

## The convention of Dukagjini of 1602

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### Abstract

In November 1601, in Dukagjin village, the Assembly of Dukagjin was gathered until 15-th of February. 2656 delegates, secular and religious, from 14 Albanian regions (Highland of Shkodra, Zadrima, Dukagjini, Kosova, Lezha, Kurbini, Mat, Dibra, Petrela, Durres, Elbasan, Shpat and Myzeqe) took part. The assembly was run by Nikolle Bardhi, Gjin Gjergji and Nikolle Mekjashi. It was decided to start fighting for liberation from Ottoman invaders. Decisions taken by Assembly were signed by 56 leaders, 4 delegates for each region. Main objective of this manuscript is the historical analysis of Dukagjini Convention of 1602.

**Keywords:** *Assembly, Dukagjin, Ottoman Empire, Venice, Nikollë Mekajshi, Nikollë Bardhi, Tomë Plezha, Pal Dukagjini.*

### Introduction

Throughout the ages, the borders of Dukagjini have shifted, which in many ways was related to the economic and social development of the area. On the other hand, one must also take into account that these borders transformations resulted from the threat emanating from the neighboring enmities and the wars that occurred in this area. As such, the borders of the region of Dukagjini are understood as products of these historical processes which the area was subjected to throughout various historical periods.

The region of Dukagjini is known with three distinct names "Lekët", "Lekni", and "Dukagjin", whereby the latter represents the name that is often used to depict this region (Zojzi, 1962, 31). In a report authored by Pjetër Bogdani in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it says that the area of Dukagjin incorporated within its territory the villages: Arst, Karma, Mashna, Komani, Kryeziu, Kçira, Iballa, etc. (Gjeta, 2008, 59). The area of Dukagjin, or Lekni, also included the regions: Luma, Has, Mërturi i Gurit (Stone Mertur), Mirdita, Thaçi and Berisha (Cordignano, 1934, 41). The tribes of Dukagjini were established in the geographical area of Bjeshkët e Nemuna (Accursed Mountains) spanning all the way to the shores of Fan (Gjeta, 2008, 59). It is likely that the name Dukagjin stems from the medieval Duke, Gjin Tanushi, who in chronicles dating from 1281 is listed as "Ducam Ginivm Tanischum" (Zojzi, 1962, 31), whose reign was not limited to the region of Dukagjini, but it also extended to the villages Fandi and Flati.

The region of Dukagjin extended from the shores of Adriatic nearby Lesh, spanning on both sides of Drin in the direction of Gjakova and Prizren. The region of Dukagjin was divided for the first time during the Ottoman invasion, when the Sancak of Dukagjin was formed. During medieval times, important trade routes passed from the shores of Adriatic through Dukagjin into Kosova. The route from Shkodra to Prizren was used by Ragusan and Venetian caravans.

It is known that the region of Dukagjin was subjected to numerous hardships and wars throughout the previous centuries, whereby the inhabitants of Dukagjin perpetually attempted to maintain and preserve their identity, culture, language, traditions

and their freedom. After the Albanian councils of Mat and Blinisht took place, the Ottoman Empire subjected the local Albanian population to severe retaliations. As a result of the circumstances, it was decided that another council of large proportions was to assemble in Dukagjin.

An important role during this period was played by the local leaders and religious clerics, amongst whom the most distinguished ones were Nikollë Mekajshi from the highlands of Shëngjergj of Tirana, and the bishop of Stefania of Benda, who took shelter in Dukagjin after being persecuted by the Ottoman authorities. This prelate gave a valuable contribution in organizing such a large inter-regional Council.

Despite previous failures, the Albanians did not cease working towards their freedom projects. In November of 1601 the Convention of Dukagjini was assembled, where the participants continued their workings despite some interruptions until February the 15<sup>th</sup> of 1602, at the Church of Alexander in the village Dukagjin. The Convention was attended by 2656 representatives, including those who had a secular and religious background, who came from 14 various Albanian regions (from the Highlands of Shkodër, Zadrima, Dukagjin, Kosova, Lezha, Kurbin, Mat, Dibra, Petrela, Durrës, Elbasan, Shpat and from Myzeqe). The Convention was headed by Nikollë Bardhi, Gjin Gjergji, and Nikollë Mekajshi (Senkoviç, 1965, 40). The Council took the decision to wage war against the Ottoman invaders in an attempt to liberate the region. The decisions approved at the Convention were signed by 56 main leaders in total, comprising of 4 representatives from each region (Historia, 2008, 226).

