

The projects of Nikollë Mekajshi Presented to the European Chancelleries for the Liberation of Albania, 1601-1610

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Abstract

In 1600 NikollëMekajshi had gone to Rome, which was a holy year and filled with festivities. He could not leave without taking advantage of this opportunity and presenting his Project to the Pope's court. The bishop of Stefania had presented to the cardinal San Giorgio the reigning situation in Albania so as to incite a venture against the Ottoman reign. The situation was similar in the other regions of the Balkans. The project of NikollëMekajshi was not taken into consideration, however he continued his work to advance his project on liberating Albania, whereby he presented it to various other European princes. The bishop of Stefania, NikollëMekajshi, presented his report of liberating Albania to the Pope. After numerous unsuccessful attempts to gain support in the court of Venice, NikollëMekajshi from the region of Dukagjin, presents a letter to the king of Spain, where he informs the king about the suitable conditions to wage war against the Ottomans, and he does so by present a plan of action. On July 15th 1610, saddened and disappointed from the negligence and the lack of support from the king of Spain to support the project for liberating the country, NikollëMekajshi contacts the Pope, whereby he presents his project on liberating Albania to the cardinal Borgese.

Keywords: Albania, Ottoman Empire, NikollëMekajshi, Rome, Spain, Pope Clementi VIII, Borgese, San Giorgio.

Introduction

NikollëMekajshi (NiccoloMechaisci) was one of the main leaders of the Albanian liberation uprisings, who was aiming to attack and liberate the city of Kruja in 1595. It is believed that he originates from Mjekësi in the vicinity of Elbasan (Fjalori, 2008), and in 1592 he became a bishop of Stefania in Northern Albania. He engaged very swiftly thereafter in the projects of liberating Northern Albania, where he was one of the participants in the Convention of ShënMërisë of Mat Saint Mary in 1594 (Bartl, 1974). He participated as an important member in the Convention of Dukagjin in 1601-1602, together with three other leaders who represented the vicinity of Elbasan. After the Convention of Dukagjin, he maintained relations with the courts of European chancelleries, so as to convince them and secure the necessary help in the liberation war of the Albanian people (Fjalori, 2008). NikollëMekajshi was forced to retreat into the Mountains of Dukagjin, in order to escape from the persecution from the Ottoman Empire, considering that the Ottomans viewed him as a very dangerous leader.

NikollëMekajshi went to Rome in 1600, which was a 'holy year' where grand festivities took place. He could not let this opportunity escape without presenting his project to the Papal court. The governor of Kotor had notified the Venetians about the voyage of NikollëMekajshi to Rome, who informs their ambassadors that they would welcome 'any forgiveness and spiritual favors' for the good of the bishop and his followers, but at the same time he passes the information that the Venetians should not engage in any agreement with NikollëMekajshi (Bartl, 1974).

We understand exactly what they had discussed based on two letters written a year following their meeting, where both hold the same date, July the 15th 1601. The first letter is sent by the bishop of Stefania in Albania to the cardinal Jul Aldobrandi Father Stefani, which is sent hidden from the Venetians because otherwise they would intercept the information and divulge them to the Ottomans. Mekajshi informs that the Ottomans were beginning to suspect the incitement and organization of the Christians in Albania (accusations which were not without ground).

In order to escape from the dangers looming from the Ottomans, Mekajshi had retreated to the highlands of Dukagjin. He was asking the cardinal to provide him with a pension so that he could continue his work as a bishop (Zamputi, 1989). In regards to his projects, he goes more into details in his second letter, where the bishop of Stefania informs the cardinal San Georjino about the suitable situation in Albania to engage in an uprising against the Ottoman invaders. A similar situation reigned in the other regions of the Balkans. The letter states that he 'is informing your Monseigneur that the time is appropriate to initiate a military undertaking, which we have awaited for so long, because the country was left without any help considering that the leaders of the Ottoman army: the Sipahi, Janissaries, Sancak-beys and other important people station in Albania, who all have left to fight the war in Hungary. The remaining part of the military does not have the necessary power, and they are without leaders and lack military experience. Seeing that the Ottoman army in Europe is occupied with the war in Hungary and those in Asia are fighting against the rebellious chancellor in Caramania, and those in Syria bordering with Adana are preoccupied with finding ways how to cross Mecca, they all have their problems. In such circumstances, the conditions are favorable to initiate a military undertaking in the Albanian lands.

