

## LEAGUE OF PRIZREN – ALBANIAN LEAGUE OR ISLAMIC LEAGUE

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### SUMMARY

Albanian League of Prizren was an organization of all the Albanians that aimed to realize the Albanian National Renaissance program: protecting the country's territorial integrity and the creation of Albanian national state. Its activity was developed in very complicated political circumstances, because against the Albanians were the Ottoman Empire and sultanists clerical circles. The fact that in Albania's political life operated a sultanists trend, that were against the idea of an Albanian vilayet open the debate if the League of Prizren is an Albanian national league or an Islamic league. All enemies of League, especially the Balkan monarchies and Tsarist Russia, used press at the time to set the League of Prizren as an Islamic organization created by the Porte. League wasn't Islamic even though its leaders not declared war on the Porte at the time when PanChristianity demanded partition and occupation of the Albanian territories.

**Key words:** League of Prizren, character, interpretations, activity

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### INTRODUCTION

Eastern crisis in the '70s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century induced a risk for the Albanian nation. This crisis was provoked by Tsarist Russia, because its expansionist intentions aimed to dominate in the Balkan Peninsula, to penetrate in Mediterranean Sea. After the victory of Russian arms, the Albanian political forces were convinced that their lands would be divided between the Balkan monarchies, Russia's ally, after it was secede from the Ottoman Empire. So, in spring 1878, one of the main issues had been the formation of the League, in which, the radical patriots and the moderate circles was defended its national character.

League of Prizren was the creation of Albanians, regardless, that often, it has been discussed, that in the first meetings of the Assembly of Prizren dominated sultanist delegates. Although has been finely analysis about the character of the League, the report of political forces in the Parliament or the ideological war motive developed within the Assembly, is deepened the

gap between assessment that the League of Prizren is a national creation and assessment that the League of Prizren is a creature in favor of Turkish, even Islamic of Kahrar-name (Decisions Act).

It's unclear, at what point the Ottoman Government has participated in the creation of the League of Prizren. Often, it's claimed that the League had been called by Shkodra's vali, Hysen Pasha, instructed by the Sublime Porte. Probably the Ottoman government has encouraged recent events in Prizren,<sup>74</sup> we can accept that the creation of the League was convenient for the Sublime Porte and was received with kindness, and even financed by it,<sup>75</sup> but isn't enough:

a) memorandum that the League of Prizren sent to Lord Bikonstild, leader of the British delegation at the Congress of Berlin, that was written: "Albania wouldn't be represented by the Ottoman government in

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<sup>74</sup> Bartl, Peter (2006), Albanian Muslims in the motion for national independence, 1878 – 1912, p.145

<sup>75</sup> Idem, p. 146

- Berlin; Albanians have their national character “; <sup>76</sup>
- b) discourse held by Abdul Frasheri, Tuscany’s delegate (Janina vilayet) on the first day of the Parliament, who, among others, said: “Intention of this meeting is to stop wild enemies by vowing to protect our lands that we have inherited by our grandmothers and great-grandfather”; <sup>77</sup>
- c) two petitions drafted in Parliament (one for the Congress of Berlin and the other for the Sublime Porte) signed by four thousand people, by Muslim and Catholic together; <sup>78</sup>
- d) the Assembly’s decision to create the army of League, which would be formed with Albanian volunteer, independently by the Sublime Porte; <sup>79</sup>
- e) or the last decision of Assembly, which was related to the political and legal equality of all Albanians, regardless of their religious; <sup>80</sup>
- to demonstrate the national and patriotic character of the League?