The Council of Dukagjini sent two of its own representatives to the Senate of Venice, in order to declare their decision about the intent of waging war against the Ottoman invaders. Following is the content of their letter.

*To the very reverent prince and eminent Monsignor. We the elders, leaders and chieftains of the entire people of Albania, gathered together, in unison with the Catholic people of the Roman religion, and we have assembled two thousand and fifty six people from the leaders, who have congregated at the place (village) of Dukagjin in Shën Aleksandër, and have secretly vowed to take measures for the people of Albania, in the hopes of returning our ancient freedom back to our place, as it once was at the time of our prince, Gjergj Skënderbeu.*

*And we are hereby inform your reverence as to how we have been incited by the requests and great promises of other princes of your kind, who have communicated with our ambassadors through letters and by words, so that we should instigate an uprising and take up arms against the barbarians, to take into our control the fortress of Kruja or that of Shkodra, if we would be assisted by you with a fleet, soldiers, weapons and anything else we might need.*

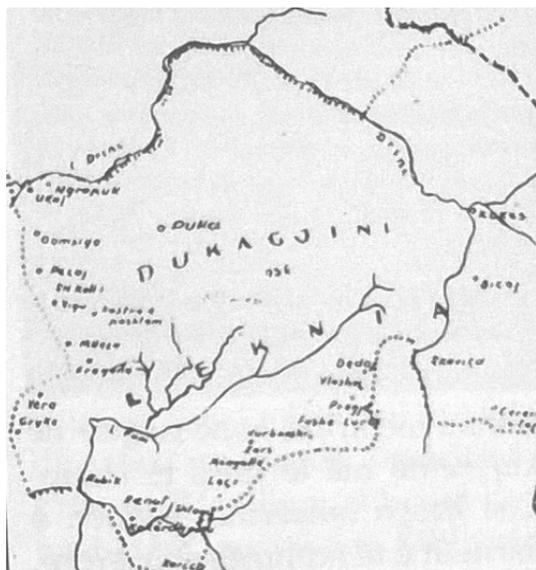
*We have welcomed the respected Monsignor of Sapa and Lord Pal Dukagjini, who are deeply loyal to Your reverence, and they have come to this Convention and our council, telling us many things and laying before us many reasons, and begging us so that we would stay peaceful for the time being, as it is not the adequate time for such actions.*

*But we are full of will, and we cannot stand these barbarians any longer, which is why we, as loyal to Your reverence, as we are proving that by this writing, have gathered all together with our hearts vowed in secrecy, and we agreed to let you know that we have elected as our ambassadors from the ranks of our loyal leaders, the respected Monsignor of Sapa and Sardanja, the abovementioned Lord Pal Dukagjini, in order to represent us to Your reverence, who will orally inform Your reverence in regards to the entire situation, and oblate the fortress of Kruja whenever you so wish so that we can take our arms against these barbarians.*

*Our country is very strong by nature. Here we have silver and gold mines. Amongst us pertaining to the Roman religion, there are 40.000 men of sword, valuable valiants who fight fearlessly just as in the time of our abovementioned prince, Gjergj, for the holy faith against*

*these infidels, and now we fight with even greater bravery against these tyrants than before. Furthermore, the Albanians of the Greek faith will join us together with the Albanians of the Serbian faith who are our neighbors.*

*And in three days, we will be joined by 100.000 chosen men, valuable valiants, and we will take up weapons all together against these barbarians and we will fight bravely, and we will be aided daily, firstly by the help of Your Highness and Your reverence, we will march to Constantinople. Regarding other matters, Your worthy reverence should trust the words that the abovementioned ambassadors will lay out and make requests in our name, and to fully trust them as our true ambassadors, as it is tradition with Your Excellency, to whom we humbly abide. Released in Shën Aleksandër (Llezhdër) of the region of Dukagjin on February the 15<sup>th</sup> 1602 (Historia, 2008, 349).*



**Sancak of Dukagjini**



**Convention of Dukagjin**

he Convention of Dukagjin in the name of the unified regions submitted to the Senate of Venice five chapters on the basis of which Albanians would declare their readiness to cooperate with the Republic in order to banish the Ottoman Empire from their lands.

