

# PERCEPTIONS OF BULGARIA AND BULGARIANS IN THE ALBANIAN PRESS IN 1908

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The year 1908 is considered a major turning point for the political and social conditions of all the Balkan peoples who were still politically attached to the Ottoman empire. The competition between the Great Powers for obtaining economic concessions in European Turkey on one side, and the struggle opposing the agents of the different national questions to the Sublime Porte or to each other on the other, had created a perilous and unclear situation in the Ottoman Balkans. Albanian journalists who promoted the affirmation of the national ideas followed closely the events and they dedicated time at thinking on how Albanians should look at the Bulgarian national question and whether Bulgarians were to be considered as potential allies or foes. The study of several articles written in 1908 shows that the opinions of the Albanian journalists toward the aforementioned issues shifted repeatedly. Previous political exploits such as the San Stefano Treaty and the relations between Albanians and the Turkish government seem to have influenced the picture drawn of Bulgarian national affairs by Albanian activists.

**Key words:** Albania, Bulgaria, Independence, 1908, Press

1908 година се приема за повратна точка по отношение на политическите и социалните условия на онези балканските народи, които политически все още са обвързани с Османската империя. Конкуренцията между Великите сили за постигане на икономически облекчения в Европейска Турция, от една страна, и съревнованието между редица противопоставящи се активисти, поставящи различни национални въпроси пред Високата порта, от друга страна, създават опасна и неясна ситуация в османската част на Балканите. Албанските журналисти, които се борят за утвърждаването на националните идеи, следят отблизо събитията и посвещават време за осмисляне на това как албанците би трябвало да гледат на българския национален въпрос и дали българите трябва да се разглеждат като потенциални съюзници на врагове. Проучването на няколко статии, написани през 1908 г., показва, че становищата на албанските журналисти към посочените по-горе въпроси се променят многократно. Предишни политически дела: като Договора от Сан Стефано и отношенията между албанци и турското правителство изглежда, че са повлияли на картината, създадена за български национални въпроси от албански активисти.

**Ключови думи:** Албания, България, независимост, 1908, преса

## Introduction

The object of this paper is to explore the political thought of the Albanians in 1908 concerning Bulgarian politics and national question. This historical enquiry is conducted on some of the most representative journals of the Albanian national

revival with the aim of understanding how the unilateral independence declaration of Bulgaria was received by the Albanian activists and if it produced any change in the perception of Bulgaria and Bulgarians. In conceiving this question I was led by the expectation of collecting some clues that if added to other literature on the same matter and period, might perhaps be useful in providing some details on the reasons why Albanian activists did not eventually exploit the political situation created in the Balkans for their goals, but were instead made outcast of the Balkan League that not very long after marched over Turkey risking to dash once and forever their hopes for self-government. I have consulted six journals: *Kombi*, published in Boson and directed by Sotir Peci; *Drita* which was printed in Sofia by Shahin Kolonja; *Shkopi* which was a satirical journal published in Egypt by Jani Vruho; *La Nazione Albanese* published in Italy by Anselmo Lorecchio; *Besa* and *Bashkimi*, which were both published in Constantinople after the restoration of the Ottoman constitution in July 1908. The directors of *Besa* and *Bashkimi* were respectively Mehmet Frashëri and M. Shau. In order to learn how the events affected the relationship between Albanians and Bulgarians I chased chronologically those events that provoked a major impact on local and international policies linked to the Balkan in 1908. An overall assertion of my findings can here be made in advance which I must admit was not unforeseeable to me. Feelings of isolation and fear seem to have characterized the thoughts, the plans and the actions of Albanian activists who believed to be carrying their national struggle alone, and without the possibility of relying on a regional – although only temporary – ally.

### Overview on Relations between Albanians and Bulgarians to and about 1908

The relations between Albanians and Bulgarians in the period of the national revival have been partially treated in Albanian and Bulgarian historiographies (Pollo 1984; Dimitrov 1968; Sokolova 1979). This subject seems to have lately fallen into forgetfulness while more attention has been dedicated to mutual relationships from different historical and social perspectives (Eld'rov 2000). The prospect of the creation of a Slavic dominated area in the Balkans was a catalyst for Albanian associationism (Stavrianos [1958] 2000: 502). The San Stefano Treaty was particularly generous to Bulgaria but also to Serbia and Montenegro. Bulgaria was to obtain territories where according to Albanian historiography, population was predominantly Albanian (Puto 2010: 16). In April 1878, people from Dibra/Debar sent letters of protest against the