Regarding the League’s program, an important notice gives the Italian consul in Shkodra, Berio, who possessed the text of the resolution that had approved the General Assembly, on July 2, 1878, <sup>81</sup> where, among other, was said: “League is absolutely independent by the Porte. League has been formed to strengthen the nationality and the integrity of our country.” <sup>82</sup>

### **Is the League of Prizren a patriotic – national League?**

League of Prizren represents a political, military organization, even pan-state, which, was faced with the intentions of the Balkan monarchies, anti Albanian decisions of the Sublime Porte and the hostile position of the sultan and

the Porte, for three years. This reality was possible only because the League was set up, from the beginning, to June 15, 1878, on solid national foundations, which proves not only the League’s protests against the decisions of Albanian territories separation, but especially, the autonomist program of the League of Prizren adopted on the same day, June 15, 1878.

Many foreign observers passed the Albanian territories in the 70s - 80s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which can be called "eyewitnesses" of the Albanian events of that time. From this observers group, can be distinguish five foreign observers, all independent of their governments' policies, and supporting the thesis that the League had a national - patriotic character.

The American traveler, A. Mayhev, who visited Albania in 1880, wrote: "League is a purely patriotic organization, which was composed by Albanian of all levels". Mayhev noted that "League had secured in Albania and not from the Ottoman Empire the manpower and financial resources; Five months later, the League dismissed every conspiracy and, already, it’s an accomplished fait its revolt against the Ottoman yoke." <sup>83</sup>

The French scholar J. Carlus, who visited Albania in the fall of 1880, claims with conviction that: "The League of Prizren was intended to refuse the partition of the Albanian lands in favor of neighbor monarchies and to win the political autonomy of the country. For this, proves the proclamation of the Central Committee of the League, in which it said that its further intent was to create the Albanian national state." <sup>84</sup>

The British traveler V. Chirol, who visited Albania in September 1880, expressed: "The current disturbances in Albania aren’t spontaneous. They have their roots in the virtue of patriotism of the Albanians, which has inspired them to revolt against the Great Powers and the Sublime Porte." <sup>85</sup>

The Italian-Albanian political personality Pietro Chiara, who, after visiting the territories where

<sup>76</sup> Idem

<sup>77</sup> Belegu, Xhafer (1939), League of Prizren, p. 20

<sup>78</sup> Frasheri, Kristo (1989), League of Prizren 1878 – 1881, p. 184

<sup>79</sup> Idem, p. 185

<sup>80</sup> Idem

<sup>81</sup> Idem, p.201

<sup>82</sup> Hadri, Ali (1979), The historical importance of Albanian League of Prizren (1878-1881) p. 141-142

<sup>83</sup> Frasheri, Kristo cit. p. 10

<sup>84</sup> Idem, p. 11

<sup>85</sup> Idem

the League operated, from Preveza to Shkoder, without going to the center of this League, summed up his impressions in an Italian volume entitled "L'Epiro, Gli Albanesi la Lega". The main axis of his work composed his thesis on the national character of the League of Prizren. Chiara defends her patriotic character with three main arguments:

- a) establishment of the League of Prizren was dictated by the concern of the liquidation of the Albanians as a nation and not by the order of the Sublime Porte;
- b) statute approved by the League forced him to fight for the protection of the Albanian territories and non-Turkish;
- c) its Albanian characters confirms by League which turned, in autumn v. 1880, in an Albanian provisional government, a fact indicated that Albania intended to cut the connections with the Ottoman Empire;<sup>86</sup>

The eminent Italian of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marco Antonio Canini, in his work published in 1879, entitled "The Epirus issue", he considered the League of Prizren, an Albanian patriotic organization. "Porte - he wrote – didn't create the League, but left it to the foundation when he was in difficulty by the defeat that suffered to the war with the Russians. League was founded in Prizren, by an Albanian Parliament, with an aim that the Albania would regain its independence"<sup>87</sup>

"In Albania – the French ambassador reported to his Foreign Minister in Istanbul, Vadington, on November 11, 1878 – it became a national motion. All are armed, regardless of the religion. They seek the independence of the past..... Porte is powerless to defeat this rebellion"<sup>88</sup>

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League was treated in Kahrarname as a political institution which was independent from the Sublime Porte. In its 14<sup>th</sup> Article said

"Government will not interfere in the League's affairs. Our League, also, will not interfere in the internal affairs of government administration if it doesn't use violent measures that are proved". But what emphasized more its independent character was the right that the League won by Kahrarname to organize armed forces, apart from the Ottoman imperial army, and to fight against Foreign Powers, despite the attitude of the Sublime Porte. League assumed some prerogatives in the administrative and judicial area.