The Ottoman army was being informed by the Venetians that the former ought to be careful from the Christian fleet, and as such the Ottomans took preventive measures in other places, aside from Shkodër where the position of the Ottoman army was strong in Varosh, despite the fact that there were few food stocks. They did not take in measures in Krujë among other fortresses. This would serve to our advantage because the Ottoman army has no cavalry there in order to prevent our march, and there are not even 1000 cavalymen in the entirety of Albania. During this period a herald from Belgrade, where the Turkish Pasha headquarters were established, had informed them that Ibrahim Pasha, who was a general and the brother-in-law of the Sultan, had passed away (Zamputi, 1989). This was a great loss for the Ottoman army, and they accept this when they declare that the Ottoman house was done with after his death.

The Christians will not have a second chance like this to initiate this military undertaking in Albania, Greece, Serbia and in Bulgaria, so that for six months the Christians will march at the gates of Constantinople, if God is willing.

The Christians were impatiently waiting for the help promised by his Holiness. Had we known that his Holiness would not help us, we would have long since made peace with the Ottomans' In the following paragraphs, NikollëMekajshi had asked to 'gather as many as 12.000 muskets and other war munitions, to come with unfurled flags without securing themselves from anyone. It would be good for the military initiate to begin on September 18th of that year, because in that day people would go for trading in a town four days away from here. The fortresses would have less men guarding them, and if you wish to begin such an undertaking, you must inform us at least 20 days ahead, so that we have the necessary time to prepare ourselves'(Zamputi, 1989). The project of NikollëMekajshi was not taken into consideration, however he continued his work to further his project on liberating Albania, where he asked for help in this initiative to the other princes of Europe.

In the year 1603, the Pope Clement VIII, asked the Albanian bishop NikollëMekajshi to make a project-report on the Kingdom of Albania and Macedonia (Malcolm, 2015). On July the 3rd of the same year, the bishop of Stefania presented the project to the Pope. In the beginning, it provides an overview on the war of the Albanians waged during the three first years of the 17th century, it provides an overview of the political and social circumstances, the climate, the riches of Albania, and he informs the Pope on the Albanian character as renowned warriors (Thëngjilli, 2003). After numerous unsuccessful attempts with the Papal court and Venice, NikollëMekajshi heads to the king of Spain. On November 21st of 1606, the Venetian delegate to Naples, reports that Petkovic was sent together with 2000 ducats in Albania to talk with the bishop of Stefania with whom 'the Spaniards have great relations'. In the spring of 1607, Mark Gjini, Domenik Andreas and Father Domian travel to Spain and deliver to the king of Spain a letter written by NikollëMekajshi, where among other things it said that 'he promised to him Albania, if he so desires'(Bartl, 1974). On May the 15th of 1607, the Venetian ambassador to Naples qualifies 'the bishop of Stefania' as the main supporter of the Spaniards in Albania. In September of 1608, the Venetian agent FrancesoSkorroveo informs from Budva, that the bishop of Stefania had continuously been in contact with the Dalmatian Dolishti in Rodon, in and they had discussed the possibility for an Albanian uprising and for establishing the Spanish dominion: 'they had told to the knight Dolishti to pass on the information to the king of Spain, that they were loyal only to the Spaniards' (Bartl, 2011).

However, the king of Spain was not deeply impressed by the project, where he informs through Count Benavente that 'he orders the people of the provinces of Albania, Himarë and Greece that his kingdom, in his holy desire, would wish to liberate them from the oppression and tyranny and return to them their full freedom', however he informed them that 'the time is not yet right to put this plan in function' (Bartl, 1974). Despite this response, the relations between the bishop of Stefania, NikollëMekajshi, and the king of Spain did not end here. On March the 26th of 1609, from the region of Dukagjin, the Albanian leaders wrote a letter to the king of Spain, where they present as their representative NikollëMekajshi, the bishop of Stefania. "We are sending you our highly honored lord NikollëMekajshi, the bishop of Stefania of the Holy Royal Catholic Highness as our true and earnest ambassador, who will inform you in entirety about our situation. For this, we have no option but to pray that you will accept his lordship as our true ambassador. We also inform you that there are some scoundrels, who go around using lies and pretending that they our sent as ambassadors from us. This is why you must not trust them if their reports are not verified by our below-signed secretary. With no further ado, we are greeting you as your eternal obedient subjects. Dom Pjetri i Zi, abbot of Saint Paul, secretary for the entire kingdom" (Zamputi, 1989). On July the 3rd of 1609, NikollëMekajshi wrote a letter from Rome addressed to the king of Spain, Felipe III, where he presents the favorable conditions for the war and provides him with a plan for action. 'We inform your Highness, that the people of Albania and Macedonia have sent to your Highness the Albanian representative Mark Gjini and the Slav Anton Petkovic, who in their name offered your Highness reign over their country. The troubles had already erupted in Albania, with weapons in hands they had overthrown the Pasha of Serbia, and your Highness can understand that they are brave men, however they are far too few in numbers and so it would be difficult to face such a strong army as the Ottoman army. Unfortunately, they have not been helped by the king of Naples, nor Count of Benaventana, where the former had sought help through their representative. Considering that the Albanians are currently in an unfavorable situation, they sent the bishop of Stefania as their representative to the Pope and Spain' (Zamputi, 1989).