annexation (Frashëri 2012: 199). But surprisingly Albanian historiography reports that the possibility of an alliance between Albanians and Bulgarians was taken in consideration soon after the Berlin Congress (Pollo 1984: 262).<sup>1</sup> Before that, in the 1860s, the Bulgarian writer and journalist Petko Slavejkov had shown peculiar attention to the Albanian national question. He reckoned that Albanians, Bulgarians and Vlachs faced the same threat in the struggle for the affirmation of their national rights: the panhellenistic policies of the Patriarchate and the Megale Idea (Dimitrov 1968: 196–200).

After the Berlin Congress of 1878 many Albanians went Bulgaria in attracted by the economic opportunities created in the new autonomous state (Pollo 1984: 88). The enlightened elite of this immigration discovered in the newborn principality the propitious place for propagandizing national ideas. Sofia soon became one of the most important centres for the development and the divulgation of Albanian culture (Clayer [2007] 2012: 128). The city hosted since 1893 the association *Dëshira* whose leader and founder Kristo Luarasi published the periodical *Kalendari Kombiar* since 1897 (Petrota [1932] 2008: 409–410). Luarasi was soon joined by a collaborator, Shahin Kolonja who directed and published the newspaper *Drita* from 1901 to 1908. Historian Stavro Skendi ([1967] 2000: 148) estimated that the latter was the most popular journal written in the Albanian language that back then circulated in the territories of nowadays South and Central Albania. Albanian activists operating in Sofia established good relation with Bulgarians (Sokolova 1979: 79) and they showed solidarity toward the Bulgaria's own national issues (147–156).

Since the abovementioned Russo – Turkish conflict a prejudice toward the neighbouring Slavic speaking people begun to affect the Albanians national movement. One of the most prominent sources that testify this bias is Sami Frashëri's *Shqipëria ç'ka qëne, ç'është e ç'do të bëhet*<sup>2</sup>. This book was dedicated to the programmatic elaboration of an Albanian conjoint political action for dealing with present and future challenges. As for the present Sami Frasher stated that the Albanian people were surrounded by foes whose only purpose was to take possession of their land. Bulgarians were the third on the list after the Turks and the Greeks. He also pointed out that in the event of a war between Turkey and Bulgaria Albanians should not take the sides of Turkey but restrain to defend themselves (Frashëri [1899] 2010: 32–35). Albanian and Bulgarian speaking communities have been living together for many centuries in the Eastern territories of nowadays Albania, but especially in Macedonia

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<sup>1</sup> It is a 1879 treaty published by Jusuf Ali beu in Sofia in Bulgarian language by the title (translating it from Albanian as it is reported on the book) “Conversations of the day that deserve attention”.

<sup>2</sup> Albania what was, what is, what will it be.

(FYROM). There are many cases of families where both the languages are spoken due to intermixed marriages as well as for convenience circumstances. In 1908 the territory that makes the present day Macedonian republic was partitioned in the three Turkish provinces of Kosovo, Manastir (Bitola) and Salonika where Albanians and Bulgarians lived mingled with other ethnic groups (Basciani 2010: 140). There is a major problem in defining their mutual relationship which springs from the fact that Albanian sources at the time would refer to all Macedonians as ethnic Bulgarians. Historiographies developed in present day Bulgaria and Macedonia corroborate diametrical perspectives on what were the intentions and will of the Bulgarian – Macedonians (Minčev 1995), or respectively, Macedonians and how they coped with cohabiting Albanians (Naumoska 1995; Hristov 1995). This is an issue that I cannot embrace here for overt reasons of space. I will restrain at transposing the terms “Bulgarian”, “Macedonian” or “Macedonian – Bulgarian” in the way they were used by the Albanian sources that I use in the present paper.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, Albanian illegal fighters for the national rights established contacts with the so called Bulgarian-Macedonian *komitadjis*<sup>3</sup> (Skendi [1967] 2000: 194; Smirnova 2003: 41). One brief but accurate and trustful description of those events has been provided by Mihal Grameno, an Albanian writer and *komitadji* (*komita* in Albanian) in his memoirs *Kryengritja Shqiptare* (1925).<sup>4</sup> In 1907 he became a member of a small Albanian illegal group under the lead of Çerçiz Topulli. By August of the same year they met for the first time with Bulgarian *komitadjis* in the area of the lake Prespa where today Albania, Macedonia and Greece share their borders. The two groups hanged together around the lake area for few days getting in contact with other Bulgarian *komitadjis*. They made a good impression on Grameno who recollects these encounters with fine memories: “I would never deny that when we collaborated with the Bulgarian *komita*, we got along as brothers and we learned much from their organization techniques.”

