

## **The role of the Albanian Diaspora (in the U.S.) on the Declaration of Independence of Albania**

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The fall of the Albanian League of Prizren and the very difficult economic situation forced hundreds and thousands of Albanians to flee outside the borders of Albania and even further than that, outside the borders of the Ottoman Empire. Most of them migrated to Romania, Bulgaria, Egypt, Russia and the USA, countries where the former old colonies of Albanians could be found. Taking into consideration the difficult and severe conditions of Albania, in the context of the national development movement and the implementation of its platform for the development of the Albanian education and culture, an important role at the time was played by the Albanian Diaspora. Its role had already escalated to the creation, joining and unification of societies and clubs. Such was the case of the creation of the Federation "Panshqiptare Vatra" in the United States. The activities of its representatives in the countries where the federation was active were legal and in favourable political conditions. Their political goals were quite clear and the two main objectives were the liberation from slavery and the preservation of the territorial entirety of the Albanian lands. The political activity of the Diaspora developed within so called societies or cultural clubs, which was clearly expressed in their statutes. This political activity was obvious in the press of time, according to which this was happening in order to make use (in favour of the Albanian movements) of the available legal means, as well as to avoid any possible obstacles that could come out from the governmental authorities under the pressure of the Ottoman government to the authorities where these societies and clubs were operating. The contemporary actor of these societies, Visar Dodoni later on wrote: In that time the primary objective of the Albanian desires was the birth of the Albanian literature; but the goal that was hidden behind these wishes was the national freedom...

The achievement of the Albanian Declaration of Independence was a long important process. It was an active one especially for the political elite and prominent patriots inside and outside our country. This process was finalized with the raising of the Albanian flag in the town of Vlora, it also marked the final separation from the Ottoman Empire.

In order to reach this final action a long struggle and a lot of efforts were required, both inside and outside the country. The efforts made by the European chancelleries but also thanks to the organized war of the Albanian people, especially the revolts of the years 1910-1911 up to the general one of 1912 were factors that contributed significantly. Of course it was the ongoing struggle of the Albanian people that played the main role in the proclamation of independence, but we can not underestimate the major contribution of the Albanian Diaspora in the context of achieving such goal.

During "the Renaissance war" with "pens and guns for the mother nation", Albanians' efforts never ceased abroad. Furthermore, referring to the object of this reference, we will try to present the Albanian diaspora contribution in the years 1908-1912. We will appreciate the contribution of "Vatra" (Nook) in the U.S., of the Albanian diaspora in Bucharest, of the colony in Braila (Romania), etc. They never ceased their actions, beginning with the efforts to establish their clubs and cultural activities during the years 1908-1909, the publication of texts and writing them in Albanian language, publishing Albanian newspapers, financial aids for school education in Albanian language etc. Furthermore, this diaspora, being consistently in contact with the echo of events in Albania, tried to make Albanians aware of the John-Turkish policy, and the difficult situation in which they lead the country by sending representatives within Albania in those moments, by giving the necessary instructions, by unmasking plenty of Albanians who were in service of the Ottoman Empire and later by taking part in organized volunteer groups, in defence of Albanian territory.

Diaspora representatives participated in the final act of the declaration of independence on 28 November 1912.

## ***First Steps***

During 1908 the promotion of diaspora political activity was conducted by the club "Bashkimi" (Union) of Manastir. The call for the alphabet Congress was greeted with joy by the Albanian colonies of Cairo, of Alexandria in Egypt, of Bucharest in Romania, of Varna in Bulgaria, etc. Albanian patriots of the above respective countries expressed their enthusiasm in calling this Congress and showed their willingness to send their representatives in it.<sup>346</sup> On 24 August 1908 there was founded the Albanian society in Thessaloniki whose leader was Mithat Frashëri. It was known as a charitable society that had no political or religious aim.<sup>347</sup> The leader of this association would participate as a delegate in the Congress of Elbasan, as a representative of the society of Thessaloniki.<sup>348</sup>

On 8 September 1909 a conference by Mr. Abdyl Ypi was held in Thessaloniki Club, who by using a clear and sweet language pleased the listeners by telling what Albanians are. He confessed about the meanness and mistake that the Turkish bring by encouraging division among Albanian people. During those 500 years Albanians helped the Ottoman Empire, they protected it against the enemies. The Ottoman government made mistakes by sending in Albania officials who did not recognize Albanian customs. Albanians should not sit and expect the world to do things for them. People should try themselves to unify in order to open schools, and become aware of the fact that only with the help of its language can the nation make progress at the same pace as the other ones."<sup>349</sup>

More specifically let's stop at the activity of the Albanian diaspora in the U.S. With the arrival of Hyriet there seemed to appear a green light for the Albanians, because now they seemed to enjoy the freedom of their language. Such thing is

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<sup>346</sup> "Korca" Newspaper, Korçë, year 1909.

