonstrate preparations for war.

Preparations were made in accordance with the preliminary agreements between the Balkan states. Under the influence of the Russian representatives in Belgrade and Sofia, Nicholas Hartwig and Anatoly Neklyudov, who had succeeded in harmonizing the Serbian-Bulgarian contradictions, on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1912, the agreement on the friendly alliance between Serbia and Bulgaria was signed, which obliged the signatory parties for mutual assistance in case their interests and claims were violated by other powers.<sup>6</sup> The agreement was followed by the Greek-Bulgarian one (May 1912), which obliged the parties to mutual military assistance but did not mention the claims since both were aimed at Thessaloniki. The Montenegrin-Bulgarian Alliance an oral form of agreement, and Serbian-Montenegro ones concluded the series of Balkan Alliances of 1912.<sup>7</sup>

On October 8<sup>th</sup>, in the same day when Balkan Allies received the Austria-Russian note, which warned them to maintain peace and respect the *status quo*, with the aim of occupying Shkodra (Skadar) and the Sandzak of Novi Pazar, Montenegro the smallest and weakest state in the Balkans declared war on the Ottoman Empire.<sup>8</sup> On October 17<sup>th</sup>, Serbia and Bulgaria declared war, and a day later, Greece did the same. Within a few days, the Balkan armies crossed the Ottoman Empire borders.

The declaration of war by the Serbian King was just a formal act as the Serbian army had begun mobilizing since September 20<sup>th</sup>, 1912.<sup>9</sup> The 3rd Army and independent formations such as the Ibar Army and the Javor Brigade marched south. Under these circumstances, without officially starting the war, Serbian military units began advancing towards Kosovo. The attacks began on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1912, when the Javor Brigade and the Ibar Army crossed the Ottoman state border. They were supported by the 3rd Army and marched towards Pristina.<sup>10</sup> On October 23<sup>rd</sup>,

<sup>4</sup> Oliver Jens Schmitt, *Ballkani në shekullin XX. Një histori post-imperiale* (Prishtina: Artini, 2021), 13, 39, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Gül Tokay, "Ottoman diplomacy, the Balkan Wars and the Great Powers", in: *The Wars Before the War, Conflict and International Politics before the Outbreak of the First World War*, edited by Dominik Geppert, William Mulligan, Andreas Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Михаило Војводић, Радован Самарџић, (приређивачи), *Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903–1914*, Књига 5, Свеска 1, (Београд: САНУ, 1984), 375; Thoma Murzaku, *Politika ballkanike e Rusisë dhe çështja shqiptare: nga origjina deri në ditët e sotme* (Tiranë: Mësonjëtorja e parë, 1999), 55.

<sup>7</sup> Džon D. Tredvej believes that the foundations of the Montenegrin-Bulgarian agreement were laid in Vienna, at the beginning of June 1912. See: Džon D. Tredvej, *Soko i orao: Crna Gora i Austro-Ugarska 1908–1914*. Podgorica: Istorijski institut Crne Gore: SANUS, 2005. See also: Leften S. Stavrianos, *The Balkans since 1453 – with a new Introduction by Traian Stoianovich* (London: Hurst & Company, 2000), 533.

<sup>8</sup> Саша Кнежевић, „Едвард Греј и Скадарска криза”, *Југословенски Историјски Часопис*, бр. 1–2, (2000), 57.

<sup>9</sup> Милутин Д. Лазаревић, *Наши ратови за ослобођење и уједињење, српски-турски рат 1912. године*, Књига прва (Београд: Штампарија Златибор, 1929), 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

the Serbian army took Pristina, and a few days later Vučitrn, Kosovska Mitrovica, and Novi Pazar.<sup>11</sup> With control established there, the Supreme Command of Serbia ordered the Army of Ibar to move towards Djakovica (Gjakova) and Peć (Peja), to occupy these two cities. On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, Serbian troops reached Peja, but it had already been occupied by the Montenegrin army.<sup>12</sup>

At the beginning of November 1912, Kosovo was fully under Serbian and Montenegrin military forces. The Serbs occupied most of it, while the Montenegrins held the western part, namely the cities of Peja, Istok, and Gjakova. After the agreement of November 7<sup>th</sup> that determined the border between Serbia and Montenegro,<sup>13</sup> the respective administrations began to be established.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman garrisons in Thessaloniki (V), Monastir (VI), Skopje (VII), and those in Shkodër, Ioannina, Strumica, Pljevlja, Peja and Thessaloniki quickly retreated, offering no serious resistance.<sup>14</sup> Serbian sources say the defense of these territories was entrusted to the Western Army, headquartered in Thessaloniki. The Vardar Army, consisting of 86,000 soldiers, was also part of this army. Due to the attack by Serbian and Montenegrin forces, the units of this army were unable to be fully replenished with reserves from the divisions in Prizren and Pristina.<sup>15</sup>

The rapid advancement of the Balkan Allies spurred their negotiations. These negotiations intensified at the end of October, when the Great Powers declared the break-up of the *status quo* in the Balkans. Discussions about the Ottoman Empire's territorial partition undoubtedly affected Albanian territories. Specifically, the restoration of "Stara Serbia/Old Serbia" was Serbian policy's ultimate goal. The geographical notion "Old Serbia" emerged as a result of state changes, i. e. to describe those regions of the medieval Serbian state that did not appear on the map of the Principality of Ser-

<sup>11</sup> Milovan Sekulić, „Titova Mitrovica u balkanskom i prvom svetskom ratu”, *Kosova*, br. 15, (1986), 59–60.