Which is why we are presenting to your Highness this project so that you would support it, and we assure you that it will be an easy task to achieve: the first attack will be organized in Elbasan, the metropolis of that kingdom that is so populated, but not that strong, because there are only 15.000 Turks there, and your Highness would send over 30.000 soldiers, some cannon gunners and musketeers, who would attack the Janissary center. Once your soldiers would arrive, the local soldiers would immediately join the attacks and take over this city, and they would not be afraid even if the largest army in the world would come to try and stop them from taking over the entirety of Albania and Macedonia. Thereafter, we would easily take over Shkodër and Krujë.

However, prior to that you must send 10.000 escudos, meaning 5.000 for those who will take over Shkodër, and the other escudos for Krujë. This money must be paid before any action and as soon as possible, in order to corrupt the people who would hand over the castle. Then we will try bigger things, with an army comprising of about 60.000 Albanian and Spanish fighters we will march to Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and Thrace so that we will arrive to Constantinople. The people of the occupied lands were 'unable to fight and unarmed, so that our Spaniards together with the Italians and Albanians are sufficient to break the Janissaries who represent the flower of the Turkish army'. In this way we could also take over the capital, Constantinople. Naturally, the undertaking would need to be supported by the Spanish fleet'. NikollëMekajshi asked 'for money from the King of Spain at the end of the letter so as to afford his stay in Rome as well as to receive a pension, considering that he could not return to Albania because he would be ambushed by the Ottomans. Signed on July the 3rd of 1609, Father NikollëMekajshi, bishop of Stefania' (Bartl, 1974). It did not take long and Felipe III from Segovia, on August the 29th of 1609, responds to NikollëMekajshi and advises him to not travel to Spain to the king, but the king proposed that the bishop ought to communicate with him through the Spanish ambassador in Rome, Count de Castro, and that he should come to Spain only thereafter. Among other things, it says that he should not initiate the undertaking in Albania alone, because this would destroy the project for the forthcoming years (Zamputi, 1989).

Before heading to Italy, NikollëMekajshi had talked to the inhabitants of the seaside, and together with them he had come to the conclusion that they should not initiate any action without receiving clear signals from the king of Spain. However, the situation was tense and it was necessary to initiate the military undertaking for liberating the Albanian lands as soon as possible. Saddened and disappointed by the negligence and unwillingness to help from the king of Spain, addresses the Pope by presenting to him the project for liberating Albania, whereby he also presented his project to the cardinal Borgese.

In a short additional letter addressed to cardinal Borgese which is dated July the 15th of 1610, NikollëMekajshi adds the request that is addressed to the Pope, where among other things he says: 'I will wait for an answer from your Holiness (the Pope)'. 'Cherished and dear Sir! I have the honors to present this letter to Your Highness where I request for readiness on your behalf to help us in these important moments and to give us support wherever possible. I am obligated to send this request and thank you in advance. In Rome, in my usual apartment signed on July the 15th of 1610. Addressed to his Highness as your humble obedient, NikollëMekajshi, bishop of Stefania.

To his Holiness and our Lord, Pope Paul V. Holy Father, the main mistake of the princes in these days are their lack of security and a large fear of undertaking any action worthy of them; it would have been in that case that we would have cherished the highest happiness, if we do not help them, but we do to them as we would by laying a sickly man in a golden bed. All that I can call blessed honored Father, I do not pretend to console with this letter, nor to convince Your Highness for the order and to read for all, I only propose negotiations that have not yet taken place, not negotiations with few words, but those that come out of the mouth of a man who is a parson of the Christ. Your Excellency knows very well that the kingdom of Albania and Macedonia are subject to the Turkish tyranny, and that they are in a terrible situation due to the treatment that the local inhabitants receive from the Turks, whose wish for freedom is difficult to express with words.