1. *We want Monsignor to appoint a general military captain who is ready to lead the country, from the ranks of our council;\**
2. *We want that we as leaders, as Your aptness sees it rightful, or as the eminent general captain sees it fit, to become colonels, governors and captains of our infantry and cavalry, with a salary that seems befitting to our very loyal actions, so that we may perpetually have reason, for our successors as well, to live and die under the blessed flag of Shën Mark (Saint Mark), be it in times of war or times of peace;*
3. *We want to be exempted and freed from the obligation of sailing galleys paylessly, be it now, or forever, and to be exempted and freed from the taxes in the lands that Your reverence will conquer as well as in the above mentioned lands, including the lands of your country;*
4. *We want to pay one of thirtieth of the old tax, as is practiced in other cities of yours, be it*

*for wine, or for wheat of any other grain, for fish, oil and other foods that will be sold in the future by our people and the inhabitants that roam the above mentioned lands, and that we should not pay any other tax or drudgery, other than those that we pay in advance in the sum of one part per thirty of those that will be sold;*

5. *We want that Your very reverence Monsignor of Venice to protect us and to receive our protection from its enemy, to support us anywhere, as its very loyal citizens and to not abandon us at any time or relinquish us to others, thus befalling the guilt upon its soul (Ugolini, 2002, 24).*

From the requests made by the Convention, it is evident that the locals requested an autonomous government under the leadership of a Venetian captain from the council of Venice. The leaders asked to gain from their requests by ensuring high positions and ranks in their lands. The Albanians could not agree with the idea of transforming from an Ottoman invasion to a Venetian one. The future state leaders would be perpetually loyal to His Monsignor if the latter would protect their lands. If the requests were made so that the Venetians would invade, then those requests calling for the protection of these lands would make no sense, seeing that Venice would have initiated the invasion of Albanian lands without any necessity for requesting such an act.

“On July 25<sup>th</sup> of the year 1601 Nikollë Mekajsh from the Highlands of Dukagjini wrote to a cardinal in Rome, where among other things it said: there are annual incursions on behalf of the Ottomans against the people of Dukagjin, and similarly from the people of Dukagjin against the Ottoman army”. The document states further on about the events that occurred at the time when the Convention of Dukagjini was taking place.

Four Sancak-beys with an army comprising of around 15.000 men, cavalry and infantry, managed to plunder valuable items and animals in their expeditions in the hinterlands, whereby they even captured some slaves after they destroyed and razed their homes to the ground (Zamputi, 1967, 89).

After this expedition, the highlanders were aware of the threats that they could expect from the Ottoman troops, and so they initiated the attacks on the two posts established by the army of the Sancak-beys. Positioned on one side was the son of Mustafa pasha of Dibra together with 6.000 men, and on the other side positioned in the valley of Mat was the other part of the Sancak-beys' army. Around 10.000 armed insurgents attacked these two posts of the Ottoman army. The first attack waged by the highlanders was very powerful where they managed to break the army of Dibra, and they were forced to retreat.

After the Ottoman retreat, the highlanders ceased plunder material from the Ottoman army, including the enemy's flags, horses, weapons and other valuable belongings. Many were left for wounded and dead in the battlefield. Seeing this defeat, the Ottoman army positioned in the valley of Mat retreated and thus managed to avoid the attacks from highlanders, such that they would not endure the fate of Dibra's army. After the defeat of the Ottoman army, the chronicler continues his story, where he tells that the highlanders were ready to aid the armies that were coming from the sea, despite their economic problems caused by numerous wars.

From the highlands where the men of all ages had assembled to hold the Convention, all had agreed to take on arms, and called for a unified attack, from the highlanders of the mountains and the expeditions from the sea, and had agreed that September the 18<sup>th</sup> would be the most appropriate date to initiate the attacks against the Ottoman forces.