<sup>12</sup> Milovan Sekulić, *Kosovo od 1912. do 1918. godine*, (doktorska disertacija, Univerzitet u Prištini, Filozofski Fakultet, Odeljenje za istoriju, 1980).

<sup>13</sup> Liman Rushiti, *Lëvizja kaçake në Kosovë: 1919–1928* (Prishtinë: Instituti i Historisë, 2016), 21.

<sup>14</sup> About the First Balkan War see: Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912–1913. Prelude to the First World War* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002); M. Hakan Yavuz and Isa Blumi (eds.), *War and Nationalism. The Balkan Wars, 1912–1913, and their Sociopolitical Implications* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2013); Feroz Ahmad, “The Late Ottoman Empire”, *The Great Powers and the End of the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Marian Kent (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 5–30; Mark Biondich, *The Balkans, Revolution, War, and Political Violence since 1878* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Isa Blumi, *Reinstating the Ottomans: Alternative Balkan Modernities, 1800–1912* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2011); Ebru Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks and the Balkans: Empire Lost, Relations Altered* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Sevtap Demirci, *British Public Opinion towards the Ottoman Empire during the Two Crises: Bosnia-Herzegovina (1908–1909) and Balkan Wars (1912–1913)* (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 2006); Başkanlığı Genelkurmay (ed.), *Balkan Harbi Tarihi (1912–1913). Harbin Sebepleri, Askeri Hazırlıklar, ve Osmanlı Devletinin Harbe Girişi*. vol. 1 (Ankara: Gnkur, Basımevi, 1970); Misha Glenny, *The Balkans: Nationalism, War, and the Great Powers, 1804–1999* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999); Karl Kaser, “The Balkan Wars, 1912–1913: An Austro-Hungarian Perspective.” *Istorijski Zapisi* br. 1–2, (2009): 15–32; Борис Милосављевић, „Балкански ратови”, *Летопис Матуце српске*, бр. 3, (2013), 252–288.

<sup>15</sup> М. Д. Лазаревић, *n. d.*, 39–42.

bia. In these regions, according to geographer Dedijer, a space of 40,000 km<sup>2</sup> included Macedonia, Kosovo, and Sandzak.<sup>16</sup> Academic Jovan Cvijić added a narrow strip on the Adriatic around Lezha, Shkodra, and Durrës (Draç).<sup>17</sup> Taking over the Kosovo Vilayet territories was considered an integral part of the "historic Serbian nation". Cvijić clearly reflected this objective in an article written on the eve of the Balkan Wars. Considering that in the "Stara Serbia" there was a considerable Serbian population that had been subjected to Islamization, poverty, risk to religious and educational freedom, as well as pressure and violence from Albanians, he called on the governments of Serbia and Montenegro to stop this violence against and liberate these regions.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Sandzak were spaces where the main Balkan roads crossed. This offered easy access to the Adriatic and Aegean seas.<sup>19</sup> The Serbian access to the Adriatic was also considered very important by the Serbian Prime Minister, Nicola Pašić. He expressed that without this access the Serbian state would suffocate and be confined like in a sealed pot. For Pašić, "to deprive Serbia of this right under the pretext that this land is Albanian, would hinder the natural solution of the Balkan question and this would create an unsustainable situation".<sup>20</sup>

The Serbian government declared clearly against creating a small Albanian state, even autonomous. However, it acknowledging that it would grant educational and cultural autonomy to Albanians who would be part of the Serbian state. Furthermore, to avoid Austria-Hungary's intervention in the Adriatic, Serbia claimed to divide Albanian territories with Montenegro and Greece, a claim sanctioned since March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1912, in the secret appendix of the Serbian-Bulgarian Treaty. The Greece border was supposed to start north of Vlora, near the Semani River, and in Monastir, between Ohrid and Prespa.<sup>21</sup> By following this border, the Greek state had to include, among other things, the city of Vlora and the island of Sazan in Mediterranean Sea within its borders.

In principle, the Greek government was not against a small autonomous Albanian state comprising the Sandzak of Elbasan and Berat. However, Greece's position in the Balkan Alliance was fragile. Bulgaria saw Greece as a small ally, and Serbia as less significant than Bulgaria.<sup>22</sup> To ensure friendly and stable relations with Serbia and a satisfactory border agreement with Bulgaria, the Greek government was willing to sacrifice the creation of an Albanian state. In this situation, Greece

<sup>16</sup> Јевто Дедијер, *Стара Србија Географска и етнографска слика*, Београд: Нова штампарија „Давидовић“, 1912.

<sup>17</sup> Dimitrije Bogdanović, *Knjiga o Kosovu* (Beograd: SANU, 1986), 273.

<sup>18</sup> D. Bogdanović, *n. d.*, 274.