It is important that everyone ought to be united and request from Your Excellency, as a universal Father in the name of the Christian faith, and who would like to extend his helping hand, so it is a moment of mercy and help from your end so that we achieve liberation. And you could do this easily, considering that you are in a small area in the kingdom where there are more than 50.000 armed men, belonging to various rites, be them Greek or Latin, but who speak the same language and have parents of the same blood. Their virtue is in the weapons holding on their shoulders and so vowed they attack thousands of Turks, so as to fight their tyranny. Today there are some men who hail from Dukagjin, and they are free, who in accordance to their virtue would take their arms and at once protect and deflect the cruel Ottoman dominion.

However, so that we can address some matters of second hand importance as well as about the adventures to come, it is necessary that the Christian take over three fortresses, and wait until they receive help from the other countries. These fortresses are: Shkodër, Krujë and Vlorë, which are quite important, and that cannot be overtaken by attack alone, not even through siege - although this could be done, but it requires a long time, however with some trickery they could be overtaken by the Christians, mostly due to the friendship and agreement we could achieve with the guards. For this alone we would need some 50.000 escudos to bribe the guards. Should someone not says: why should someone agree voluntarily and with money? Can we not say that without money we cannot do anything? To achieve this requires an intricate plan, where the supplies are provided by the Christians and received by the Turks, who guard the fortresses, and so it is necessary to tell them that some gifts have been offered to strengthen the relations that were established, and so that the bribery becomes public. To overtake the fortresses we would need about three thousand local men, a considerable number of whom would sneak in through the stairs and block the guards, and some of them would make the guards open the doors themselves by bribing them. This can easily be achieved during select seasons throughout the years, at times when all men take up arms, and once they are supported by foreign powers - which also can be achieved, because as we know, the Spaniards burned down the entire seaside fortress of Durrës four years ago, so I think that resistance in this area would be minimal.

However, it would take a lot to get three ships with three thousand soldiers on that day, who would be led greatly by you in order to annihilate the protection of the fortress and get inside, because the Turks would not have sufficient time to respond to the war, and no proper means to fight back. And this should be the time when the other part of the armada would arrive at once, comprising of three thousand soldiers and especially those armed with swords and onagers, which is done by the tradition of this place, and that all of them should be well armed so that we can show that the Christians will be united in offering help in this regard. In this way, the Turks will see that the entire country is against them and they will remain without the keys to the fortresses, so they will have to retreat to Thessaloniki where their entire hope lies. Furthermore, if Your Excellency desires to participate in this undertaking, it would be good to write to the Emperor so that we would continue pestering the Sultan in those areas where the Turks of Bosnia and those who reside in the shores of Danube cannot come to help against us, and that at the same time we must inform the Vlachs who are the Sultan's main enemies, who are still pondering whether they should join this undertaking - and similarly the ones in Serbia and Bulgaria, where we hope that by the grace of God, there are more than two hundred thousand men ready for war.

Your Excellency should not think that all these men will stay by being paid with daily salaries, but that we need a few men in the beginning for at least half a year, or one year at the most, so that we will not lack equipment and supplies to hold a large army in numbers, because Albania is rich in bread, oil, wine and every kind of grain, and so is Macedonia and Serbia which used to be called Mysja in ancient times, which was rich in oats, grains and gold and silver mines, together with all kinds of metals. And if Your Excellency desires that the king of Spain be informed or participate in this undertaking, it would be good that in the midst of three thousand men mentioned above, to have some three thousand Albanians from Puglia, who although have settled there long time, still continue to use the mother tongue, and due to that they would be very useful for the army, as well as for the Albanian soldiers together with the Italians, because they understand each other's languages (Theiner, CXXXIV). Maybe Your Holiness can give me an indication about the effect that these discussions will have? I think that for me, who sometimes can be quite inattentive, if the things that are to come certify in this manner, according to the examination of the situation, I can truly say that according to these predictions the armada will soon be ready and that soon the fortresses will be in our hands in the way we planned. And after that, neither I nor anyone can dare to begin doing that which I speak of, if it wasn't entirely sure that this would be achievable and that victory would be ensured, otherwise the Turks will burn alive all the Christians of this region. For this, as witnesses should stand some Christians and one Turk (Muslim) who was put there just for show, who had more desire for these things, and that God had promised for him to be alive now because it would have been worth it, seeing that he was born from Christian parents and quite wealthy, too - who together with some people, without knowing anything, was murdered unjustly and betrayed by the Turks who raised doubts that they were responsible for the looting of Durrës (Theiner, CXXXIV).

