

UDC 94(496.5)“1878/1881”:323.272:327
DOI 10.24919/2519-058X.39.364970

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Bibliographical Description of the Article: Qeriqi, B. (2026). The League of Prizren: Resistance and Diplomacy Defense of Territorial Integrity 1878 – 1881. *Shkhidnoievropeyskiy Istorychnyi Visnyk [East European Historical Bulletin]*, 39, 41–54. doi: 10.24919/2519-058X.39.364970

**THE LEAGUE OF PRIZREN: RESISTANCE AND DIPLOMACY DEFENSE
OF TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY 1878 – 1881**

Abstract. *The purpose of this research is to analyze the political strategy of the League of Prizren in response to the geopolitical shifts mandated by the Treaty of San Stefano and the Congress of Berlin. The study focuses on the League's transformation from a reactive defense movement into a proto-state organization that sought the administrative unification of the vilayets of Scutari, Kosovo, Monastir, and Janina into a single autonomous entity. The methodology of this research is based on a comparative historical method, triangulating two primary source groups: the Ottoman administrative records (decrees and minutes of the Sublime Porte) and the British Diplomatic Archives (Foreign Office consular reports and telegrams). This confrontation of sources allows for an analysis of the correlation between the diplomatic petitions sent to the Great Powers and the active military resistance maintained on the ground. The scientific novelty of this paper is to study transcends traditional historiographical narratives by analyzing memoranda as sophisticated instruments of modern diplomacy. The novelty lies in the argument that the League's success derived from the strategic synchronization of tactical military defense (notably in Plava and Guci) with high-level diplomatic lobbying. Although international power dynamics prevented the actual unification of the four vilayets, this interaction established the “political DNA” of Albanian statehood, providing the institutional and conceptual framework that preceded the events of 1912. Conclusion. The findings demonstrate that the 1878–1881 period marked the emergence of the Albanian factor as a pivotal geopolitical actor. While the Great Powers initially denied the Albanian national subjectivity and dictated a fragmented territorial settlement, the League's systematic diplomacy and armed resistance prevented total ethnic dissolution. The unification of the intellectual elite across confessional divides institutionalized a unified national front that internationalized the Albanian Question. Ultimately, while the independence achieved in 1912 resulted in a territorially truncated state representing only a fraction of the four-vilayet project the political foundations laid in 1878 remained the axiomatic basis for national survival. This process found historical continuity in the efforts for self-determination that culminated in Kosovo's statehood in 2008, proving that political unity and administrative claims were essential prerequisites for international recognition in the face of systemic territorial partition.*

Key words: *Renaissance, Albanian League of Prizren, East Crisis, Treaty of San Stefano, Congress of Berlin, Albanian Resistance.*

ПРИЗРЕНСЬКА ЛІГА: ОПІР ТА ДИПЛОМАТІЯ ДЛЯ ЗАХИСТУ ТЕРИТОРІАЛЬНОЇ ЦІЛІСНОСТІ 1878 – 1881 рр.

Анотація. Метою цього дослідження є аналіз політичної стратегії Призренської ліги у відповідь на геополітичні зрушення, спричинені Сан-Стефанським договором та Берлінським конгресом. Дослідження зосереджено на трансформації Ліги з реактивного оборонного руху в протодержавну організацію, яка прагнула адміністративного об'єднання вілаєтів Скутарі, Косово, Монастир та Яніна в єдине автономне утворення. **Методологія цього дослідження** базується на порівняльно-історичному методі, що триангулює дві групи первинних джерел: османські адміністративні записи (укази та протоколи Високої Порти) та британські дипломатичні архіви (консульські звіти та телеграми Міністерства закордонних справ). Таке зіставлення джерел дає змогу проаналізувати кореляцію між дипломатичними петиціями, надісланими Великим державам, й активним військовим опором, що підтримувався на місцях. Наукова новизна цієї статті полягає у дослідженні, яке виходить за рамки традиційних історіографічних наративів шляхом аналізу меморандумів як складних інструментів сучасної дипломатії. **Новизна** полягає в аргументі, що успіх Ліги зумовлений стратегічною синхронізацією тактичної військової оборони (зокрема, у Плаві та Гучі) з дипломатичним лобюванням на високому рівні. Хоча міжнародна динаміка сил перешикодила фактичному об'єднанню чотирьох вілаєтів, ця взаємодія встановила “політичну ДНК” албанської державності, забезпечивши інституційну та концептуальну основу, що передувала подіям 1912 р. **Висновки.** Результати дослідження показують, що період 1878 – 1881 рр. ознаменувався появою албанського фактору як ключового геополітичного актора. Хоча великі держави спочатку заперечували албанську національну суб'єктність та диктували фрагментоване територіальне врегулювання, систематична дипломатія і збройний опір Ліги запобігли повному етнічному розпаду. Об'єднання інтелектуальної еліти, попри конфесійні розбіжності, інституціоналізувало єдиний національний фронт, який інтернаціоналізував Албанське питання. Зрештою, хоча незалежність, досягнута в 1912 р., призвела до територіально усіченої держави, яка представляла лише частину проєкту чотирьох вілаєтів, політичні основи, закладені в 1878 р., залишилися аксіоматичною основою національного виживання. Цей процес знайшов історичну безперервність у зусиллях щодо самовизначення, які завершилися державністю Косова в 2008 р., довівши, що політична єдність і адміністративні претензії були важливими передумовами для міжнародного визнання в умовах системного територіального поділу.