<sup>19</sup> Ali Hadri, Pozita dhe gjendja e Kosovës në Mbretërinë e Jugosllavisë (1919–1941)", in: *E vërteta për Kosovën dhe shqiptarët në Jugosllavi*, edited by Kristaq Prifti (Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 1990), 234; J. Дедијер, *n. d.*

<sup>20</sup> Zekeria Cana, *Politika e Serbisë kundrejt çështjes shqiptare: 1903–1913* (Prishtinë: Shtypshkronja "KGT", 2006), 311–312.

<sup>21</sup> М. Војводић, Р. Самарцић, (прир.). *н. д.*, 377–378.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Llewellyn Smith, Venizelo's diplomacy: 1910–1913", in: Eleftherios Venizelos: The trials of Statesmanship, Edited by Paschalis M. Kitromilides (Edinburgh: University Press, 2006), 147; Ledia Dushku, *Kur historia ndau dy popuj fqinj: Greqia dhe Shqipëria: 1912–1914* (Tiranë: Qendra e Studimeve Albanologjike, 2012), 128.

responded positively to Serbia's talk invitation. Serbian-Greek meetings began in the late October and continued into November. Greece agreed to support Serbia's claims to access the Adriatic Sea, not only through diplomatic means but also by armed force.<sup>23</sup>

On November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1912, the Greek Foreign Minister, Lambros Koromilas, told the Serbian Plenipotentiary Minister in Athens, Bošković, that the autonomous Albanian state envisioned by Greece would be sacrificed with the establishment of a joint Serbian-Greek border. He reinforced this stance during his meeting with his Russian counterpart. The Greek government considered the formation of an autonomous Albanian state dangerous for the Balkan Alliance and favourable for Austria-Hungarian intervention in the Balkans. Only by sacrificing Albania would the Balkan complications be permanently eliminated, as it would no longer be the apple of discord between the two Adriatic Powers (Austria-Hungary and Italy). For the Greek Foreign Minister, a small and weak Albania was a failed baby, while a large Albania was impossible.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, the Balkan Allies continued their fierce attacks in Rumelia, aiming to put the Great Powers before the *fait accompli*. They also wanted to prevent the Ottoman army's organization. At the end of October, in accordance with war plans, Serbian units of the 3rd Army were stationed in the region of Prizren and Gjakova, awaiting to penetrate and secure an outlet to the Adriatic Sea. On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Serbian government sent a note to the Supreme Command. It requested that Serbian troops be dispatched as soon as possible to the Adriatic Sea. The note included the instruction that "the King expects quick and favorable results". Immediately, on November 9<sup>th</sup> the commander of the 3rd Army, who was in Prizren, ordered two military units to move to the Adriatic port towns of Lezha, Shëngjin (San Giovanni di Medua), and Durrës. A day later, similar orders were issued to the 1st Šumadija and 2nd Morava Divisions.<sup>25</sup> The occupation of Northern Albania was an easy task for the Serbian army. On November 20<sup>th</sup>, 1912, the Serbian Prime Minister, pushed by international reactions, requested the Serbian army to stop moving beyond Durrës in Central Albania.<sup>26</sup> The Serbian army captured the port of Durrës on November 28<sup>th</sup>, while the Montenegrin army from October 22 had surrounded Shkodra, a city in the north and their main military objective.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, the Greek army imposed a naval blockade from the Gulf of Arta to the south of Igoumenitsa. This action preceded the capture of the port cities and, at the same time, facilitated the Greek army's operations on land. On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, Greek troops took Preveza and surrounded Ioannina's castle and

<sup>23</sup> L. Stavrianos, *op.cit.*, 510.

<sup>24</sup> АИИ, Fondi: *Haus, Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv, Albanien (HHStA.PA.A)*, Vj. 22-25-2546. Telegram from the Minister of Austria-Hungary in Athens to Foreign Affairs, November 28, 1912.

<sup>25</sup> *Први балкански рат 1912–1913 (Операције српске војске)*, књига прва, (Београд: Историјски институт ЈНА, 1959).

<sup>26</sup> Михаило Војводић, Радован Самарџић, (приређивачи), *Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903–1914*, Књига 5, Свеска 3, (Београд: САНУ, 1986), 356.

<sup>27</sup> R. C. Hall, *Op. Cit.*, 73.

bombed Igoumenitsa and Saranda.<sup>28</sup> The successes achieved within a few weeks effectively undermined Ottoman power in the Balkans. On November 5th, the Sublime Porte requested a cease-fire and asked the powers to mediate to cease hostilities to prevent Bulgarians moving to Istanbul, as their army was already at the Çatalca lines.<sup>29</sup> In this situation, the six Great Powers, together with Spain, Holland, and Romania, deployed a fleet around the Ottoman capital and sent defensive troops on November 18th. Thus, the Ottoman capital was subject to international control,<sup>30</sup> while peripheral territories were increasingly outside the government's authority.

In this historical context, the final action of the Albanian political elite for separation from the Ottoman Empire must be viewed as a territorial defensive act. This is a consequence of Balkan developments. In the absence of a defensive capability of the Ottoman army, independence was declared to react to the military occupation of territories inhabited by Albanians. These territories were the Vilayets of Rumelia: Kosovo, Shkodra, Monastir, and Ioannina.