All these indicate that the reference in any case of Islam, or the inclusion of the expression of loyalty to the Ottoman Empire, didn't determine the true character of Kararname, didn't violate its basic content, which responded the aims of Albanian National Motion in that period. In addition, this wasn't the final program of the League, which will be approved in a general meeting of the Assembly, attended by representatives of all the provinces of Albania. In another document, that General Assembly approved in the same day (June 17, 1878), which was called Talimat (Direction), were treated the political, military and organizational aspects of the League. Talimat, unlike Kahrarname, was stripped by any reference to Islam, as well as the declaration of loyalty to the Ottoman Empire. In addition, League's government functions were more pronounced here. In Talimat was talked openly that the League will form a central administration in Prizren, consisting of representatives of each sanjak, from which would depend the kaza's local administrations. Except this separated administration will be created an army, separated from the Porte, which would depend by the League, directly. Through Kahrarname, the General Assembly delegates announced Prizren the League's capital.

The Albanian League was the spirit of national unity, the approach to the south and north, testimony of which is the role of Abdul Frasher, that in reality wasn't him who founded the League and even those who took part in the historical meeting of Prizren on 10 June 1878, but the League perpetuated the Albanian National

<sup>86</sup> Idem, p. 12

<sup>87</sup> Idem, p. 14

<sup>88</sup> Albania, on the eve and in the League of Prizren, (1978), Doc. Istanbul, November 11, 1878

Renaissance, more precisely, the Albanians patriotism. In all acts, addressed to Great Powers, Muslim and Christian residents protested as Albanians, as members of a unique nation. In many cases, popular meetings participants drew up petitions addressed to the Sublime Porte, which required autonomous reforms in Albania.

### Was the League a Muslim motion?

Many people may think that the League of Prizren had an Islamic character based by the expression of Abdul Frasher "*better with Turkey than with Greece*" during a meeting in Rome, in April 1878, with the eminent Italian personality of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marco Antonia Canini.

Abdul Frasher represented the nationalist wing and wanted to see by the League a motion where would attend all Albanians, regardless of religion,<sup>89</sup> but during the League works were noted some divergence of opinion between the delegates. Conservatives, consisting of pashas, beys and Muslim clerics, who had a strong support of the sultan, demanded that the Albanian unified vilayet, was an Islamic organization.<sup>90</sup>

In the League's meetings, the Ottoman administration officials and their sultanist supporters practiced a potent pressure to forced the participants to signed their protest not as an Albanian citizen, but as a national Islamic related to the Ottoman Empire.<sup>91</sup>

Soviet historian I. Senkevic separates the League of "first period" from the League of "second period". For her, the League of June 1878 was created as a pan-Islamic organization,<sup>92</sup> where delegates with an ottoman opinion, together with some Muslim delegates, Turks and Bosnians, who were invited to the Assembly, demanded that the League to returned in an Islamic Balkan organization, to follow the interests of the Sublime Porte. After a week of debates, on June 17, 1878, it was approved a statute with Islam's

spirit, although it didn't receive a lot of votes. Statute, entitled "Kahrar-name" (Book of decisions), was summarized in three principles:

1. The organization that was created was called "Islamic Cemiyet" (Islamic committee) and not the Albanian League;
2. this organization pledged to fight for the protection of all the borders of the Ottoman Empire;
3. Muslims of the Balkans will never be separated from the Sultan;

Although there were made many changes in Kahrar-name, it again expressed loyalty to the Sultan, where there was penetrated the Islamic spirit.