Ключові слова: Відродження, Албанська Призренська ліга, Східна криза, Сан-Стефанський договір, Берлінський конгрес, Албанський Опір.

Problem Statement, Review of Recent Research and Publications. The historiographical analysis of the League of Prizren has evolved from a linear narrative of events toward a structural examination of nascent state-building. This study situates itself within a scholarly lineage that bridges the gap between internal political organization and external diplomatic recognition.

The conceptual foundation is established by Stavro Skendi (1967), who interprets the League as a sophisticated ideological project. S. Skendi argues that the movement succeeded in creating a unified political articulation that transcended regional and confessional divides, transforming the “Albanian factor” into a formal diplomatic subject at the Congress of Berlin.

From an archival perspective, Skender Rizaj (1978) introduced a critical methodological shift by integrating Ottoman bureaucratic records. S. Rizaj proves that the League was not a mere instrument of the Sublime Porte; rather, it strategically co-opted the existing administrative infrastructure of the vilayets to establish a proto-state authority that frequently challenged the Sultan’s central directives. This internal “duality of power” is further explored by Stefanaq Pollo & Selami Pulahu (1981), who identifies the institution of the Besa (the oath)

as a formal legal mechanism that endowed the League with the legitimacy of a provisional government aimed at administrative unification.

Miranda Vickers (1995) contribution introduces a crucial dimension by situating the Albanian response within the context of imperialist rivalries. M. Vickers argues that the Treaty of San Stefano was strategically designed to curb the Austro-Hungarian influence and strengthen Russia's position in the Balkans, thereby reducing the Albanian territory to a mere object of fragmentation.

Isa Blumi (2003) introduces a crucial dimension to this dynamic by dissecting the fluidities of late-Ottoman diplomacy and local resistance. I. Blumi challenges traditional monolithic views of Ottoman imperial control, demonstrating that marginalized populations in the regions like the Malësia (highlands) navigated contradictory imperial policies, where the Sublime Porte was often willing to compromise local territorial integrity under diplomatic pressure. I. Blumi's study highlights how local Albanian actors strategically leveraged these imperial vulnerabilities, transforming borderland anxieties into structured political and military resistance.

The international dimension of this resistance is validated by Noel Malcolm (2001). Utilizing British Foreign Office records, N. Malcolm demonstrates that the Albanian resistance particularly in the Vilayet of Kosovo became an insurmountable geopolitical obstacle to Slavic expansionism, forcing the Great Powers to recalibrate the regional balance of power.

The synthesis of these developments is provided by Kristo Frashëri (2012), who contends that the League's primary achievement was the symbiosis of armed defense and "the diplomacy of the pen". However, as historical data confirms, this maximalist project for the unification of the four vilayets was eventually suppressed by the Great Powers. Consequently, the state declared in 1912 was not the fulfillment of the 1878 vision but a territorially truncated and halved entity forced to operate within strictly limited borders.

The present study builds upon this literature by focusing specifically on diplomatic telegrams as primary instruments of communication. It examines how the political language utilized by the Albanian actors was either adopted or marginalized by the British and Ottoman chancelleries, filling a specific gap in the study of diplomatic linguistics and power dynamics.

The purpose of this research is to analyze the political strategy of the League of Prizren in response to the geopolitical shifts mandated by the Treaty of San Stefano and the Congress of Berlin. The study focuses on the League's transformation from a reactive defense movement into a proto-state organization that sought the administrative unification of the vilayets of Scutari, Kosovo, Monastir, and Janina into a single autonomous entity.

Research Results.

National Albanian Awakening

The Albanian territories were among the first in the Balkans to fall under Ottoman suzerainty, beginning in 1385 (Skendi, 1967, p. 17). This occupation fundamentally altered the region's political, economic, and social landscape, marking the historical genesis of the "Albanian Cause". Throughout centuries of imperial rule, consistent resistance culminated in the National Awakening (Rilindja Kombëtare). Emerging in the late 18th and early

19th centuries, this era coincided with a global wave of European revolutions against feudal structures. This burgeoning national consciousness profoundly reshaped the Albanian territories (Rahimi, 1986, p. 34).