"We are in panic" - Refik Bey Toptani and Muslim Aga Beshiri on behalf of the "unfortunate" people of Tirana expressed their concerns in a telegram sent to Elbasan on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1912. This was when the Serbs took Lezha and approached central Albania. The question they raised had much to do with the fact whether "the declaration of independence can secure the country, which has been left without protection, from the invasion of the enemy, and who may also come?"<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the "Shoqëria e Zezë/Black Society" branch in Skopje informed the Great Powers that "we will never recognize such names as 'Old Serbia' and 'Epirus', or such special political and administrative forms related to some constituent parts of our Homeland".<sup>32</sup>

### The Adriatic region and the secessionist action of Albanians

The second decisive space in Albanian political action in 1912 is the Adriatic, which intertwined Austria-Hungarian and Italian interests. One of the determining factors in the development of the national idea, and further in the formation of an Albanian state entity, was the rivalry between Austro-Hungary and Italy to control the Adriatic.<sup>33</sup>

The Habsburg authorities had shown their interest in Albanian territories since 1866 when they focused their foreign policy on the Balkan Peninsula. Subsequently, the aim not to let Italy have priority in the region and the contradictions

<sup>28</sup> Basil Kondis, *Greece and Albania 1908–1914* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies. 1976), 85; L. Dushku, *op. cit.*, 132–133.

<sup>29</sup> G. Tokay, *op. cit.*, 58–75.

<sup>30</sup> Schmitt, *op. cit.*, 47–48.

<sup>31</sup> AIH, A-IV-334, Archival Materials, 1912–1915, volume I (November 1912–March 1913), p. 12. Telegram from the representatives of the population of Tirana sent to Shefqet Bey and Haxhi Ali Efendi in Elbasan, Tirana, November 13, 1912.

<sup>32</sup> AIH, Fondi: *Haus, Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv, Albanien*, Vj. 22-14-1408. Letter of the "Shoqërisë së Zezë" to the Austro-Hungarian representative in Skopje, October 15, 1912.

<sup>33</sup> Nathalie Clayer, *Në fillimet e nacionalizmit shqiptar. Lindja e një kombi me shumicë myslimane në Evropë* (Tiranë: Botimet Përpjekja, 2009), 330–341; 632–637.

with Russia over the Macedonian issue drew Austro-Hungary's foreign policy to the Balkans, the only region where the Dual Monarchy could still play the role of a major power.<sup>34</sup> There, it could only clash with Russia and Italy, as the other powers of the European Concert, in fact, the more influential ones, Great Britain, France, and Germany did not have much interest in the Balkans and any possible intervention on their part was mainly for allies. For the Habsburgs, the Ottoman provinces inhabited in their majority by an Albanian-speaking population were important for two reasons: first, Italy was to be prevented from establishing its influence there because, although formally allies with one another, the two Powers had a fierce rivalry for hegemony in the Adriatic Sea; on the other hand, these territories would be a suitable buffer zone, or rather a dyke against Slavic expansion in general, and a Slavic-Orthodox Russian driven expansion in South-eastern Europe.<sup>35</sup> The comprehensive attention and presence in the religious, educational, economic, cultural, and social fields became the cornerstone of the Habsburg policy toward the Albanians. This stabilized their influence on the Adriatic.<sup>36</sup> The monarchy aimed to influence the development of the national idea among Albanians, becoming their *protector* while considering it necessary to maintain the *status quo* in the Balkans.

Austro-Hungary was fiercely rivaled by Italy, whose foreign policy since 1896 gradually shifted from Africa to the Balkans, with the clear aim of making the Adriatic an Italian sea. In November 1897, despite mutual suspicions and contradictions, through a verbal agreement reached in Monza, the two Powers decided to coordinate their efforts to establish an equilibrium in the Adriatic and at the same time to control each other.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, if modification of the *status quo* became inevitable,

<sup>34</sup> For more thorough analysis of the Dual Monarchy's foreign policy on the Balkans see: Emil Palotás, *Machtspolitik und Wirtschaftsinteressen: der Balkan und Rußland in der österreichisch-ungarischen Außenpolitik 1878–1895* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1995); Jelena Milojković Durić, *The Eastern Question and the Voices of Reason: Austria Hungary, Russia, and the Balkan States 1875–1908* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Kurt Gostentschinigg, *Wissenschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Militär. Die österreichisch-ungarische Albanologie 1867–1918*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018).

<sup>35</sup> Ledia Dushku, Edon Qesari, "A dual perspective study: The Italian-Albanians' political activity in the focus of the relations between Vienna and Rome: 1895–1897", *Hiperboreea*, vol. 11, no. 1, (2023), 40–61.

<sup>36</sup> Teodora Toleva, *Influenca e Perandorisë Austro-Hungareze në ndërtimin e kombit shqiptar 1896–1908* (Tiranë: Dudaj, 2018), 38–81.