Another relevant attempt to establish cooperation between the Albanian national question and the Macedonian – Bulgarians was carried by Boris Sarafov. Albanian activists Faik Konica, in an issue of his journal Albania of 1907 informs us of a personal meeting he had with Sarafov in 1901. I cannot clearly stress why Konica kept this secret for so long, but I can only guess two reasons why he decided to write about Sarafov only six years after it actually happened. Firstly, because he

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<sup>3</sup> Meaning committee man

<sup>4</sup> There are two different editions of the memoirs. But only the first one (fully cited in the bibliography section) was edited by the author, while the other version appeared in 1959 and has been shrank and adapted to the contingencies of the socialist regime.

maybe wanted to dissuade Albanians – like Grameno and Çerçiz Topulli who were prompting an Albanian uprising – from collaborating with Bulgarians and or any other regional power. Second, and most likely, writing about him was Konica’s personal homage to a man that he perhaps considered as a praiseworthy foe.<sup>5</sup> Konica reports that Sarafov approached him in order to ensure the support of the Albanians for a plan he had to smuggle weapons from the Albanian coast in order to bring them to Macedonian fighters. For Konica this plan sounded as he wanted “Albanians of one side to send weapons to kill Albanians of the other side.”<sup>6</sup>, although for being polite, he did not confess this to his guest. Nonetheless Sarafov had a greater perspective as he asserted that Albanian and Bulgarians were bound to work together against the common enemies that were the Turks and the Greeks. He also affirmed that he was not trying to make a big Bulgaria but was interested in founding an independent Macedonia. He even promised that he was ready to deceive the Bulgarians in order to obtain weapons from them which were then to be used for the common Albanian and Macedonian purpose. Konica replied he would talk about this eventuality with few people, but he never trusted Sarafov’s words and undertakings. “Unfortunately – he states – Sarafov and his friends, as well as Greeks and Serbs have two programs, one that is spoken and written and one that is unspoken and unwritten”.<sup>7</sup> The same opinion shared also other Albanian activists that Konica informed about the proposal which was finally discarded.

Sarafov had a hard time in making himself credible as none would believe that he was devoted to a project of independent Macedonia after he had been leader of the Supreme Committee from 1899 to 1901. Konica was not the only one to turn down his plea for collaboration. In 1904 after the failure of the Ilinden uprising of 1903 Sarafov and another fellow of the VMRO Mihal Gerđžikov reached Italy in order to obtain diplomatic attention. Their mission was unsuccessful as either could they meet the minister Tommaso Tittoni (who refused to meet him for formal institutional reasons), neither could they make a good impression on Ricciotti Garibaldi who was at the time dedicated to the national questions of the Balkans (Guida 1984: 110–111).

Nonetheless, according to what Konica writes afterwards in the same article, Sarafov gathered around him many Albanians in respect to whose Konica expressed

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<sup>5</sup> I cannot be sure whether Konica really wrote these article as a homage to the defunct Sarafov, who was killed in 1907. The publication in fact does not show any date, but I only know that was the second issue of 1907. However, the mood of the speech is akin to an eulogy because the writer insists in using the past verbal forms when he refers to his deeds and being. It is though unusual for the shimmering judgement that is given on Sarafov.

<sup>6</sup> *Albania 1907*, n. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