Since in the 1<sup>st</sup> Article of the Kahraname it was said that the purpose was "*to preserve the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan and the Shariah law in the Balkan Peninsula*"; in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article, *the League of Prizren would see as an enemy anyone who would try to oppose the authority of the Ottoman government*,<sup>93</sup> and the 6<sup>th</sup> Article of it noted "*the armed struggle to defend these territories, and the prevention of Bulgaria to take the territories, and if the Serbian and Montenegrin state doesn't issue Muslim territories, then it will be sent akinxhinjtë (bashibozukët) to get them.*"

Initially, the Sublime Porte supported the League of Prizren and Kahrarname, but pressured on them to be more Ottoman than Albanian. According to Kahrarname, the Albanian League was primarily religious and based on Islamic religious solidarity.

Many of historians see the League of Prizren as an Islamic organization constructed by Muslims of Bosnia and Gegeri with the support of Sultan Abdylhamitit II to defend Balkan Muslims after the Congress of Berlin.

By reading the book of Peter Bartl "Albanian Muslims in motion for national independence (1878 - 1912)" the author, when tries to discover the causes of the creation of the League of Prizren, says: In 1878, at the end of the Russo - Turkish war (1877-1878), the Ottoman Empire

<sup>89</sup> Bozbor, Nuray (2002), Albania and Albanian nationalism in the Ottoman Empire, p. 170

<sup>90</sup> Idem, p. 169

<sup>91</sup> Albanian People History (2002), vol. II, p.153

<sup>92</sup> Puto, Arben (1968), Albanian question and diplomacy of the Great Powers, p. 92

<sup>93</sup> Albanian People History, cit., p. 157

was defeated and delivered large territories in Rumeli to Russia and its allies, the new Sultan Abdylhamiti II, as well as Balkan Muslims, were concerned about the tragedy that brought the war. In the Treaty of San Stefano (Yeshil Koy-t) and then in the Berlin Congress signed on July 13, 1878, the Empire was forced to delivered more than two-fifths of its territory in the Balkans, where among others, there were included the territories populated by Bosnian and Albanians Muslims. Considering that the Albanians were Islam and were constituent element of the empire and in cases of war, fought with the Ottomans against Christians, the Berlin Congress refused their demands.<sup>94</sup> The frequent use of the Muslim term by the author indicates that he was convinced and defended the Islamic character of the League as an organization created by Albanian Muslims promoted by sultanist circles.

On May 3, 1878, the British consul to Shkodra, Kirby Green noted that among the Muslims of northern Albania was infiltrating the League, an organization that was mobilizing Muslims and threatened to massacre Christian men who believed they were Bulgarians. Consul noted that the local Christians were afraid by the tense situation of Muslims.<sup>95</sup>

Also, Noel Malcolm, in his book "Kosovo A Short History" says: the *Motion is more a religious than a secular, and is guided by myftilerët, ulama and kadij .... I think it's clear that the Sublime Porte and the League had the same opinion and were working to realize a common purpose - protecting the province.*<sup>96</sup>

In Prizren meeting, except Kosovo Muslim leaders went delegates from Shkodra, as: Yusuf Age Sokol, Selim Bey and Mulla Yunus Efendi. Maybe this selection by the Shkodra's elites was intentional, because none of them was a Christian, but the three men had been Muslims.

Even though in the League were included Bektashi southern beys as Abdul Frashër, who presented a platform opposed to the platform processed by the sultanist circles in Istanbul, its

founders ideal was Islam. Although the southern Bektashis of League of Prizren were conductors of Renaissance ideas and antagonistic to the Ottomans, the general character of the League was dominated by Muslims and the Ottoman government that made the war in the name of Islam and Shariah.

