

## **The Trap of the General**

**By Xhavit Shala**

"If your Majesty<sup>1</sup> were to join together the Ionian Islands with Epirus and make it an inherited principedom for my successors, I will become a willing vassal of the French empire," Ali Pasha Tepelena wrote to Napoleon at that time.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 200 years later, Kosovars and their politicians are asking the international community, among which the descendants of Napoleon also, to support them in their efforts to declare independence, seeking to become partners and no longer vassals in the new family of the European Union.<sup>3</sup>

Ali Pasha was a very intelligent diplomat who by playing between Europe and the Ottoman Empire was able to create a dominion that included the non-Albanian islands of the Ionian Sea all the way to Ithaca that was occupied at that time by the French legions and their allies. While today, it seems that the Kosovar politicians are not able to develop the same diplomatic skills that would achieve the aspiration of their people for an independent Kosova within internationally recognized borders, now free of the threat of the Serb army thanks also to the help of French soldiers.

A few days ago, the NATO French representative, an empire [NATO] much larger than that of Napoleon, and the outgoing Commander of the KFOR forces in Kosova, General Ives de Kermabon, tricked the Albanian Kosova politicians when he invited to the handover ceremony without letting them know the Serb Chief of General Staff, General Dragan Pashkash.

The ceremony, which was held on September 1, 2005, was headed by NATO supreme commander for South Eastern Europe, U.S. Admiral Harry Ulrich. The French Minister of Defense, Michelle Alliot Marie, and other international and local dignitaries were also present in the ceremony. For the first time in such a ceremony, there were representatives of Albanian opposition parties, as well as heads of political parties, members of the government coalition parties, and representatives from Kosova Protection Corps and Kosova Police Services.<sup>4</sup>

The ceremony, which went unnoticed in Albania, troubled the political scene in Kosova and diverted the attention from its main task, preparation for the final status talks. In Kosova, the public invitation to the Serb general was translated as a sign that KFOR was preparing the way for a return of Serbian army. These fears were further reinforced by the reaction of politicians and institutions in Kosova.

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<sup>2</sup> Zhan Klod Faverial-Historia e Shqipërisë (History of Albania), pg. 398. Plejad Edition 2004

<sup>3</sup> The article is published initially at "Korrieri" newspaper on 10.09.2005 and on [www.acnss.com](http://www.acnss.com)

<sup>4</sup> Radio Europa e Lirë (Free Europe Radio) 1.9.2005

Thus, in an official statement, the government of Kosova assessed that the participation of the Serbian army chief of staff in this ceremony, was an insult to the sensibilities of the citizens of Kosova as well as an unacceptable act."<sup>5</sup> The Government said that Pashkash was the general of an unreformed army that committed atrocities in Kosova and never asked forgiveness for those crimes. For this reason, it officially asked of the French Army general to provide explanations for the presence of the Serbian Army Chief of Staff in that ceremony. More aggressive was the reaction of the opposition, which boycotted the ceremony. For PDK, the presence of a Serbian army general was "a serious provocation for Kosova, its citizens and the positive political processes that have taken place in Kosova." The rest of the opposition such as "Ora" movement led by Surroi, said that "Pashkash represented the institution which has committed atrocities in Kosova... and up to now they have not considered it appropriate to ask forgiveness for the genocide committed by the institution he is leading... keeping into considerations the delicate moment that Kosova is experiencing... all this is a provocation and a serious mistake, even though perhaps unintentional."

Even the Speaker of Kosova Assembly, Nexhat Daci, although present in the official ceremony, considered the presence of the Serb general a "an episode which can not undermine the performance of General Ives de Kermabon in Kosova." The ceremony was boycotted by the KPC (TMK) <sup>6</sup> General Staff, and different associations of local governments. The TMK (Kosova Protection Corp) HQ said that the invitation extended to the Serbian general "is a careless and premature decision."