<sup>37</sup> The meeting in Monza and the conclusions reached there between the Italian Foreign Minister Viscount Venosta and his Austro-Hungarian counterpart Goluchowski were not followed by a common official declaration. In the publication of Italian Diplomatic Documents Series is noted that: "Despite the research carried in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in the documents filed in Viscount Venosta Archive, the minutes of the Monza meeting between Viscount Venosta and Goluchowski or any other document of the time referring to the talks, has not been found". More information can be found in the circular letter that Goluchowski sent to his subordinates, about which, however, the Italian Ambassador in Berlin, Lanza was briefed "very confidentially". The latter forwarded it to his superiors in Rome. Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, Terza Serie: 1896–1907, volume II (1 maggio 1897–23 giugno 1898)*, (Roma: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato P.V, 1958), 215, 286.

the parties would attempt the relative changes leading to autonomy. This would endorse the establishment of a unified Albanian entity under Ottoman sovereignty.<sup>38</sup>

This moment came in the autumn of 1912, when the Great Powers, forced by developments in the Balkans, declared the breaking of the *status quo*, while the Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister articulated to his Italian counterpart the common interest that the parties had in creating an autonomous Albania, “which would be more secure if its state structure included regions inhabited exclusively or mostly by Albanians”.<sup>39</sup> Explicitly, Austria-Hungary would not tolerate Serbia's access to the southern Adriatic, but it agreed to give Greece the territory south of the Kalamas River in Vilayet of Ioannina. Conversely, it conditioned its participation in the Ambassadors' Conference in London on talks between the Great Powers about the creation of an autonomous Albanian state.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the Albanians' secessionist act, which had to be carried out as soon as possible, before the Serbs occupied Durrës and the subsequent creation of the national state, was thus the best way for the Austro-Hungarian and Italian authorities to exclude Serbia from access to the Adriatic. For both powers, the interest lay in the Adriatic space more than the Balkan.

Taking into account the role of the Adriatic Powers and the historic moment, some of the Albanian nationalist activists who operated in Istanbul, visited Vienna. They sought support within the context of ongoing Balkan developments. The first was Syrja Vlora and his son Eqrem Vlora, the brother and nephew of former Ottoman Grand Vezir Mehmed Ferid Pasha and prominent political figures originally from the Adriatic port town of Vlora in the Vilayet of Ioannina, distinguished for their pro-Austrian sentiments.<sup>41</sup> In October 1912, they held several meetings in the Habsburg capital, where they were informed about the Habsburg Empire's stance on the Albanian issue. These meetings resulted in the common idea of organizing a wide Albanian assembly. Father and son believed that Albanians should form a League, similar to Prizren's 1878 League.<sup>42</sup> As part of this process, Eqrem Vlora also sent a letter to Count Berchtold. “This form,” said Eqrem Vlora, “serves our purposes, as it does not rely on support from another state, and thus it does not compromise our friends. It currently provides strong support for the common Albanian cause”.<sup>43</sup>

At the beginning of November, when Ottoman sovereignty in the Balkans weakened, another scion of Vlora's family and a prominent Albanian nationalist, Ismail Qemali left Istanbul and after Bucharest<sup>44</sup>, he visited Budapest and Vienna.

<sup>38</sup> L. Dushku, E. Qesari, *op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> AIH, Fondi: *Haus, Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv, Albanien*, Vj. 22-7-709. The telegram from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria-Hungary to his Italian counterpart, Budapest, November 17, 1912.

<sup>40</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>41</sup> K. Gostentschinigg, *op. cit.*, 526.

<sup>42</sup> Regarding League of Prizren see: Noel Malcolm, *A short history of Kosovo* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 217–239.

<sup>43</sup> AIH, Fondi: *Haus, Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv, Albanien*, Vj. 22-11-1144. Letter from Eqrem Vlora to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria-Hungary, October 1912.

<sup>44</sup> About the meetings of Ismail Qemali in Bucharest see: *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX*, vol. I, (Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2017), 169–170; Ilir Ikononi, *Pavarësia. Udhëtimi i paharruar i Ismail Qemalit*, (Tiranë: UET Press, 2012), 67–83.

By the end of the 19th century, Ismail Qemali was already known in the circles of the Ottoman political life. He had held several high offices in the Empire, among others, had been General Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, major of Ioannina, Governor of vilayet of Beirut and Tripoli, deputy in Ottoman Parliament and head of the Ottoman Liberal Party (AHRAR).<sup>45</sup> Ismail Qemali was also known in the international arena, as one of the political personalities who urged the self-reformation of the Ottoman Empire by decentralizing Sultan's power.<sup>46</sup>

In Budapest and Vienna Ismail Qemali held substantial meetings with high-ranking Austrian diplomatic and military officials. Securing support at such levels was of particular importance. This is especially as he, in an interview given to the Viennese newspaper "Neue Freie Presse" on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 1912, articulated Albania's independence as an act that was not only in Albanians' interests but also in Europe's general interest. According to him, "The current occupiers would make a big mistake if they wanted to expand their borders over Albanians' backs. They will never accept such a fate, and Europe will never be at peace if Albania is partitioned. If the Balkan states are already independent of Turkey, Albania also wants to become a civilized state". As far as the Adriatic Powers were concerned, I. Qemali clearly articulated the Albanians' need for them: "We intend to maintain positive relations with Austria-Hungary and Italy, to favor our intellectual and economic development. A small state needs to rely on the larger ones, and this support from the two allied powers of the Adriatic is clear..."<sup>47</sup>