<sup>347</sup> "Liria" Newspaper, Sofje, year 1909.

<sup>348</sup> "Liria" Newspaper, Sofje, year 1910.

<sup>349</sup> "Dielli" Newspaper, year 1909.

expressed even by the Albanians living in America, especially in the newspaper "Kombi" (Nation) which was published in Boston at that period of time. This newspaper, on 21 August 1908, wrote that the proclamation of the constitution, was an act that pleased Albanians and made them happy because now they would be able to open schools in their own language.<sup>350</sup>

On 15 February 1909 the association known as "Besa-Besën" (Faith) in Boston released its first edition "Dielli" (The Sun), whose first editor was Fan Noli. In the lines of this press there was said that: " 'Dielli' (The Sun) was an organ of the national Albanians who were seeking self-government for Albania"<sup>351</sup>, while the newspaper's motto was "Albania for the Albanians". This association, along with its organ, became the centre of the Albanian national movement of the Albanian diaspora in America.

On 2 May 1909 the association of Korça people known as "Arsimi" (Education) was established in Hudson Mass. It was lead by Nikolla Dishnica. Later on its center was settled in Boston. This association aimed to have a particular influence on the educational and cultural development of the town of Korçe, which would be finalized with the opening of a philological university in this town. This association declared that it had nothing to do with politics. In the same month ( on 6 May 1909 ) in Kembric Mass there was founded the association "Përparimi" (Progress). It was a continuation of the association "Patriotic Brotherhood of Dardha" founded in 1906. Its purpose, just like the purpose of many other associations founded in America at that period of time was the transmission of knowledge among Albanians, through the publication and free distribution of books in Albanian language. With the efforts of "Besa-Besë" association there were gathered many aids for the Normal school.<sup>1</sup> In terms of aids, the association "Malli i Mëmëdheut" (with its center in Jamestown in the USA) donated \$50 to the "Përparimi" association for the Normal school.<sup>352</sup>

During 1910, in terms of aids collection for the Normal school, Dervish Beu from Elbasan, asked the director of "Dielli" (Sun) newspaper to try to gather aids for him. Among many other things in this newspaper, there was also written that the Director of the "Dielli" (Sun) newspaper agrees with "Besa-Besë" association, with Fan S. Noli and

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<sup>350</sup> "Dielli" Newspaper, year 1910.

<sup>351</sup> "Dielli" Newspaper, year 1911.

<sup>352</sup> "Dielli" Newspaper, year 1912.

with all the other well-known patriots living in America, who need to be honoured for the opening of the Normal school in Elbasan. Unfortunately the aids were rare, in one week there were gathered up to \$100. The director of "Dielli" newspaper was greatly surprised by this donation coldness of Albanians. He even organized conferences so as to find out the real purpose of this indifference.

And this is what he learnt: "There were two things that the Albanians of America disliked in the Congress of Elbasan. Firstly no American delegate was invited in the Congress, as if they had no real importance, at a time when their aids were greatly welcomed. The second thing that the Albanians of America disliked was the fact that this Congress elected as vice-chairman that person who dared to call "a dirty thing" our 500-year-old flag, the flag of our grandparents, the flag of our immortal Scanderbeg. However, the director of "Dielli" (Sun) newspaper went on saying that the Normal School would not surrender and give up because of the mistakes of the Congress. "According to him the Normal School should become and would become a national neutral institution."<sup>353</sup>

However, during 1910 the association "Malli i Mëmëdheut" would offer help for the Normal School.<sup>354</sup>

Albanians of Planters Hotel Co., answered positively to the call of Dervish Beu from Elbasan. They made a small list and provide donations (an amount of \$132) for the Normal School. Donations were also offered by the Albanians living in Worchester, an amount of \$113.<sup>355</sup>

A major concern for many Albanian patriots wherever they were within the country or abroad, was the policy being followed by John-Turks, which was completely different from their expectations. This concern was particularly evident in the national rally held at the Phoenix Hall, in America, with the participation of Albanians from different locations. The leader of this rally was the chairman of "Besa-Besë" association who emphasized: "These rights are in danger today, but they are in greater danger even tomorrow. We are in danger because the John-Turkish by fiercely imposing Turkish language to the Albanians, by introducing waking their fanaticism through Islam, by

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<sup>353</sup> "Liri e Shqipërisë" Newspaper, Sofje, year 1911.