The resulting National Movement (1830 – 1912) was propelled by two primary catalysts: the martial legacy of the national hero, Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg, and the secular ideals of the European Enlightenment. The movement operated across two strategic axes: a cultural dimension focused on fostering identity through education, and a political dimension aimed at organizing liberation through assemblies and regional covenants, eventually leading to the Declaration of Independence on November 28, 1912 (Prifti et al., 2002, pp. 17–26). Socio-Economic Obstacles and the Eastern Crisis Despite the systemic poverty and underdevelopment fostered by Ottoman rule, the Albanian efforts toward liberation remained resilient against assimilation. By the late 19th century, while the Greeks had secured independence (1829), the majority of Balkan population remained subjugated. The Balkans transformed into a theatre for the competing interests of Great Powers, instilling a justified fear of territorial partition among the local populations. The Albanians, Bosnians, and Macedonians faced a particularly arduous journey toward sovereignty due to three primary factors: The absence of a robust bourgeoisie resulting from underdeveloped socio-economic conditions; the systematic denial of educational rights by the Ottoman authorities; the entanglement of their territories in the diplomatic “war of maps” between Great Powers seeking to redistribute Ottoman possessions (Frashëri, 2012, p. 124). The fragility of the Albanian position was further exacerbated by the specificities of late-Ottoman diplomacy. As a historian Isa Blumi (2003) notes, the Ottoman officials frequently disowned large tracts of the Malësia (highlands) on the grounds that the population was “Christian”. This represented a remarkable demonstration of Hamidian diplomacy a policy identified by some scholars as an attempt to consolidate the Islamic character of the empire. While one may not fully subscribe to this reading of Hamidian policy, it remains historically significant that officials were willing to cede “Christian” territories that had been part of the Ottoman realm for 500 years and, crucially, had never been militarily captured by the Serbian, Russian, or Montenegrin forces. As a result of these narrowly defined and often sectarian diplomatic positions, the region faced a series of outside interventions that fundamentally destabilized inter-community relations and complicated the Albanian struggle for a unified, sovereign state (Blumi, 2003, pp. 40–41).

Ideological Secularism and the Oath of Unity. The primary objective of the Albanian leadership was to organize a national revolution capable of repelling both Ottoman rulers and the expansionist ambitions of neighbouring states. To achieve this, the movement adopted a secular ideological framework that prioritized ethnic solidarity over sectarian identity. This was famously encapsulated by Pashko Vasa: “Awaken Albania, wake from your slumber... The religion of Albanians is Albanianism” (Vasa, 2010, p. 96).

This shift provided the necessary social cohesion to unite the diverse Albanian regions, transcending religious divisions to establish a unified front that would eventually challenge the decisions of the Porte and the Great Powers at the League of Prizren. Geopolitical Manipulation: The Reichstadt Agreement. The strategic interests of the Great Powers were most overtly demonstrated by the Reichstadt Agreement (July 8, 1876). In this secret

accord, Russia and Austria-Hungary determined the future of “European Turkey” without consulting the Balkan peoples. Bolstered by the Russian moral and material support, the Slavic committees in Bosnia, Herzegovina, Serbia, and Bulgaria launched uprisings against the weakening Ottoman centre (Rizaj, 1998, p. 44). The rugged terrain and the vast distance from Constantinople favoured these rebellions. As the Ottoman Empire’s decline accelerated, it became clear that the localized resistance movements would soon coalesce into a broader struggle for national survival in the face of imperial collapse.

Albanians in the face of Annexation Plans of Neighbouring Countries

In an ideal geopolitical environment, regional cooperation would have been the logical prerequisite for liberation. The Balkan peoples remaining under Ottoman suzerainty the Albanians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bosnians, and Bulgarians shared a centuries-old history of imperial submission. As the demise of the Ottoman Empire became inevitable, a unified resistance offered the most viable path to expelling the Sublime Porte. However, the expansionist agendas of Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia regarding the Albanian territories rendered stable diplomatic relations nearly impossible. This predicament was aptly characterized by the Serbian social-democrat Dimitrije Tucović, who described the Albanian people as being caught “between the anvil and the hammer” combating Ottoman oppression on one side while facing the emerging threat of neighbouring Balkan states aiming to become new oppressors (Tucović, 2010, p. 46).

This dynamic intensified as the Ottoman downfall accelerated. The weaker the Porte grew, the more aggressive the neighbouring states became toward the Albanian cause. This chauvinistic drive for territorial expansion was formalized as early as 1844. Notably, the “Megali Idea” (The Great Idea), formulated by the Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Koletis, envisioned expanding the Greek kingdom into a neo-Byzantine state with Istanbul as its capital. Initially, this program encompassed all of Albania; however, by the 1860s, the proposed northern border shifted between the Drin, Shkumbin, and Vjosa rivers, representing a profound threat to the Albanian territorial integrity (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 103; Frashëri, 2012, pp. 120–121).

