

# Flag Day

The large Albanian community in Macedonia celebrates two important dates in the autumn. The first one is the Day of the Albanian Alphabet celebrated on 22 November to mark the day when the Albanian alphabet was standardized in 1908 during the Congress of Manastir (*Kongresi i Manastirit*) in present-day Bitola. This date became a commemorative day and a holiday for the citizens belonging to the Albanian community in Macedonia.

The other date, which is not an official holiday in the country, comes only a few days later. Flag Day (*Dita e flamurit*) is one of the most important celebrations of the Albanians. It started in Albania in 1912 to celebrate national independence, but very soon became a national holiday of all Albanians regardless of the country they live in, as Albanian national flag became not only a marker of the Albanian statehood, but also a symbol uniting all ethnic Albanians. The date of the holiday, 28th November, unifies two events: the hoisting of the Albanian flag in Vlore in 1912 and the flying of the same flag by the medieval ruler Scanderbeg in 1443. Scanderbeg is an indelible memory of the Albanian people despite the centuries that have passed since his times, so that both Scanderbeg and his flag have been symbols around which Albanians' awareness of their identity was preserved and developed over the centuries when they did not possess their own state. The flag with a black two-headed eagle on a red background is also recognized as the community flag of the Albanians in Macedonia. It is hoisted on all the national holidays together with the Macedonian state flag in the municipalities with Albanian majority. In these municipalities Albanian community flag is also displayed on some other official occasions. In private celebrations, such as weddings and funerals, the flag is used much more frequently.

Early Flag Day celebrations in Macedonia



caused tensions between the majority ethnic Macedonian population and the Albanians. But within years both sides accepted it as one of several community holidays, one side no longer feeling the need to overexpose the flag, and the other side understanding that the holiday itself is not a provocation of interethnic hostility.

Albanian independence was gained in 1912 after a successful People's Uprising against already weakened Ottoman Empire. As the already independent Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and others opted for a partition of the territories which the Ottomans held in the Balkans, Albanian leaders and intellectuals rushed to proclaim the territory of Albania as a sovereign country. In a swift but effortful diplomatic action they managed to secure the support of both the Ottomans and the "great powers" like Austro-Hungary and Italy.

The recognition came in phases. The country first gained autonomy under the Ottoman sovereignty, but after the Balkan wars and the partition of the Ottoman regions, in 1913, it was recognized as an independent country ruled by a European monarch under the supervision of great powers. The resolution of uncertainty around the status of Albania was precipitated by the the Great Assembly held in Vlore on 28 November 1912, when the Independence was declared by 83 deputies from many towns where Albanians lived as well as representatives of the diaspora. After the declaration was unanimously accepted, one of the most prominent deputies, Ismail Qemali waved the national flag from the balcony in the presence of several hundred Albanians. The flag was modeled after the 15th-century flag of Scanderbeg's principality.