One day later, Ismail Qemali met with the Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Austria-Hungary, General Blasius Schemua. The existing documentation does not reveal their conversation. However, after the meeting, Ismail Qemal Vlora sent a short telegram to his hometown, with a very meaningful text: "I arrived on the first ship. Albania's future is secure".<sup>48</sup> The most significant meeting was with the Austria-Hungarian Foreign Minister, Count Berchtold, on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1912 in Budapest. This was at a reception held by Count Hadic, the former Undersecretary of State in the Hungarian cabinet, where Ismail Qemali "took advantage of the opportunity to request his interest in Albania's fate".<sup>49</sup> There are few details about their meeting. However, what is known for sure is that Berchtold, as the Serbs approached Durrës, assured the Albanian politician of their return to their homeland, regardless the fact that I. Qemali was not Vienna's favorite.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Dritan Egro, „Jetëshkrimi i Ismail Qemali“, *Studime Historike*, no. 3–4, (2012), 303–306.

<sup>46</sup> Bilgin Çelik, *İttihatçılar ve Arnavutlar: II. Meşrutiyet Döneminde Arnavut Ulusçuluğu ve Arnavut Sorunu*, (Istanbul, Buke Kitapları, 2004), 94.

<sup>47</sup> "Interview du chef albanais Ismail-Kemal", *Le Radical*, Paris, 9 novembre 1912, 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit/ Central State Archives of the Republic of Albania*, Fondi: 145, D. I-1, fl. 10. Telegram from Ismail Qemali to the mayor of Vlora, Vienna, November 9, 1912.

<sup>49</sup> AIH, Fondi: ASDMAE, Serie Politica P (1891–1916), Albania, Pacco 737. Telegram from the Italian ambassador in Vienna to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs informing about the conversation held between Berchtold and Ismail Qemali.

<sup>50</sup> AIH, Fondi: *Haus, Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv, Albanien*, Vj. 22-11-1158. Telegram of Foreign Affairs to Austria-Hungarian Ambassador in Rome, November 22, 1912. See also Kurt Gostentschnigg, *Wissenschaft im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Militär. Die österreichisch – ungarische Albanologie 1867–1918*, (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 573–576.

From the above, it is clear that independence and the establishment of a sovereign Albanian ethnicity was a crucial issue for the Adriatic Powers. This was an issue that the Albanian political elite understood and wanted to exploit with determination. But the Albanians' path towards independence was more than just a matter of the Adriatic Powers: in its entirety, the creation of an Albanian state was a matter for the entire European Concert. Their consensual stance to maintain the *status quo* in the Balkans and since October 1912 to break it had an undeniable influence on the outlining and formalization of the Albanian elite's positions in relation to the Ottoman Empire and since November 1912 towards its detachment from it. The Adriatic Powers played a significant role in this process, but they weren't the only ones involved. All the Great Powers participating in the Conference of Ambassadors in London are actors and decision-makers.<sup>51</sup> The supervision of the Great Powers over Albania and its organization are regulated by the constitution of the new Albanian State with 9 articles, approved by the London Conference of Ambassadors, on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1913. According to them "Albania was constituted as an autonomous principality, sovereign and hereditary by the line of primogeniture, under the guarantee of the six Powers", while an international control commission was established as the responsible body for the finances and civil administration of the Albanian principality.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the Albanian state also carries the full European dimension.

### **Albania's Independence: Concretization within the Ottoman Space**

The developments in the Balkans and Europe conditioned the relationship between Albanians and the Ottoman state. Integrated and naturally heterogeneous within the Ottoman Empire, Albanians reacted quite diversely to the imperial state and the position they should maintain. This was in accordance with the war dynamics in the Balkans. Should they believe in the liberation mission of the Balkan armies and refuse the call for mobilization by the Ottoman army, or should they align themselves with the Ottomans against the Balkan Allies? As Ottoman subjects, Albanians had the obligation to respond positively to the call for mobilization. A significant portion of them were fully integrated into imperial life. The long coexistence, despite occasional problems, was difficult to break with a pen stroke. However, their presence in the ranks of the Ottoman army gave the Balkan governments a strong argument to defend before the Great Powers the partition of territories inhabited by Albanians, as simply and only Ottomans. On the other hand, they alone could not withstand Balkan Ally's attacks.

The divergent alternatives brought different assessments within the Albanian elite and decision-making remained complex. In the absence of a single political-

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<sup>51</sup> See introduction in: Nathalie Clayer, *Une histoire en travelling de l'Albanie: 1920–1939 - Avec, au-delà et en deçà de l'Etat* (Paris: Édition Karthala, 2022).

<sup>52</sup> G. P. Gooch and Harold Temperley, edited: *British documents on the origins of the War 1898–1914*, vol. IX, Part II, (London: H.M. Stationery Office, 1926), 941–942; Owen Pearson, *Albania and King Zog. Independence, Republic and Monarchy 1908–1939*, (London: The Centre for Albanian studies & I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2004), 44.

organizational center, the enemy was not identified in the same way. Some considered the Balkan Allies as such, others the Ottoman Empire, while the relations of local actors with the imperial authorities in the center and periphery became unstable and dynamic, in line with the course of the war and the position of the Great Powers towards the *status quo* in the Ottoman Balkans.