It appears that some of the reactions in Kosova were pronounced as a function of the political battles there, and in a rush to catch up with the others and "let one's whistle blow." They somehow blame and excuse the French general for what he did. According to Speaker Daci, the invitation by Ives de Kermabon of the Serbian Chief of Staff, "is a personal concession that is taken out of proportion" while according to Kosova government sources, "the explanations given by general Ives de Kermabon was that he did what he did for the good of Kosova and that this is not the same army which committed the atrocities." The two main opposition parties immediately took advantage of the occasion to attack the government representatives who participated in the ceremony, saying that it was a mistake. These reactions were not muted even by the fact that General Dragan Pashkash was introduced into the ceremony as "a senior army official of neighboring country."

The attendance in that ceremony of the Serb general should have come as no surprise. BETA News agency, informed from Belgrade that on August 31, "Dragan Pashkash, will attend the command hand over ceremony to the Italian replacement Lieutenant Colonel, Giuseppe Valoto." This information was also published in Kosova's daily newspapers. With that information beforehand, the Kosova politicians, if they wanted to, could have discussed the issue over with the French general, given the fact that they had been dining

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<sup>5</sup> RTP ,1.9.2005 -"Kosova Government reacts over General Pashkash presence in Prishtina"

<sup>6</sup> Politika, Danas - 02/09/05; UNMIK, B92, Tanjug, Beta - 01/09/05

together just a night before the ceremony. The Albanian political actors had the opportunity to coordinate their stands and come out with a unanimous position for the visit. They were not prepared and they did neither. Some boycotted the ceremony while others went there and then issued contradictory statement, leaving the internationals with a bad taste.

Thus, according to Alex Andersen, Director of International Crisis Group Office in Prishtina, "the reaction of Albanian leaders is a consequence of their failure to come up with a common platform for the final status," while it considered the KFOR decision "an inappropriate political step." "It is very regrettable, Mr. Andersen continued, that the Contact Group is not making public its position on conditional independence. This affects the assessment of the majority of Albanians who base their opinions on the symbolic actions of the international community and on what solutions they offer for Kosova's status." Giuseppe Valoto, the successor to the French General, said that he had learned many things during the ceremony.

We hope that they have understood that independence is the most precious thing for Kosova and that any "concession" on that point could bring unexpected consequences.

The authorities in Kosova also failed to take into consideration the fact that the ceremony would be presided by NATO Commander for South Eastern Europe, US Admiral, Harry Ulrich. It is unlikely that the Serb General would have attended without making sure that the US Admiral was informed of his presence in the ceremony. Dragan Pashkash visit to Kosova follows the Washington's invitation for Belgrade authorities, to sign two military agreements of understandings: Security Cooperation Agreement (SCA) and Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). These agreements will facilitate Serbia and Montenegro efforts modernize their army, undertake further reforms in the military field and introduce in the armed forces the principle of civilian control and a common approach with other Euro – Atlantic members.

To the last moments of his stay in Kosova, General Ives de Kermabon, tried to remain faithful to the commitment that he made when he first arrived in Kosova "to restore the trust." And to accomplish this he had to try to the end. However, trust can be restored only if there is a bit more transparency. Based on press reports, the French general had invited chiefs of staffs from neighboring countries. If these reports are accurate, then perhaps the general did not consider Albania a neighboring country since the Albanian Army Chief of Staff did not attend the ceremony, and based on our investigations no invitation was ever extended to him.

Returning to our story, Napoleon was right in doubting Ali Pasha Tepelena's proposals, because the Pasha soon after inviting Napoleon's officer, aide-de-camp Rogge, the French deputy governor for Ionian Islands, to his estate, betrayed him turning him over to the Ottoman authorities.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Once he learned that the Ottoman Empire had declared war on France, Ali Pasha Tepelena lured the French aide-de-camp into an ambush, took him captive and sent him prisoner to Constantinople where he died in 1799 - Jean Claude Faverial-Historia e Shqipërisë (History of Albania), pg. 396. Botime Plejad 2004

Two centuries later the French General, Ives de Kermabon, would have been better advised to have more faith in the Kosovar authorities rather than follow a policy of *fait accompli* that Albanians often translate as a trap. If in case it was meant as a trap, Kosovar politicians should get used to them as many more may follow during the status talks. Even if this incident was intended to be a French lecture on restoring trust between Albanians and Serbs, the Kosovars would do well to draw lessons from it.