severe disappointment. The article finishes somehow unclearly as the judgment that Konica draws on Sarafov is not easy to grasp. He firstly provides an extremely orientalist image by stating that Sarafov “was one and the same, but a thousand times smaller, the reflection of two formidable men of his own seed (better read as race), Ghengis Khan and Timur. A blind strength that raids ahead, he was focused only on the target, and, without seeing or hearing, crashed and destroyed everything that stayed on his path”. But then this terrifying picture slightly turns into an honourable man that served his national question and gave all Albanians an unexpected lesson of chivalry: “*he never lied to a member of his own.*”<sup>8</sup> This last sentence may raise the suspect whether Konica regretted his choice to not have accepted Sarafov’s offer. But if considered within the wider range of writings that follow, this article displays some recognizable features that contradistinguish the perception and the relations of the Albanian activists towards Bulgaria. The Bulgarians and everything that was related or even suspected of being related to them was distrusted by Albanians as the image of Bulgarians was fixed in a recurrent sentence stating that Serbs, Greeks, Bulgarians and Turks were enemies and that nothing good could come from them in the long term. But at the same time, as emerged in the account of Mihal Grameno as well as in the conclusive part of Konica’s article, Albanian activists appreciated the work they did for their own national cause and were therefore willing to learn from them. This shy approach implied a paradoxical positioning of the Albanian activists in the regional context as they seem to have been passive allies with Bulgarians and Bulgarians – Macedonians without making further steps. This positioning was hardly remunerative in the context of a secession conflict which was mounting in European Turkey at the time. Although one might think that Albanians obtained a state in 1912 without taking part in the fight, or worse, fighting on the sides of the defeated power that was Turkey.

### Bulgaria and Bulgarians in the Albanian press of 1908

By reading the newspapers *Kombi* and *Drita* in the beginning of 1908 it seems as if Bulgarians and Albanians were facing common threats which were Greece, Turkey and the Serbia. *Kombi* published news concerning Albanian and Bulgarian confrontations with Greeks in the Manastir vilayet. The Turkish regime was accused of opposing Albanians, while did nothing to prevent Greeks from committing atrocities.<sup>9</sup> The high commissioner for Macedonia Hilmi pasha was held responsible

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. italic in the original

<sup>9</sup> *Kombi*, January 3, 1908 p. 1; On 31 of January, *Kombi* published the letter of a *komitadji* made prisoner by the Turks that reveals that Albanians and Bulgarians were cooperating in wiping out Greeks.

of the situation. *Drita* of the first January 1908 accused Hilmi pasha for having filled Macedonia with bandits from Greece and Serbia in order to suppress Bulgarians.<sup>10</sup> On 29 February *Kombi* claimed that Serbs and Greeks were allies because they were against the Bulgarians in Macedonia. The Albanian journalist however felt that neither of the two countries could really succeed in an armed struggle with Bulgaria or Romania. The Bulgarian military prowess was exalted in an article on *Drita* the 1<sup>st</sup> of January which discussed the writing of a Turkish officer concerned with the dangers of Turkey in case of a Bulgarian attack. On the *Kombi* issue of 13 March *Guri i Tsapit* (penname of the aforementioned Mihal Grameno) reported on reprisal that the hamidian regime was enacting on the Albanians in the *kaza* of Korça. He reminded of the Bulgarian bloody struggles against Turkey as the only possible way to achieve the national rights. On February 13 *Drita* published an article about Lazar Siljani. He was an Albanian born in the Debar region who had moved in Bulgaria with his parents at a very young age. He grew up with Bulgarian national feelings and was involved in activities for the liberation of Macedonia. However, Siljani did not lose his mother tongue. In Bulgaria he promoted a righteous image of Albanians who often suffered discrimination. Siljani published also a book in Albanian *Besa dhe feja e Shqiptarëve të vjetër*<sup>11</sup>, which according to *Drita* was the first book in Albanian written by an orthodox *gegë* (northern Albanian).

Albanians never professed openly an alliance with the Bulgarians for the Macedonian affair or with Bulgaria as a possible diplomatic partner. Distrust always prevailed. They looked more dubiously at Bulgarians as the international relations became tenser. To this contributed the Sultan's railway concession to Austria – Hungary. *Drita* and *Kombi* were favourable to the project, but they also stated that the Sultan's decision displeased Russia, Serbia and Montenegro as in their opinion it damaged Slav unity by separating Serbia from Montenegro.<sup>12</sup> Already at the end of the winter *Kombi* changed approach toward Bulgaria and Turkey. The publication of *Drita* was interrupted for many months until September, when the last two issues were printed. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of February, on the second page of *Kombi* an article criticized Turkey for being the only regional actor to not have yet helped the Albanian question. For the author the interests of Albanians depended on Turkey. He argued that Balkan

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On page 3 of the same issue is reported of Albanians and Bulgarians suffering Serb violence in Skopje; on *Drita* of the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1908 at page 3 a letter from Romania explained how Greeks were turning Albanians and Bulgarians the ones against the others in the village of Negovan.