<sup>354</sup> Edwin Jacques, "Shqiptarët", Kartë e pendë 1995, p.335.

<sup>355</sup> Sh. Demiraj, K. Prifti, Kongresi i Manastirit, Tiranë 1978.

keeping the country in poverty, by forcing Albanians deny their nation, by sending the strongest Albanians die as soldiers in Yemen etc, John-Turkish bit by bit are weakening and destroying our nationality. Our rights are in danger tomorrow, because if tomorrow brings the destruction of Turkey, it will find us unprepared. In order to be prepared for this, we need to tell the truth to our co-patriots, they need not to be lied by the tales and forget their nationality, but they should manlike do their duty.”<sup>356</sup>

During the year 1909 several important steps were taken by the associations operating in the USA for the unification of theirs into a single one. The board of the association “Malli i Mëmëdheut” showed its concern about the unification in “Dielli” (Sun) newspaper. Their concern was immediately followed by the concern of “ Besa-Besë” association which loudly called for the organisation and gathering of all the other Albanian associations of America created up to that period of time such as: “Përparimi”(Progress), “Arsimi” (Education), “Fatbardhësia” as well as the church association of Saint Gjergj.

In the wake of these efforts a series of rallies were organized in various urban centers where Albanians lived. Therefore rallies were organized in Boston on 1 November 1909, in Hudson Mass on 12 November 12 1909, in Bideford on 18 November, in Nejtik on 25 November, in Worchester on 1 December, in Sauthbric on 14 December. Their goal was the expansion of the Albanian patriots for the revival of the Albanian National Movement. These efforts showed their first results with the merger of the two associations "Besa-Besë" and "Malli i Mëmëdheut" in 1910. This was an action that would make possible the further expansion of this union .The issue of unification became more evident during 1911, when the national Albanian movements against the Turkish which had already exploded in Albania needed to be supported more than ever.

In “Dielli” (Sun) newspaper there was written: "Today we need unification, we need to live with honour, and we need to join for our country! People need to search unification, they need to call in a single voice ‘viva union’ ”. <sup>357</sup>

For this purpose Kristo Floqi was appointed to plan the unification program of the

Albanian associations operating in America which would be checked and approved by all the associations.

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<sup>356</sup> V. Duka “Shqiptarët në rrjedhat e shek. XIX”, Panteon 2001.

<sup>357</sup> Eqërem bej Vlora, “Kujtime II”, Shtëpia e librit dhe e komunikimit 2001.

Therefore a joint meeting was arranged on 24 December 1911 in Boston. All associations were required to send their representatives in it. There was also arranged that in this meeting there would be discussed Kanunorja of Central Committee, the first article of which emphasized that its primary goal was the protection of the Albanian nation's interests, among which the liberation of the nation. In this first meeting Fan Noli was elected as the chairman who rejected that position. Instead of him there was elected Kristo Floqi. The meeting decided to elect a commission of four members, who would represent the leaders of the Central committee. The meeting also decided that each village where Albanians lived, would send one representative in Boston, and together these 10 or 12 members from Boston would form the Central Committee.<sup>358</sup>

The initiative of "Besa-Besë" association would be followed by the initiatives of the other associations too. In this initiative there were joined the associations "Besa-Besë", "Malli i Mëmëdheut", and "Përlindja". The latter one, whose chairman was Denis Kamburi, was in Jamestown.

In 1911 the rally which was organized in Boston ended up with a meeting being organized in Boston on 17 March at 3 o'clock. The speeches in this meeting were held by many patriots, among them we could mention Fan Noli, who spoke about the atrocities of the Turkish army. While the patriot Orazio Iriani ( professor ) by introducing facts managed to declare worldwide the efforts of Albanian diaspora in America, showing that it does exist and work for Albania. Among many other things he showed that "Turks are Turks, and Albania should never expect any good things from them. Ahmet Rizaj called in the middle of the parliament that there were no Albanians, but Myfit Beu responded" efendëm var var " !. Some time ago a Turkish newspaper wrote that there were no Albanians in America, but what about these people here, what are they gathered for?<sup>359</sup>

In the years 1910 and 1911, Noli held important fiery speeches before the association Besa-Besë, in support of the Albanian rebels in Kosovo, by raising up their fights and their bravery led by Isa Boletini and Idriz Seferi in the battles of Çernaleva and Kaçanik.