The blatant nature of these policies astounded the traveller and scholar Edith Durham, who noted the bitter irony that the Albanians had significantly contributed to the cause of Greek Independence. Rather than recognizing this historic assistance, Greece sought to expand at the direct expense of those very allies (Durham, 2001, p. 55). Simultaneously, from the north, Albania faced the Serbian political project known as Načertanije (The Draft). Authored by Ilija Garašanin, this document aimed to consolidate surrounding territories into a Greater Serbian state, restoring the medieval empire of Tsar Dušan. According to the Načertanije, the borders of this envisioned state would encompass Northern Albania and Kosovo territories Garašanin strategically labelled “Old Serbia” (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 103; Ćirković, 2004, p. 212).

These Pan-Slavic ambitions aroused profound existential fear among the Albanians, especially as Montenegro and Serbia bolstered by the Russian patronage emerged victorious against the Ottomans. For the Albanians, the hope for national independence was swiftly overshadowed by a crisis of survival. The plans for fragmentation were no longer mere border disputes; they represented a systemic threat to the nation’s existence (Pollo, 1981, p. 46). The

Serbian and Montenegrin strategies aimed to exploit the turmoil in Bosnia to expand their dominion, coordinating an annexation policy under the aegis of Russia (Bartl, 2017, pp. 101–102). This solidified the Albanian conviction that the Russian victory in the Russo-Turkish War would result in total territorial disintegration and political downfall (Frashëri, 2012, p. 144).

Ottoman military defeat in 1877 – 1878 to the Russians intensified growing fears among European powers that the Tanzimat reforms instigated since the 1840s were not succeeding in strengthening the empire, a key requisite to maintaining the balance of power in the Balkans. To many, the weakening of the Ottomans' hold on their Balkan subjects allowed Russian intrigue to threaten European peace and development (Blumi, 2003, p. 239). In this context, the Albanian struggle became a complex survival effort against a fading empire, predatory neighbours, and a disinterested European diplomatic corps.

The Albanian Cause against the Decisions of the Great Powers

The geopolitical status of the Albanians reached a critical juncture with the signing of the Treaty of San Stefano on March 3, 1878. While rumors had circulated for weeks, the full gravity of the accord was only confirmed in April, when the official text corroborated those Albanian lands were being treated as mere objects of fragmentation (Frashëri, 2012, p. 171).

From a broader diplomatic perspective, this fragmentation was a direct result of Great Power rivalries. According to historian Miranda Vickers, the treaty was strategically designed to curb Austro-Hungarian influence in the Balkans, satisfy Pan-Slavists who wished to see the liberation of all Slavs, and fundamentally strengthen Russia's position in the region (Vickers, 1995, p. 47). Consequently, because its territory sat at the intersection of these imperial ambitions, Albania emerged as one of the primary victims of the treaty.

The practical implications of this diplomatic alignment manifested in a sweeping mandate to partition nearly half of all Albanian-inhabited territories among neighboring Slavic states. Under the terms of the accord, the newly projected "Greater Bulgaria" was slated to annex the prominent south-western and eastern provinces of Korça, Bilisht, Pogradec, Struga, Dibra, Kërçova, Gostivar, Tetovo, Skopje, and Kaçanik. Simultaneously, Serbia aimed to extend its borders southward to annex northern and north-eastern Kosovo up to Mitrovica. To the northwest, Montenegro was projected to triple in size by absorbing a vast bloc of Albanian lands, including Ulcinj, Kraja, Anamal, Hoti, Gruda, Tuz, Kelmendi, Plava, Gucia, and Rugova. Faced with this imminent threat of territorial dissolution, the Albanian leadership was forced to rapidly transition from passive alarm to structured political resistance. In immediate response to these existential threats, the Albanian intellectuals spanning Muslim, Orthodox, and Catholic backgrounds transcended regional and religious divides, coalescing in Istanbul to establish the "Central Committee for the Protection of the Rights of the Albanian Nation". Serving as a unified voice for all Albanian-inhabited regions, this body formulated a cohesive national strategy to navigate the unfolding crisis. To operationalize this strategy, the Committee launched a dual-pronged approach: an extensive diplomatic campaign addressing Western powers to contest the treaty's legitimacy, running parallel with the systematic mobilization of domestic patriotic sentiment to resist the looming partition on the ground (Rahimi, 1986, p. 100; Malcolm, 2001, p. 229).

This protest found a powerful manifestation on May 26, 1878, when the leaders of Prizren wrote to the French Ambassador, declaring: “We are protesting in the name of human freedom... We have taken an oath that we will sacrifice even our lives if necessary” (Pollo & Pulaha, 1978, p. 15). Similar defiance emerged in Dibra, where citizens vehemently contested their inclusion in Bulgaria, asserting their inextricable identity as the Albanians (Skendi, 1967, p. 43). The resistance assumed a multifaceted character, notably characterized by centuries of interfaith solidarity. In a formal protest note from Shkodra and its surrounding highlands, Catholic and Muslim leaders stated: “We, Catholics and Muslims, brothers for centuries... have always been united to resist acts of robbery”. The signatories expressed a profound sense of betrayal by the Ottoman Porte, which, under the Russian duress, had consented to surrender their lands to “enemies of four centuries” (Pollo, & Pulaha, 1978, p. 12).