<sup>10</sup> See also G. C. Dodoni, *the Damned Greeks*, *Kombi*, March the 13<sup>th</sup>, 1908, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Translation: The honour that is gained for being trustful (this is the best translation I can think of the Albanian term *besa*) and the faith of the old Albanians.

<sup>12</sup> See article in *Drita*, January the 15<sup>th</sup>, 1908, p. 4 and *Kombi*, February the 21<sup>th</sup>, 1908, p. 2



states chased only their own interests. Bulgarians in particular subjugated Albanians with “schools and fake friendship”. On May 29 *Kombi* claimed that Albanians in Macedonia had been losing their language by adopting Bulgarian and Turkish idioms. The reason after this denationalization process was the absence of schools. The article ended with an attempt to dissuade Albanians from joining the Young Turk clubs as the latter were against national aspirations. On June 19 at page 2 *Kombi* expressed deep concern for the pressures that Italy and the other great powers were exerting on Turkey in order for Italy to obtain the concession for the construction of a railway that would link Belgrade to the Albanian Adriatic coast. For the Albanians the project was conceived in order to reinforce the Slavs in the Balkans and thus curb the Austrian penetration. Although the benefits that Bulgaria was to gain with the railway were not explained, Bulgarians were considered part of the Slav threat that menaced Albania which was “all the ways surrounded by wolves”.

After the restoration of the Ottoman constitution on July 24, the opinions expressed in the Albanian newspapers converged on the idea that Albanians were to pursue their interests altogether with Turkey. Nonetheless few Albanians remained sceptical about the real chances of the Young Turks to implement a constitutional regime. On July 24 *Kombi* in the first page stated that most of Christians and Muslims in Macedonia were against the implementation of the constitution. In the writer’s opinion, the Young Turk movement had just shortened the days of the Empire. A similar claim was made in the journal *Shkopi* few months later. On November 13 the writer argued that the peoples of the Ottoman Empire, including Bulgarians and Albanians, were not ready to live in a constitutional regime. He based the assertion on the thesis of the clash of civilizations between the Christian West and the Muslim East recognizing that the problem was not much related to religion, but to the political conception of power. He observed that, unlike in the West, cultures in the East did not separate religion from the sovereign power and thus the constitution was the expression of the secularized power that people in the Ottoman Empire could not accept or understand because power was to them still a gift from God. The critique seemed addressed to the both Christians and Muslims in the Ottoman Balkans. Besides he affirmed that since the Ottoman constitution did not make any provision for the organization of Albanian territories in a single administrative unit, such territories would had been progressively absorbed by neighbouring states that claimed Albanian cities, or lost in the event of a war. Among the threats surrounding Albania also Bulgaria is mentioned, but it is not made clear exactly what part of Albanian territories Bulgaria was interested to absorb.



In the days after the restoration of the constitution *Kombi* displayed compliance to the new regime as it nourished the hope that it could turn useful to the national interests. Bulgarians instead were depicted as troublemakers who caused unnecessary conflict with Turkey. On 7 of August *Kombi* claimed to have found a book written by a man named Schopoff who they envisioned might had been Bulgarian or Russian. The book contained a memorandum signed by an alleged Albanian committee that was addressed to the Sultan in 1902 in order to demand the autonomy of Albania and Macedonia. But Albanian claims did not include any parts of the Kosovo, Manastir and Salonika vilayets which were instead to make the autonomous Macedonian province. Thus the journal argued that the document sent to the Sultan was a fake that Bulgarians had created in order to make the Sultan believe that they had an agreement with Albanians. The writer then accused the Bulgarians of being deceitful to them saying that “the little tolerance that they showed by allowing a newspaper in their capital, is just because they want to use it for their own interest”. In this quote, the writer referred to Bulgarians as “our neighbours”, without specifically using the “Bulgarian” ethnonym. This generalization maybe shows his search for a synonym. On the other hand, may tell that Albanian activists were at the time not even trying to consider the possibility of creating an agenda of foreign policy with neighbouring powers, but Bulgaria and Bulgarians were seen as part of a greater, not well defined, foreign threat.