So that I will not be deprived of my right to live and to protect all things that I have, I need to live this miserable life in these non-arable lands where from I have not stepped down for three years. And for this reason, Blessed Father, if he dare not act as we write and promise, if we were not to be placed in danger, unfortunately we are in the mouth of an insatiable beast, the wish of which is only to swallow, how to say, people while being alive if only they have the slightest suspect that the former were responsible for some crime. And trust me, Your Holiness, that these people do not want anything else from your Holiness only that you provide the help so as with the support of your strong and holy arm, we can cast away our common enemy, because we can no longer endure its tyranny which it is being used now more than ever against its own citizens. To tell you the truth, those who are up against a powerful Turkey, and want to raise arms against them, seeing that it behaves unjustly against them and their riches by depriving them from their riches and their lives. I am more than certain that if we are to receive help, then we will find victory. Because the people want us to take over the fortresses and to take arms and join us against any resistance in this undertaking, although the resistance will be minimal, but the people will give all they have to embrace this undertaking. And this goes without mentioning the restless disturbances and the damaging wars waged against the Sultan by the king of Persia, who is truly worthy of this title, because this goes to our advantage, seeing that the Sultan has moved all his troops there (Theiner, CXXXIV).

It so remains that Your Excellency, as a substitute of Christ, a vicar, the most devout of the Catholic faith, either you alone or together with the other princes, as you so wish - would be wonderful to embrace such a highly important undertaking, which would be repaid as illustrated by these direct words: he who becomes the leader and the author of this act will be our master bearing the title of king of Albania and Macedonia, where the royal residency will be amongst the Albanian people, who are more loyal to your holy apostolic residency than to the Orthodox. Because of this, if Your Excellency will engage in this plan, these two kingdoms would be under your reign, appointing as king one of your nephews. On my behalf, I must say that because of my great desire to see this plan come to being, which I rightfully should have, have written a bit longer than I initially thought I would (Naçi, Stavri; Zamputi, Injac; Shkodra, Zija; Buda, Aleks; 1961). Finally, so as to conclude the letter, I must say that Your Holiness should act so as to increase our hopes and will, without having any doubt - due to which our souls swerve many times without being able to decide. The above mentioned people want your help so badly, and they are certain that Your Holiness will have the willingness to embrace this undertaking. From my usual residence, dated July the 10th of 1610, signed by the very humble obedient to Your Holiness, Nikollë Mekajsh, bishop of Stefania (Archive, file, 846).

Nikollë Mekajshi continued to keep his contacts with the Spaniards as well, and in 1611 he wrote that now would be the suitable time to initiate the undertaking in Albania, because the Ottoman army had experienced heavy defeat from the Persians. Nikollë Mekajshi had done a great work in informing the Christian state about the difficult situation in which the Albanian people were under the Ottoman regime.

He presented his project for liberating Albania in front of European chancelleries, however unfortunately they were not supported because of various interests of the European princes. Mekajshi spent his last years mostly in Naples, because he dared not to return to Albania where he was persecuted by the Ottoman authorities. In 1615 he passed away, without seeing his plans for the Albanian people come to completion.

Conclusions

NikollëMekajshi was the main man who orchestrated the Albanian uprisings in the liberation war against the Ottoman Empire. In the last years of the 16th century and during the first decade of the 17th century, he became very active in his attempts to liberate the Albanian lands, whereby he presented his projects to various European chancelleries, because he was aware that only through receiving their help those plans could come to fruition. He speaks of his projects in more detailed manner in his letters, where he informs San Giorgio about the appropriate moment to initiate the military undertaking in Albania against the Ottoman invaders. NikollëMekajshi requested from the European chancelleries for weapons and military munitions and that they would march in aid towards the Albanian and Balkan troops. He had assumed that once the foreign soldiers would arrive, the locals would immediately take up their arms, and this armada could take over the Albanian cities without fearing even the greatest army in the world, who could not stop this act of overtaking Albania and Macedonia. The biggest project was the one in the year 1610 where he addresses a letter to the Pope in asking material and military support. He informs the Pope that the region of Dukagjini is liberated, and that the people of this area have taken up their arms to protect and resist the Ottoman dominion. NikollëMekajshi maintained the war of the Albanian people against the injustices continually caused by the Ottoman invaders for as long as he could.

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