The indignation of the Albanian people was directed not only toward Russia and its Balkan allies but also toward the Porte for signing an act that effectively “sentenced their homeland to death” (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 29). However, geopolitical friction soon intervened as Austria-Hungary and Great Britain, seeking to curb Russian influence, demanded a revision of the treaty. This led to the Congress of Berlin (June 13 – July 13, 1878), chaired by Otto von Bismarck. Despite the revision, the Congress systematically ignored the Albanian cause, treating their provinces as pawns to suit the strategic interests of the Great Powers (Buda, 2006, pp. 344–345). The Albanians argued for parity, asking why the Serbs, Montenegrins, and Bulgarians were granted statehood based on national elements while the Albanians were denied the same (Nushi, 2011, p. 24).

This marginalization resulted in profound despair for the Albanian people. As Europeans, they had contributed to the protection of western civilization for years. Furthermore, the figure of Gjergj Kastrioti – Skanderbeg had a deep political meaning for Europe since, under his leadership, the Albanians had been Europe’s shield against the Ottoman penetration in Europe in the 15th century. Four centuries later, the homeland was subject to fragmentation from the Congress of Berlin (Kondo, 1988, p. 110). In other words, the Congress of Berlin, similar to the Treaty of San Stefano, had the same opinion about the Albanian cause and territories, considering them as Ottoman possessions.

The Albanian League of Prizren

The initiative to organize a general assembly of Albanian leaders was rooted in a profound historical tradition of tribal assemblies (*kuvende*), which served as the fundamental mechanism for communal decision-making and resistance (Malcolm, 2001, p. 229). Unlike neighbouring Balkan movements that leveraged medieval legacies to justify expansionist agendas most notably the Serbian “Greater Serbia” projects the Albanian tradition of union was defensive and devoid of territorial ambitions. Instead, the National Movement drew its primary inspiration from the era of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 29). Recognizing that the Sultan’s forces could not be repelled individually, G. Skanderbeg convened the League of Lezha on March 2, 1444, committing the diverse Albanian tribes to a unified front (Noli, 2018, pp. 67–69). The existential necessity of confronting a superior imperial power taught Albanian insurgents to transcend localism and forge inter-provincial ties based on a shared ethnic identity (Pollo, 1981, p. 46).

In accordance with Albanian custom, political unity and military mobilization served as the prerequisite to armed conflict. By December 1877, “provincial liaisons” and “self-defense commissions” were established across various regions to suspend local disputes in favour of national survival (Frashëri, 2012, p. 180). Consequently, the establishment of a national League was viewed as the logical continuation of this ancestral resistance. The League of Prizren emerged as a matter of urgent necessity in the spring of 1878, designed to forge a union rooted in this ancient custom: provinces would first convene local assemblies before dispatching representatives to a general national assembly to coordinate a unified response (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 153).

The League of Prizren functioned as a defiant response to the detrimental decisions imposed by the Great Powers at San Stefano and the anticipated resolutions of the Congress of Berlin. Orchestrated by the Istanbul Committee, the General Assembly convened on June 10, 1878 strategically timed just three days before the Congress of Berlin began to ensure the Albanian demands reached the international stage. The selection of Prizren as the host city was deliberate. As noted by a historian Kristo Frashëri (2012, p. 205), the Assembly’s primary mandate was to organize an armed defense against Bulgarian, Serbian, and Montenegrin occupation. Consequently, the movement required a headquarters in close proximity to these volatile fronts; only a major centre in Kosovo could serve such a critical strategic purpose.

During its proceedings, the Assembly established a Central Committee tasked with coordinating a broad national front dedicated to opposing the fragmentation of the Albanian territories (Skendi, 1967, p. 45; Prifti et al., 2002, pp. 153–155). As the decline of the Ottoman Porte became increasingly inevitable, two distinct ideological currents emerged regarding the methodology of liberation. The more progressive faction, led by Abdyl and Sami Frashëri, advocated for complete secession and a general armed uprising, identifying total independence as the only sustainable future for the nation. In contrast, a conservative and feudal faction with pro-Islamic tendencies expressed significant hesitation. These figures, who benefited from the existing Ottoman socio-political hierarchy, sought to preserve their class privileges and feared the radical disruptions inherent in total independence. To maintain national cohesion and avert a disastrous internal schism during this existential crisis, Abdyl Frashëri’s group exercised “strategic tolerance”. They sought a compromise with the conservatives to ensure a unified resistance against immediate external threats (Pollo, 1981, p. 50; Rahimi, 1986, pp. 84–112).