The reason they agreed on this date was because the largest part of the Sancak-beys army was occupied with the war in Hungary, and it was assumed that they would not have sufficient troops to withhold the highlanders' attack. Despite this, the Albanians were aware that some Sancak-beys would not go into faraway lands to wage war, all the time being aware of the Albanian attacks. However, it was thought out that an attack orchestrated from the mountains and the sea could be successful. The other reason was that there was a large fair taking place on September the 18<sup>th</sup>, which was to take place in a four day distance away from Albanian lands where many Albanians would go, as such these movements could be used to camouflage the organized attack, whereby the Albanians would easily free the country and even capture important fortresses (Zamputi, 1967, 189).

In order to successfully complete this action, the Albanians who had gathered at the Convention of Dukagjin requested for about 12.000 musketeers to come to their aid, seeing that the Albanians only possessed the bow and the arrow, javelins and swords. To achieve success in military battles against the army of the Sancak-beys, the former needed more advanced weapons of the time.

The Ottoman rules that roamed the Albanian lands began panicking at the thought of seeing the Spanish fleet, so that they began their own plans to initiate an undertaking. The Ottoman troops began abandoning the lowlands of Albania. As such, a very favorable climate arose for the liberation of the country. However, as it occurred numerous times before, not much was put into action. The pretense made by the Spanish fleet to embark in Albanian shores was an unaccomplished idea, seeing that it initiated its actions in the faraway lands of Africa.

In such circumstances, the Convention used all its connections to see its plans come to fruition in relation to the enemy of the insurgents, by sending their representatives to Venice, Nikollë Bardhi from Zadrime and Pal Dukagjini, so that they could aid in convincing the Republic to initiate military undertakings against the Ottomans. During their travels, they had a meeting with the archbishop of Zara. The remarks made by the archbishop of Zara were quite realistic, who adds: at the Senate of Venice the situation is analyzed thoroughly, and it is not so easy to convince them to help those who want to reclaim and free their lands from foreign invaders at any cost.

Just as reasonable was the other remark: It is the fear of Venetians, by seeing the preparations that the Spanish fleet was making in order to support the actions of Albanians that the former would act contrary to what they declare, as a result of the existing enmities between the European countries. Despite these developments, the Albanians were always ready to wage wars for liberating their country, regardless if the political circumstances were in their favor or not.

The Albanians were aware that the war for liberating their country would be very difficult. It is because of this that by submitting their projects to the European countries, they would request support the latter by lending them weapons and other items related to war. On May the 6<sup>th</sup> of 1602, the archbishop of Zara informed the cardinal Jul Aldobrandini in relation to the conversation that the former had with the bishop of Sapa, Nikollë Bardhi, who informed him on the plans of staging an armed insurgency in Albania, and that in order to do so, Nikollë Bardhi was heading to Venice and thereafter Rome, and had also requested an accompanying letter to submit in these respective cities.

*"Today in my house was the Albanian bishop, with whom we discussed at length about numerous things that occupied our minds. He was adamant in his requests, hoping that he would find support from the Republic in relation to the issue that we discussed previously.*

*He deemed the project of gaining control over Shkodër as difficult, and he thought that it would be even more difficult to take over Krujë. Taking control over the Albanian cities was impossible without the active participation of the forces of European countries. He tells that the Albanians are ready and determined to give their maximum efforts to free themselves from the Ottoman reign. Last year we expected (he says) with great joy the Spanish fleet, because in seeing them the Ottomans were prepared to abandon their country. Among other things, the bishop added that the Christian Albanians were not called recently in the war in Hungary, but only the Turks (Muslims) and the Christians of Bosnia, who will also not be in Hungary before the beginning of June and that they were heading there with great fear...".*