According to Kirby Green consul, Albanian Motion should be seen as an attempt by Islamic millet, by Ottoman nation, surrounded by the risks almost insurmountable and the only hope that they had was to learn and to be led in resolving the issue by the British. They consoled themselves with religious obligation that had to share their destiny with Caliph (vicegerent of the Prophet Muhammad - Sultan).<sup>97</sup>

## CONCLUSION

League of Prizren represents an organization with the general Albanian character in Albania's political life, which was placed on religious and regional divisions, that brought together all the Albanians under its direction, Muslims and Christians, Gheg and Tosk and created, a real political and national unity of Albanian people, based on common interests of all social forces of the country, to protect the integrity of the country and its liberation.

Thanks to the political, diplomatic and military activity, the League won the right to citizenship in the world of historiography. League wasn't a "Porte's instrument", "an Islamic organization" or an expression of "the war of the Muslim element against the Christian", an "explosion of Islamic xenophobia" used by Istanbul to avoid territorial losses after the Treaty of San Stefano. Often, in this conclusion emerges foreign historiography, especially Yugoslav historiography.<sup>98</sup>

The Sublime Porte tried to present the Assembly of the League and its activities as an organization with Islamic character, but, fortunately, it didn't

<sup>97</sup> Shkodra on November 11, 1878, The British Museum, London, Accounts and Papers (38). 1878 – 9, LXXIX, 79, 538 – 539

<sup>98</sup> Prifti, Kristaq (1998), League of Prizren and the issue of the National Union of Albanians (1878 - 1881), p. 136

<sup>94</sup> Bartl, Peter cit., p.142

<sup>95</sup> Public Record Office, London, F.O.195/1186

<sup>96</sup> Malcolm, Noel (1999), Kosovo a short history, p. 222

succeed. League Leadership, on June 15, 1878 addressed the Porte a petition that said: "*When homeland invites us for help, personal interests should be cursed. In our League we have decided to stay away from the religion because, primarily, we are Albanians*". This document, from the beginning, argues that Albanians, regardless of religious, were determined as a founded nation on the principle of a national programmatic platform.<sup>99</sup>

The Albanian League of 1878 - 1881 notes the first frontal fighting organized by Albanian people against the Ottoman occupiers and the Great Powers, which wanted to change that, a frontal clash with the expansionist policies of neighboring countries, where League defended his national unity.<sup>100</sup>

"We - declare the delegates assembled in Prizren – wouldn't accept, hereafter, that any occupiers tyrannized us and crushed the residents of our lands."<sup>101</sup> With the concept occupiers, these delegates meant not only Serbian and Greek Balkan monarchies, but even the Turkish sultan and his empire.

To Novak Razhnatovic, as Vladan Gjeorgjevic said once, the League wasn't nothing else than a propagandist assemblage, created by the Porte to justify war against Montenegro for the protection of the Ottoman Empire territories.<sup>102</sup>

Soviet historian I. Senkevic, in her monograph "Albania in the Eastern Crisis", published in 1965, tries to emphasize the anti-Turkish direction of the League. She believes that the League of November 1878, which adopted the program of autonomy, became the Albanian national motion.<sup>103</sup>

League of Prizren was, till the end, an Albanian patriotic organization, even though its direction had, alternately, sometimes moderate patriotic

circles, sometimes revolutionary patriots. In addition, the maps of its driving forces weren't, as claimed J. Haxhivasiljevic geographical character (feudal or reactionary in North, intellectuals or progressive in South), but always a social character in national plans.<sup>104</sup>

After all, if the League of Prizren would have a pro-Turkish Islamic character, it wouldn't be destroyed by the Turkish – European army.

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<sup>99</sup> Bajraktari, Jusuf (2011), League of Prizren - national state project, p.21

<sup>100</sup> Buda, Aleks (1978), Albania opposite Eastern Crisis, 1878-188, p. 14

<sup>101</sup> *Acts of the Albanian Renaissance*, p. 41

<sup>102</sup> Frasher, Kristo (1988), League of Prizren and its historical importance in Historical Studies nr. 4, p. 126

<sup>103</sup> Puto, Arben cit., p. 92

<sup>104</sup> Kristo Frasher, cit., p. 21