After several days of intense deliberation, the Assembly finalized its program on June 18, 1878. The movement was governed by the *Kararname* a regulation of military and administrative character that defined the structural parameters of the national resistance. While historiography has yet to confirm the exact number of participants, records identify 110 prominent figures from diverse social strata. Key participants included Ali Bey Guçia, Hasan Pasha Tetova, Ymer Prizreni (Chairman of the Committee), Sylejman Vokshi, and the Assembly Chairman, Iljaz Pasha Dibra. Abdyl Frashëri, managing diplomatic affairs, delivered a seminal address: “The aim of the Assembly is to halt our ruthless enemies by taking an Albanian oath and swearing to protect with our lives our lands inherited from our grandfathers and great-grandfathers” (Prifti et al., 2002, pp. 154–155).

The League effectively assumed the functions of a provisional government. Under Article I of the Talim (the administrative ordinance within the “Act of Decisions”), Prizren was designated as the administrative headquarters. The Assembly functioned as the supreme legislative body, while the Central Council served as the executive authority. This Council was charged with establishing an expansive network of local administrative bodies across all Albanian-inhabited territories, integrating representatives from every sanjak and kaza to ensure unified governance (Pollo, & Pulaha, 1978, p. 43; Rexha, 1978, p. 26). To ensure democratic legitimacy, copies of the League’s program were distributed to major Albanian urban centres for public review, collecting signatures to be presented as a collective national demand (Arsh et al., 1967, p. 107).

As the decisions of the Great Powers regarding the fragmentation of Albania were ratified, the delegates departed from Prizren with a solemn conviction: diplomacy had reached its limits, and armed struggle was the final alternative. Pollo (1981, p. 48) summarizes that the League’s activity was driven by three uncompromising strategic objectives: The recognition of the Albanian nation as a single and indivisible entity. The preservation of the integrity of Albanian national lands. The unification of all Albanian-inhabited territories into a single, autonomous administrative unit.

Throughout the month-long Berlin Congress, a flood of protests and petitions had poured in from the Albanians. The Albanians’ principal desire was for the unification of the southern vilayets with those of Shkoder, Uskub and Kosova, and to make Ohrid the capital owing to its central position. One of the first acts of the Albanian League was to send a memorandum to Lord Beaconsfield, Britain’s delegate to the Berlin Congress. It read: “Just as we are not and do not want to be Turks, so we shall oppose with all our might anyone who would like to turn us into Slavs or Austrians or Greeks, we want to be Albanians” (Vickers, 1995, p. 51.)

The Albanian Resistance

The resolutions of the Congress of Berlin served as a definitive signal to the League’s leadership that the era of petitions and telegrams had failed to yield tangible results. Faced with the imminent fragmentation of their homeland, the Albanians embraced the conviction that their lands could only be preserved through force; as noted at the time, “a man’s best friend” had become his rifle (Skendi, 1967, p. 61). The League Committee committed to opposing, at any cost, the cession of Chameria to Greece and the surrender of Plava and Gucia to Montenegro. While the defense of Chameria allowed for a brief diplomatic window while the southern Turco-Greek border was finalized, the northern front at Plava and Gucia required immediate military mobilization (Frashëri, 2012, pp. 278–279).

The League’s resolve for armed resistance increasingly alarmed the Ottoman government. As a historian Aleks Buda notes, this concern underscored the authentic national character of the League; it was an organization established to safeguard Albanian interests, not Ottoman ones (Buda, 2006, p. 348). This distinction was validated by the British Consul in Shkodra, Kirby Green, who reported in November 1878 that League leaders declared: “The Sultan cannot sell an inch of [Albania’s] land without asking its heirs, the Albanians” (Rizaj, 1978, p. 152).

Following the signing of the Treaty of Berlin, the Great Powers exerted mounting pressure on the Sublime Porte to implement the newly established mandates. Under the threat of

Russian armies stationed near Istanbul, the Porte was compelled to expedite the transfer of northern Albanian territories to Montenegro (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 168).

To facilitate this transfer, an Ottoman–Montenegrin Delimitation Commission set out to tour the region in early August 1878. Tension reached a climax during this period with the arrival of Mehmet Ali Pasha (Karl Detroit), a general tasked by the Sultan with demarcating the new borders. According to a historian Isa Blumi, the general attempted to find a middle ground to avoid conflict; he proposed a compromise that would hand over parts of Herzegovina (populated by Orthodox Slavs) to Montenegro in exchange for keeping Plava and Gusinje within the Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, however, the Great Powers did not approve of Mehmet Ali Pasha's reasoning. Austria's interests in Bosnia did not permit the expansion of Montenegro at their expense, and none of the European states fully understood why the local opposition predicted by the general would pose a significant obstacle. Consequently, the treaty was left to stand as initially planned (Blumi, 2003, p. 241).

Faced with this diplomatic deadlock, during a meeting in Prizren, Mehmet Ali Pasha warned Balkan Muslims of "dire consequences" should they continue to resist. However, as he travelled to Gjakova, he was met with overwhelming hostility (Buda, 2006, p. 348; Frashëri, 2012, p. 307). The local response was immediate and, as the general had feared, eventually turned violent.