The situation on July the 6<sup>th</sup> of 1602 is depicted quite differently by the bishop of Lezhë, Inocent Stoicini, who in a letter sent to the cardinal San Xhiroxhio, according to the former, the bishop of Sapa and Pal Dukagjini had not travelled as representatives of the people. Pal Dukagjini was a Venetian agent who had betrayed Tomë Plezha. The letter submitted on behalf of Albanians was a forgery. They had even forged the stamp, which is why Rome would not trust them. The Senate had given to Sapa 400 ducats and 300 ducats to Pal Dukagjini, whereas they also gave them 600 ducats to hand out to the other leaders. By this price, Monsignor wanted to rid the bishop of Sapa from his plans. Whereas, he already had control over Pal Dukagjini and he was rewarded for the work he had done, and he was further encouraged to increase the numbers of the 'pro-Venetian' supporters. After they had received the reward from Venice, they were ordered to return to Albania, however they headed to Rome. However, if the situation was such as depicted by the bishop of Lezhë, they would have returned to Albania. The letters written by the bishop of Lezhë affected the impressions of Rome in regards to the Albanian representatives. The Albanian clerics were rightfully hateful towards this bishop, because he did not inform upon the realistic situation in Albanian lands and abroad.

On June the 20<sup>th</sup> of the year 1602, Pjetër Jeronimi from Sibenik was taken into interrogation in the presence of the Venetian ambassadors in Rome, where he declared that Mark Kalojani (Sameul) from Tivari was in continued attempts together with vice-king of Napoli and the King of Spain to hand over the city of Kotor and other places in Albania. He had gained a salary of 300 ducats, which indicates that he was interested only in material gain.\*

All the attempts of the Albanian people, together with the leaders who travelled to European countries, were attacked by various means on all sides, so that they would be forced to become vassals to this or another prince. On the other hand, it must be noted that no European prince, or King nor even Emperor, took seriously the endeavors of the inhabitants of the Balkans. They were interested only as long as they could gain something from the situation, which is why the group that supported the Venetian interests caused insurmountable damage to the war of Albanians for freedom. Ever since the first undertakings for liberation, the division between the Albanian leaders that reflected the enmities between European countries, directly and indirectly damaged the liberation movement in our country.

These divisions at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were described by a chronicler who was an ocular witness to these events: *'Naturally, all Albanians want to free themselves from the Ottoman reign, and they can achieve this with their forces...however, amidst there are three differing parties amidst the Christians, where one of them is dependent on the Pope, the other one on the Catholic King (of Spain) and the third one on the Venetians'* (Zamputi, 1967, 89).

The region of Dukagjin was suitable to defend itself in comparison to the other Albanian regions, and as such it was suitable for the inter-regional Convention to take place. The people of the region of Dukagjin were very patriotic, and they had sacrificed a lot in the wars that occurred in the previous centuries in hopes of freeing the country. As many times before, it was similar this time around, when Venice sabotaged their projects and the war of the Albanians.

### Conclusions

After Albanian assemblies of Mat and Blinisht, Ottoman Empire increased its pressure on the Albanian population. Thus, in order to better organize liberation war, it was decided to convene an assembly in Dukagjin. Assembly can be considered one of the greatest of its time. During this period, local heads and clerics, played an important role. Among them Nikolle Mekajshi from highlands of Shengjergj of Tirana, Bishop of Stefani and Benda who at the time was wanted by Ottoman authorities and was sheltered in Dukagjin. This prelate made a valuable contribution in organizing an interregional assembly of such size. Dukagjin Assembly, on behalf of the united regions, presented to the Senate of Venice five chapters on which Albanians would be willing to cooperate with the republic for the expulsion of the Ottoman Empire from their territories. Albanians could never accept the idea of transition from Ottoman invasion to Venetian one. Leaders of the upcoming state would be forever loyal toward Signoria if the latter would defend their country. If the request were addressed for Venetian conquest, then the ones for protection would not have had any sense, because Venice had begun the campaign for the occupation of Albanian territories without having to request such thing. In those circumstances Assembly used all the possible connections in order to realize its plans, with main enemy of Albanian uprising, sending its representative Nikolle Bardhi from Zadrima and Pal Dukagjini to Venice, offering help and to convince The Republic to start combat campaign. Not a single European prince, pope, king or emperor looked seriously at the effort of Balkan people, except in the prism of personal interests. The party which held the side of Venetians, damaged more than anything else the struggle of Albanian people to liberate their country.

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