On August the 14, *Guri i Tsapit* (Mihal Grameno) reported on *Kombi* that in Korça everyone was ecstatic about the constitution but Greeks and Bulgarians who always had tried to dismember Albania and Macedonia. In his opinion Bulgaria was to be careful in her next steps and not to provoke a war with Turkey now that the army found vigour. His advice to Albanians was to exploit the situation by opening schools and finding internal cohesion although it comported the momentary abandonment of “certain hopes”, which probably meant to put aside the project for an autonomous Albanian province. On September 13, *Drita* encouraged Albanians to make the most of the constitutional freedoms by emulating other nationalities, such as Bulgarians, who had established schools and other institutions for the benefit of their national cause. The national program announced by *Drita* highlighted the necessity of “asking all the rights that other nations are asking”, and did not make any specific claim to an Albanian autonomy.

It must have seemed convenient to Albanians at that time not to alter the administrative divisions by asking the formation of autonomous province. This attitude was dictated by the feeling that in the case Turkish provinces were to be redefined by

a nationality criteria, Albania would lose many territories to Bulgarians and Greeks as they had been much more efficient in growing the ranks of their followers. *Drita* suggested that Albanians had to work very hard in order to survive as a nation: “If we don’t work, we will be extinguished and forgotten as a nation because those who work will assimilate us and will delete our nation and our name from the earth”. This quote discloses that many Macedonians were undecided about what nationality to chose and that agents of national propaganda played a major role in defining the ethnicity of region. From this perspective, ethnical identity seems to have been induced by a process of power secularization that does not differ from the social process which gave form to the modern multi – party political systems in Europe.

The journal *La Nazione Albanese* mirrored the opinions of *Kombi* and *Drita*, although there was not coordination between them. On 30 September director Anselmo Lorecchio commented an interview of a Young Turk officer appeared on the *London Times*. He was praised to hear that the Young Turk’s program was against the creation of an autonomous Macedonia. On page 2 Lorecchio stated that Macedonia remained still a natural Albanian region, despite the many “unpunished” activities of the Greek and Slav propaganda. In the following pages of the same issue he reviewed the diplomatic accident between Sofia’s minister in Constantinople Guechoff and the Turkish government which sparked the process leading to the declaration of independence by Prince Ferdinand on 5 October (Crampton [1997] 2005: 130). Lorecchio took overtly the sides of the Turkish claims. Concerning the Bulgarian declaration of independence, on 31 of October, Lorecchio noted that independence was the accomplishment of the supreme aspiration of all the people. However he thought that Bulgaria had been arrogant in the conduct of the whole affair knowing that no one was going to punish her.

A recent Kosovo-Albanian study asserts that the “traditional opponents” of the Ottoman Empire took advantage of the power vacuum in Constantinople where new elections were about to be held and thus Austria – Hungary annexed Bosnia – Herzegovina, Bulgaria declared independence and Greece annexed Crete after the withdrawal of the Great Powers from the island (Ramizi 2004: 131). The declaration of Bulgarian independence and the annexation of Bosnia – Herzegovina by Austria – Hungary happened simultaneously as apparently the two chancelleries coordinated their plans in order to minimize the possible effects of a Turkish reaction (Chary 2011: 45; Ilchev 2005: 260–261). The Ottoman Empire did not react for the annexation of Bosnia – Herzegovina because it was considered lost since the Congress of Berlin and obtained in turn the withdrawal of the Habsburg troops from Novi Pazar. But

the Bulgarian affair was received differently. The Albanian journals indicate that a diplomatic crisis was unleashed between the two states which some prospected might had escalated into a violent conflict opposing Bulgaria and Turkey. Albanians feared that Bulgaria might have been let free to declare war on Turkey and perhaps even come out victorious of the conflict. Knowing that Bulgarian territorial claims included the whole of western Macedonia, they felt that was best to support the Young Turks, although their regime proved adverse to Albanian nationalism. On 25 August in fact Young Turks sent to prison the Dervish Hima who was a member of the committee “Union and Progress” because of a speech on behalf of the Albanian national rights that he made in Shkodër (Prifti 1993: 197). *Kombi* on 16 October affirmed that Bulgaria was causing unrest in the whole of the region and that the independence act was illegitimate. The journal argued that Bulgaria’s readiness to go to war with Turkey was instigated by Austria – Hungary. Meanwhile the situation was worsened by the Serbian reaction to the annexation of Bosnia – Herzegovina which risked provoking a war between the Habsburg Empire and the Serbian Kingdom. The writer concluded that “Albanians were not going to leave Turkey without a friend” until the moment when would have been impossible to guarantee the safeguard of Albanian territories by staying in the empire.<sup>13</sup>