On September 6, 1878, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Albanians led by Ali Pasha Gučia besieged the residence of Abdullah Pasha Dreni, where the general was being hosted. The ensuing conflict resulted in the death of both Mehmet Ali Pasha and his host, marking a definitive violent rejection of the Berlin mandates by the League of Prizren (Skendi, 1967, p. 63).

This event had three profound impacts: Political Rupture, it ended all pretense of cooperation between the League and the Ottoman government Military Resolve, it solidified the determination of local populations to resist partition by force. International Visibility, it thrust the "Albanian Cause" into Western headlines, forcing European diplomats to acknowledge the movement's strength (Malcolm, 2001, p. 231). In tandem with military action, the League launched a sophisticated diplomatic mission to Rome, Paris, Vienna, and Berlin. Representatives Abdyl Frashëri and Mehmet Vrioni sought to convince the Great Powers to abandon border ratifications in Epirus. Ottoman diplomatic telegrams from early 1879 confirm the gravity of this mission, noting that the delegates were prepared to declare that all Albanians would "fight united as a single body" against Greek annexations, even if the Porte itself felt forced to concede (Prifti, 1978, pp. 30–31). The military and diplomatic combination of the League began to alter European perspectives. The French Ambassador in Istanbul, Furnié, eventually conceded that the only practical solution to avoid a massive Albanian uprising was to abandon Greek territorial requests in Epirus (Frashëri, 2012, p. 349).

Istanbul was caught in a strategic vice: the Treaty of Berlin entitled the Sultan to intervene, but doing so required a direct and costly confrontation with the League (Frashëri, 2012, p. 321). After a failed negotiation mission by Mukhtar Pasha in December 1879, the Porte was forced to admit to the Great Powers its inability to fulfill its obligations to Montenegro an excuse the government in Cetinje rejected. Montenegro, backed by its rights under the Berlin Congress,

continued to demand the direct cession of Podgorica, Shpuza, Žabljak, Plava, Gucia, and Rugova (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 178; Rizaj, 1998, p. 166).

Geopolitical tensions reached a breaking point as Montenegro issued an ultimatum, citing the unsustainable cost of maintaining 25,000 soldiers at the ready (Frashëri, 2012, p. 395). In late 1879, the Montenegrin army under Marko Miljanov launched a massive assault on Plava and Gucia. They were met by the League's forces led by a coalition of commanders: Ali Pasha Gucia, Jakup Ferri, Sylejman Vokshi, Haxhi Zeka, Filip Çeka, and Jusuf Sokoli. In fierce combat, the League's volunteers inflicted a decisive defeat on the Montenegrin troops, forcing a retreat that caused profound despair in Cetinje (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 180; Rizaj, 1998, pp. 166–167). Stunned by the Albanian resilience in the mountains, Britain and Austria-Hungary proposed a coastal compromise: compensating Montenegro with the strip from Ulcinj to the Buna River. The logic was that the Great Powers' navies could intervene more effectively by sea. The League, however, rejected this "reward". Volunteers from Shkodra occupied Ulcinj, while the Assembly of Dibra (October 20, 1880) convened to address three pillars: the defense of Ulcinj, the creation of an autonomous vilayet, and the formation of a provisional government (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 202).

Under the pressure of a combined Great Power naval demonstration, the Sublime Porte eventually capitulated. To salvage its reputation and demonstrate "goodwill" to Europe, the Ottoman government issued categorical instructions to facilitate the peaceful transfer of Ulcinj to Montenegro, effectively positioning the imperial centre against the Albanian volunteers entrenched on the coast (Rexha, 1978, p. 88; Rizaj, 1978, p. 173).

The Ottoman Porte took its most decisive step against the movement by deploying Dervish Pasha and eighteen battalions. On November 3, 1880, arriving in Shkodra, he marginalized local leaders and marched toward Ulcinj to enforce the territorial cession (Külçe, 2004, p. 141). Upon arrival, Dervish Pasha issued a stern ultimatum: the transfer of Ulcinj to Montenegro was an "irrevocable state obligation" mandated by the Great Powers. He warned that any resistance would be met with the full force of his authorizations (Rizaj, 1978, p. 174). Despite this, the Albanians remained resolute. In a poignant protest note dated November 16, 1880, the League Committee condemned the Pasha's blockade of the Shkodra-Ulcinj road, declaring that if the imperial army attacked to facilitate the Montenegrin takeover, they would "definitively rebel" and "punish him with war" (Pollo & Pulaha, 1978, p. 118). Their commitment was absolute and secular: "All of us, regardless of religion, have decided to object by force the invasion of our lands by any force, be it Muslim or other" (Skendi, 1967, p. 70).