We can identify two phases in the attitude of the Albanian political elite: the first one includes October 1912, when collaboration with the Ottoman Empire was articulated and demonstrated; the second one includes November, when the reaction of the Albanian political elite gradually took the form of separation from the Ottoman Empire, officially decided by the majority in the National Assembly held on November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1912 in Vlorë. There is a belief that the decisive events in shaping these two phases were: the Ottoman defeat in the battle of Lüleburgaz, a town close to Istanbul. At the same time as a result of the Balkan Allies victories, the Great Powers broke the Balkan *status quo*, putting Ottoman sovereignty in doubt.<sup>53</sup>

In the run-up to the outbreak of the First Balkan War, Syrja Vlorë, sent a telegram to the Albanian Muslim elite and clergy in the Vilayet of Monastir and Ioannina, urging them to help the Ottoman government in its military preparations and to take the necessary measures “to defend their homeland and national existence”.<sup>54</sup>

As the war began and the revolt of Albanian Catholic mountaineers against the Ottoman regime unfolded on the border with Montenegro, and cooperation with the Montenegrins became apparent,<sup>55</sup> the threat of Ottoman territories partition by the Balkan Allies was closer than ever. Caught in the midst of the fire, as long as the Great Powers maintained the Balkan *status quo*, some of the Albanian nationalists from the Vilayet of Kosovo and Shkodra judged that if they remained united with the Ottoman forces, they would preserve the Albanian territorial unit along with the Ottoman one. In this context, let us mention the reaction of the nationalists from Kosovo Hasan Prishtina and Isa Boletini, in October 1912. They urged the mountaineers to end their rebellion against the Sublime Porte and mobilize alongside it against the Balkan armies. “Albanians know that living under the Turkish flag secures our national existence. We cannot act otherwise if we want to remain unitedly ... If you want to live among us as faithful brothers, you must end the attacks”<sup>56</sup> said Hasan Prishtina in the telegram sent to the mountaineers in October 1912. Isa Boletini expressed the same stance in his telegram: “I fail to understand the reason for your attacks near Shkodra against the army, the city, and the government. If this is due to any injustice done to you by the government, it would be an act against all of us. If that were the case, we would be ready to defend our common rights with you

<sup>53</sup> Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı (editors), *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Balkan Savaşları, C. I*, , (İstanbul: T. C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, 2013), 268–269. Report from Consulate of Peshtë to Foreign Ministry in Istanbul, 5 November 1912.

<sup>54</sup> Syrja Vlorë, *Kujtime. Nga fundi i sundimit osman në Luftën e Vlorës* (Tiranë: Iceberg Publishing House, 2013), 66.

<sup>55</sup> N. Clayer, *op. cit.*, 633.

<sup>56</sup> AIH, Fondi: *ASDMAE*, Serie Politica P (1891–1916), Albania, Pacco 676. The telegram that Hasan Prishtina had sent to the Catholic mountaineers, Rome, October 25, 1912.

and your representatives."<sup>57</sup> Bishops Serreqi and Nikollë Kaçorri, Ali Fehmi Beu, as well as the cousins from Tirana Abdi and Fadil Toptani from vilayet of Shkodra, with the support and encouragement of Austria-Hungary, worked to change the attitudes of the Catholics and to secure their cooperation with the Ottoman Army.<sup>58</sup>

Starting in November 1912, efforts were made in influential circles of the Albanian political elite for organized reaction and collective decision-making, through calls for a congress. There were several attempts, the most concrete coming from the Vlora family.<sup>59</sup> But it was Ismail Qemali who expressed the need for Albanian independence. This gave the Albanian reaction a separatist character and implied Albanian neutrality in the First Balkan War. In a well-coordinated rush, using the human infrastructure created by previous initiatives, especially that of his cousins Syrja and Eqrem Vlora, he successfully thwarted every effort to hold a national assembly.

### **The Finalization of the Act of Self-Determination: The Assembly of Vlora and the Declaration of Independence of Albania**

On November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1912, at around 2 pm, on the same day that the Serbs had entered Durrës, while the Ottoman Empire had agreed to grant autonomy to the Albanians, delegates gathered at a national assembly in Vlora unanimously decided that Albania should become free and independent under a provisional government. Ismail Qemal Vlora was elected to head the Provisional Government, and Bishop Nikollë Kaçorri distinguished for his pro-Austrian sentiments its deputy.

In the broader context of formalizing the act of self-determination and separation, as well as creating national institutions (the provisional government and the Senate), the delegates at the Assembly of Vlora granted legitimacy to the decision-making process by carrying representation mandates for almost all spaces where Albanians lived, including the diaspora. Overall, the distribution of representation levels was achieved while maintaining a fair ratio of religious affiliation. Thus, out of 83 representation mandates, 17 (22%) belonged to Christians (15 Orthodox and 2 Catholics).<sup>60</sup> This representational nature gave the Declaration of Independence and national institutions a national and supra-religious character. In this way, the Assembly of Vlora overcame and fundamentally challenged the Ottoman model of political and social organization based on religious affiliation. Respecting the religious ratio in the distribution of mandates and the composition of the Albanian Government and the Senate was of particular importance. This was because Albanians

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* The Italian consulate in Ioannina transmitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the translation of the telegram that Isa Boletini had sent to the Catholic mountaineers, Rome, October 25, 1912.