The fear of a Balkan war faded out in November. The Albanian newspapers of Constantinople rejoiced for the new regime, believing that Albanian nationality was finally recognized. The journal *Besa* on 10 November reported news of the talks concerning the compensation that Turkey was to receive and of the pressures that were being made on Turkey that was for not to ask large sums of money from a poor country as Bulgaria was. Bulgaria in fact, just as the other Balkan nations that gained independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, was legally bound to pay to its former sovereign the expenses of the money spent for public works implemented by Turkey in the territories that were now not anymore in any form associated with the Empire. In the same issue the peoples of the empire were encouraged to cooperate in peace and forget the conflicts of the past. The journal *Bashkimi*, expressed plain satisfaction for the constitution. The journal remarked that Albanians had to be careful of the states surrounding them. On 29 November the editor insisted on the idea that the country was bounded by foes and that Albanians should defend the frontiers. It is not possible to understand whether by defending the frontiers it implied those of the Ottoman state or the hypothetical frontiers of the Albanian entity, which the Turks

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<sup>13</sup> This was indeed what then happened.

kept on not recognizing. Concerning the relations between Turkey and Bulgaria the journal assured that there was not any danger of war.

Probably the greatest goal that Albanians could attain within the possibilities of constitutional setting was the organization of the Monastir Congress that begun on 14 November and lasted one week. The Congress was publicly held for treating linguistic and school issues and it was attended also by representatives of the Vlach, Bulgarian and Greek communities of the city. There are several reports affirming that a secret political agenda was discussed behind closed doors. The object of these secret discussions was the creation of a political centre for the organization of the Albanian national question which was to emancipate from Turkey in the form of an autonomous province or as a fully independent state, according to the sources that collected the information (Ramizi 2004: 124–129). The plan could never turn into practice as Young Turk government adopted a policy of nationalization of its Ottoman subjects which led to the imprisonment of most of the advocates of the Albanian national identity.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to examine the Albanians impressions on Bulgaria and Bulgarians in 1908. The analysis took in consideration some of the most relevant journals of the Albanian national movement. Albanians perceived an antagonism with Bulgarians which was not caused by Bulgarian policies alone, but from the exploits of the international relations and by the psychological predisposition of Albanians toward their neighbours since at least the Santo Stefano Treaty of 1878. Bulgarians were never perceived as fierce foes as other regional actors were, but they were always mentioned in the list of agents that were putatively or for real, in any circumstance, interested in damaging the Albanian interest. In a way, the conflicting relations determined by the 1878 treaty enveloped the relations between Albanian activists and Bulgarians for many years to come, even if on the terrain relations between them were seldom violent but mostly friendly and collaborative. Would in this case be right to question whether Albanians in 1878 learned to know their neighbours and to distrust them once and forever or that the events of those years (1877–1878) were so traumatic that created a sort of a mythical perception of their neighbours, as well as of their own self, seen as the outcast member of the community? – Being this a status that most of Balkan countries have experiences at some point of history. The Albanian negative reception of the Bulgarian declaration of independence was determined by this predisposition and by the sensation of Albanians to be losing the support of Austria – Hungary which in turn absorbed Bosnia – Herzegovina. In fact, as the year begun with a shy

approach due to the encounter of the *komitadjis*, a change of perspective is observable in the journal *Kombi* soon after the Sultan conceded the railway construction rights to Austria – Hungary. *Drita* might have wanted to express the same words but was conditioned by the fact that it was published in Sofia. The stern belief that Balkan neighbours such as Bulgaria were unreliable, perhaps limited the possibilities of the Albanians to construct an alternative diplomacy that did not rely just on Turkey. There were instead within the Balkan context many actors and none of them was stiff and easily apt for the narrow sentence that was used to describe the adversity of the political environment where the Albanian national question was taking shape. None of them was monolithic, because none of them was strong and homogenous enough to be so and this weakness stood the space for a more constructive approach to a joint endeavour. These deductions present the limit of being done almost on the sole consultation of journalistic material. I believe that relations between Albanians and Bulgarians in the period here discussed deserve far larger attention.

## Newspapers

Albania – Bruxelles  
 Bashkimi – Istanbul  
 Besa – Istanbul  
 Drita – Sofia  
 Kombi – Boston  
 La Nazione Albanese – Catanzaro  
 Shkopi – Alexandria

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