The ensuing conflict was a desperate, unequal struggle. Facing 10,000 regular Ottoman troops and immense diplomatic pressure from the British Consul Green and Austro-Hungarian Consul Lippich, the League's ranks began to fracture under the weight of the "Ulcinj blockade". While some members succumbed to the pressure, the defenders of Shkodra and the local volunteers fought a heroic three-day campaign. Following fierce engagements at the Battle of Klesna and Saint George, Ottoman forces finally occupied Ulcinj on the evening of November 24, 1880 (Frashëri, 2012, pp. 603–609). The fall of the city closed the chapter on the northern border disputes but left a lasting echo in Europe, where public opinion began to shift against the discriminatory policies of the Great Powers regarding Albanian

national rights. While the northern crisis subsided, the southern border remained a significant challenge. In June 1880, the Great Powers proposed the Kalamas River as the boundary, which would have granted Ioannina to Greece. Ultimately, to satisfy Greek claims, the Powers ceded Thessaly territory the League had also claimed further alienating the Albanian leadership (Frashëri, 2012, p. 662).

Seeing the diplomatic path settled, the Porte turned its full military might toward the total suppression of the League. Dervish Pasha, having advised the Sultan to bypass concessions in favour of brute force, launched a massive expedition with 30 battalions, approximately 20,000 soldiers. In Prizren, Abdyl Frashëri issued a final, visionary call for unity: “The Porte will not do anything for Albania... Let us think and work for ourselves. Let’s leave the divisions between the Tosks and the Ghegs aside. Let us be Albanian and let us create Albania” (Malcolm, 2001, p. 235). Dervish Pasha’s campaign began with the seizure of Skopje and the arrest of Jashar Bey Shkupi. Declaring a state of siege, Ottoman forces systematically dismantled the League’s infrastructure, arresting Committee members and exiling them to the island of Rhodes (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 221). With its leadership imprisoned and its territory occupied by the very empire it had once hoped to reform, the League’s formal existence came to an end, though its ideological legacy remained the foundation for the eventual independence of 1912.

Dervish Pasha’s strategy was twofold: to intimidate the leadership through the detention of key figures in Skopje and to demoralize rank-and-file partisans before a single shot was fired (Frashëri, 2012, pp. 671–674). On April 16, 1881, the Ottoman army, boasting 15,000 soldiers and 12 mountain cannons, occupied Ferizaj and declared a state of siege. In response, the League mobilized approximately 7,000 fighters in a desperate attempt to encircle the Ottoman camp near Kaçanik and Lipjan (Rizaj, 1998, p. 220). Despite Dervish Pasha’s chilling ultimatum, the League launched its operation with a mere 5,000 volunteers. Led by figures such as Mic Sokoli, Sef Koshare, Mulla Hyseni, Binak Ali, and Sylejman Vokshi, these fighters were vastly outmatched by Ottoman heavy artillery and professional training (Frashëri, 2012, pp. 678–683). The decisive clash occurred on April 20, 1881, at the Battle of Slivovo. For several hours, the Albanians held their ground until Ottoman field artillery began its devastating bombardment. In an act of extraordinary heroism, Commander Mic Sokoli famously threw his chest against an Ottoman cannon to silence it, sacrificing his life in the process. With military resistance extinguished, Dervish Pasha focused on erasing the League’s ideological core. He identified Abdyl Frashëri as the primary architect of the movement and placed a bounty on his head. Frashëri was eventually captured near Elbasan in late April 1881. Dervish Pasha’s telegrams to the Porte identified Frashëri as the “main cause” of the uprising, citing documents that proved his intent to unify the vilayets through force (Rexha, 1978, p. 123).

Though the Porte succeeded in military suppression, it failed to extinguish the spirit of the movement. The League of Prizren irrevocably widened the gap between the Albanian people and the Ottoman Empire, serving as the “Great Turning Point” for national emancipation. The aspirations forged between 1878 and 1881 provided the direct inspiration for the League of Peja (1899), the Congress of Manastir (1908), and the general uprisings that culminated in

the Declaration of Independence on November 28, 1912 (Prifti et al., 2002, p. 226; Malcolm, 2001, pp. 235–236).

Conclusion. The findings demonstrate that the 1878 – 1881 period marked the emergence of the Albanian factor as a pivotal geopolitical actor. While the Great Powers initially denied the Albanian national subjectivity and dictated a fragmented territorial settlement, the League's systematic diplomacy and armed resistance prevented total ethnic dissolution. The unification of the intellectual elite across confessional divides institutionalized a unified national front that internationalized the Albanian Question. Ultimately, while the independence achieved in 1912 resulted in a territorially truncated state representing only a fraction of the four-vilayet project the political foundations laid in 1878 remained the axiomatic basis for national survival. This process found historical continuity in the efforts for self-determination that culminated in Kosovo's statehood in 2008, proving that political unity and administrative claims were essential prerequisites for international recognition in the face of systemic territorial partition.

Funding. The author did not receive any financial support for the publication of this article.

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The article was received October 22, 2025.

Article recommended for publishing 30/05/2026.

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