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<sup>358</sup> Stavro Skëndo "Zgjimi kombëtar shqiptar", Toena.

<sup>359</sup> Instituti i Historisë, "Lef Nosi-Dokumente historike 1912-1918", Tiranë 2007.

The associations “Besa-Besë”, “Arsimi”, “Dallëndyshja”, “Malli i Mëmëdheut”, “Shoqëria Kombëtare” and “Mirëbërësi” were pro the unification until the beginning of march 1912.

While on 28 April 1912 American diaspora reached the final outcome which was the unification of all associations into a single one by creating the Albanian Federation “Vatra”. This union was named like this due to the high authority of this federation among the Albanians of America and its chairman Fan Noli. In May 1912 “ Vatra” Federation made efforts to create a national newspaper.<sup>360</sup>

As it can be seen the final goal of the Albanian diaspora in America was already realized. What was required now was putting in practise Vatra’s program, as well as the direct active participation during the events of 1911-1912 which would end up with the declaration of independence.

As far as the aids for the general Albanian rebellion were concerned, there was an article published by “Dielli” newspaper titled “The call of rebellions among migrating Albanians” in which was written: “ In the sister newspaper ‘Freedom of Albania’ in the first page of its final edition, we sang with remarks a call of aids to our rebellion brothers in Kosovo and Malësia. Although we haven’t taken such a call, we will make efforts to do our duty as much as we can. Our brothers should know that their calls will always be welcomed in our hearts. They should never lose their hopes because blood never becomes water.”<sup>361</sup>

In August 1912 there were clearly displayed on the pages of “Dielli” newspaper the efforts of the Albanians living in America to topple John-Turkish power. This is what there was written on the pages of this newspaper: "Through “Dielli” newspaper we managed to wake up Albanian patriots, we could boast for having taken a little part in the efforts against Jonh-Turkish power, but a big part in the strengthening of our national ideal. The John-turks know this better than we do. As a proof we keep a word of theirs “TANIN” which used to say that the centre of the Albanian Committee is probably located in America.”<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> Sejfi Vllamasi, “Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri, Tiranë 1995.

<sup>361</sup> Skënder Luarasi “Tri jetë”, Migjeni 2007.

<sup>362</sup> Ismail Qemal Vlora, “Kujtime”, Toena 1997.



The aid of "Vatra" Federation was manifested even in the creation of a group of immigrants, Albanians of America, dressed in red and black uniforms, wearing hats on which there could be read the words "Freedom or Death". This federation was of the opinion that in moments in which Albania was, in order to maintain territorial entirety the most valuable thing to be done was the preservation of their status under the Ottoman Empire, so as not to be destroyed and torn from the neighboring states.

According to them: "Albania is an ongoing volcano, fire burnt and destroyed it from all sides, Montenegro and Serbians in the north, the Greeks in the south and Bulgarians in the east. Before breaking the imperial army they want to break the territory. Since we are people seeking for peace we are going to answer our nation's call, we are going to do whatever we can to protect the honour of Albania."

Following the protection of Albanian national issue, another big rally was organized in Boston on 17 November 1912, in which Konica called for sending telegrams to the Super Powers and European chancelleries. There would be emphasized that if the separation of Albania was allowed, great rebellions would be organized in the Balkans

In the act of the declaration of independence on 28 November 1912 there were also present members of the Albanian volunteers coming from America. Not only this, but based on the testimony of Qamil Panariti, regarding the origin of the flag raised in Vlora, he said that the flag had been brought from Boston in Corfu in 1911, by members of the association "Besa-Besë", who had expressed their desire to take part as volunteers in the Albanian uprising of that year.

The flag was brought to Albania by Marigo Pozio, who had wrapped it round her body so as to escape Greek customs control.

"Vatra" Federation in those years became like a government in migration. Its leaders were welcomed by the official authorities, as representatives of Albania. With their excellent speeches, they defended Albanian people and the Albanian issue. Fan Noli often left because of being in charge of important tasks.

In the autumn of 1912, when the Nation was in danger of fragmentation, Fan Noli was sent in London by „Vatra“ Federation. Fan Noli greeted Ismail Qemali for the declaration of independence from the British capital, London.