<sup>58</sup> AIH, Fondi: *Haus, Hof und Staatsarchiv Wien, Politisches Archiv, Albanien*, Vj. 22-15-1570. Confidential information from the Austria-Hungarian Consul in Durrës to the Austria-Hungarian Ambassador in Istanbul, 12 October 1912.

<sup>59</sup> N. Clayer, *op. cit.*, 634–635; *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX*, vol I, (Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2017), 166–172.

<sup>60</sup> For a detailed treatment of the distribution of representative mandates see: Ledia Dushku, “Nga të zgjedhur në kohë lufte në të mandatuar në periudhë paqeje: një qasje krahasuese e tipare të përfaqësimit në Kuvendin Kombëtar të Vlorës dhe Parlamentin e vitit 1921”, *Studime Historike*, no. 1–2, (2021), 69–75.

were heterogeneous from a spiritual point of view. It established a harmonious relationship between religious groups, maintaining peaceful coexistence without tension and conflict. This ensured unity and overcome divisive crises for the state while avoiding the risk of characterizing Albania as a Muslim state.

The Christian element had a greater presence in the Provisional Government than its real percentage in the overall population. This was done to avoid labeling Albania as a Muslim state and prevent structural discrimination against Christians. On December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1912, based on an agreement of understanding between the delegates and with the support of the consuls of the Adriatic Powers in Vlora, the National Assembly approved the government with Ismail Qemal Vlora as the prime minister, consisting of 5 Muslim and 4 Christian members (3 Orthodox and 1 Catholic).<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusions

The final action of the Albanian political elite for separation from the Ottoman Empire came under the conditions of developments during the First Balkan War. It was a result of the convergence of developments in three sub-national spaces: the Balkans, the Adriatic, and the Ottoman Empire. In the context of the Ottoman army's defensive incapacity, independence was declared by Albanians as a defensive reaction to the military occupation of their territories by Serbs, Greeks, and Montenegrins. In circumstances where independence and the establishment of a sovereign Albanian ethnicity were considered an important issue for the Adriatic Powers, the Albanians separatist reaction carried a diplomatic dimension, materialized by occasional meetings of the Vlora family's descendants (Ismail Qemal Vlora, Syrja and Eqrem Vlora) in Bucharest, Vienna, Budapest and Trieste, and the support of the Adriatic Powers. On the Ottoman side, the final reaction of the Albanian political elite for separation did not appear to be a decision agreed upon by the Ottoman Porte. Questioning the preservation of Ottoman sovereignty in the Balkans diminished the cooperation between the Albanian periphery and the Ottoman centre and gave a separatist nature to the action of the Albanian political elite, materialized in the National Assembly of Vlora. The decision-making of the latter carried a national and supra-religious character, fundamentally challenging the Ottoman model of political and social organization and opening the way for a new philosophy in Albanian state organization.

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<sup>61</sup> AIH, Fondi: *ASDMAE*, Serie Politica P (1891–1916), Albania, Pacco 738. Telegram to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 December 1912.

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FROM OTTOMANS TO ALBANIANS:  
THE FIRST BALKAN WAR  
AND THE PROCLAMATION OF ALBANIAN INDEPENDENCE  
(OCTOBER–NOVEMBER 1912)

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*Summary*

The First Balkan War separated Albania from the Ottoman Empire. In this historical context, the Albanian political elite's separatist action must be viewed as a territorial defensive act. This is a consequence of Balkan developments. In the absence of a defensive capability of the Ottoman army, independence was declared in reaction to the military occupation of Ottoman territories inhabited by Albanians, from the Balkan Allies. In circumstances where independence and the establishment of a sovereign Albanian ethnicity were considered a crucial issue for the Adriatic Powers, Albanian nationalist activists visited Vienna and Budapest. They sought support within the context of ongoing Balkan developments. At the beginning of November, when Ottoman sovereignty in the Balkans weakened, Ismail Qemali an Albanian nationalist and scion of the Vloora family, held significant meetings with high-ranking Austria-Hungarian diplomatic and military officials. On the Ottoman side, the final reaction of the Albanian political elite to separation did not appear to be a decision agreed upon by the Ottoman Porte. Questioning the preservation of Ottoman sovereignty in the Balkans diminished cooperation between the Albanian periphery and the Ottoman center. This gave a separatist nature to the Albanian political elite's action, accomplished in the National Assembly of Vloora. The latter's decision-making carried a national and supra-religious character, fundamentally challenging the Ottoman model of state and social organization and opening the way for an alternative philosophy in the Albanian state organization.

KEYWORDS: First Balkan War; Albania; independence; Serbia; Greece; Montenegro; Ottoman Empire; Adriatic Powers; European Concert; self-governing institutions; supra-religious character

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