

The Diplomacy of the Great Powers Towards Albania in the Context of the "Adriatic Question"

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Abstract *This paper aims to analyze the factors that influenced the diplomacy of the Great Powers towards the Albanian question at the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920). Treated not as a special case, its fate was integrated with the solution of the "Adriatic question", meaning the rivalry between Italy and Yugoslavia to exert influence over the Eastern Adriatic. Thus, the Great Powers didn't respect the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Albania aimed at meeting its neighbors' intentions, such as: the Italian sovereignty over Valona and the hinterland, and the mandate for a small autonomous state in the Central Albania; the Yugoslavian pretensions to the North part of Albania and the Greek claims for the so-called "Northern Epirus". For that reason, the Great Powers reached political compromises and signed the memoranda of 9th December, 1919, and the agreement of 13th January, 1920, that foresaw the fragmentation of Albania between three neighboring countries. Fortunately, it was the decisive role of the American President, W. Wilson that separated the Albanian question from the Adriatic one and let it open to be discussed to other international forums.*

Keywords: *The Paris Peace Conference; the Great Powers' diplomacy; the "Adriatic question"; the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of the Albanian state;*

1. The Great Powers' Diplomacy Towards the Albanian Question at the Paris Peace Conference

After the First World War, the winning Great Powers called the Peace Conference on 18th January, 1919, in Paris with the aim of setting the peace conditions and sharing the spheres of influence. All the participants, in particular small countries hoped to find a right solution to their national question based on Wilson's principles. The Entente declared that "they had fought for justice, liberty and a new diplomacy, meaning the people's right to self-determination" (Swire, 2005, p. 231). But, the Allies just consolidated the old diplomacy, causing other problems in the post-war order. This fact was noticed in the position of the international factor towards Albania at the Peace Conference, too. The High Council in Versailles didn't take into consideration the legal request of the Albanian delegation to be represented on the Conference, "in order to protect its rights against the neighbors' intentions and to ask for the accurate border division according to the nationality that unfortunately didn't happen to the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1912-1913" (The Academy of Science of Albania. The Institute of History, 1975, p. 81). But, the Albanian delegates were accepted to participate only to present their viewpoints in the commissions for territorial cases. Thus, the Albanian problem was discussed indirectly, integrated into the Greek question and the Adriatic one. "The treatment of Albania at the Peace Conference as an object of bargaining and, even worse, the ignorance of its neutrality placing it on the same position with the vanquished, an unjust and quite arbitrary act, was inequitable and dangerous attitude. It caused not only an incalculable damage to the Albanian question, but also impeded to make the Balkans a region of peace and stability in the future" (Verli, 2002, p. 112).

2. The Fate of Albania and the Solution of the "Adriatic Question"

The meetings of the Peace Conference witnessed that the Great Powers diplomacy faced with difficulties and disagreements in order to finish the peace treaties. In the beginning of April 1919, the "Adriatic question" was

considered a severe conflict, meaning the rivalry between Italy and Yugoslavia in the Adriatic, to which was joined the solution of the Albanian problem, too. The diplomatic history of the "Adriatic question" began with the Secret Treaty of London, on 26th April, 1915, signed between Italy, Britain, France and Russia. According to it, "Italy admitted to join the army beside the Entente instead of many territorial gains by the Adriatic and other places and a loan of 50 million pounds from London. Naturally, the territorial provisions of the Secret Treaty of London made a good deal between Italy and the Allies" (Gurakuqi, 2006, p. 34), especially article 6 and 7 referring to Albania: Article no.6 "Italy shall receive full sovereignty over Valona, the island of Saseno and surrounding territory (from the Vjosa River, in the north, nearly up to the northern border of Himara, in the south). Article no.7 Should Italy obtain the Trentino and Istria in accordance with the provisions of Article 4, together with Dalmatia and the Adriatic islands within the limits specified in Article 5, and the Bay of Valona (Article 6), and if the central portion of Albania is reserved for the establishment of a small autonomous neutralized State, Italy shall not oppose the division of Northern and Southern Albania between Montenegro, Serbia, and Greece, if it is recognized from France, Great Britain and Russia. The coast from the southern border of the Italian territory of Valona up to the Bay of Stillos, will be neutralized. Italy will take the charge of representation of the Albanian state in relation with foreign Powers. Despite this, Italy agreed to leave sufficient territory in the east part of Albania to guarantee the existence of a border line between Greece and Serbia to the west of the Ohrid Lake" (The Archive of Institute of History (AIH), Tirana, A.V.57, p. 17).

The content of the Secret Treaty of London was used as a point of reference to the compromise policy between the Great Powers and the Balkan countries aimed at solving the "Adriatic question". That was the result of the contradictions between Italy and Yugoslavia to divide the lands of ex-Austria-Hungarian Empire. "The Italian government claimed to annex not only the coast along the Eastern Adriatic, partly or entirely inhabited by Slavs, but also the city of Fiume (Rijeka), inhabited mainly by Italians, that the Secret Treaty of London left to Croatia (Yugoslavia)" (Culaj, 2010, p. 231).

The Italian-Yugoslavian rivalry for the Eastern Adriatic determined the neighbors' policy towards Albania, too. "The government of Italy aimed at receiving the ownership of Valona, as an important geostrategic point in the Southern Adriatic and putting over the Italian protectorate the "Albanian autonomous state", that was foreseen to be established on the "Muslim" Central Albania. Also Roma requested that this protectorate or control should be probably exerted over the Albanian borders of 1913" (The Academy of Science of Albania, 2007, p. 131). While, the diplomacy of Beograd was double standard towards its Southern neighbor. On one side, it supported the independence of Albania on the borders of 1913, with the purpose of avoiding the Italian intervention in Albania. If Italy were a direct neighbor of Yugoslavia, it would help to destabilize the multiethnic state. On the other side, the Yugoslavian government declared that if any other country is given the right of invasion or protectorate over a part or the whole territory of Albania, it will ask for the part that "belongs" in order to protect its fundamental interests.

Meanwhile, the Great Powers, much more France than England, tended to encourage Yugoslavia in maintaining the balance of power in the Balkans against the Italian domination. The Prime Minister of Beograd, N. Pasic, made efforts to provide even the support of the American diplomacy. He used the slogan "the Balkans belongs to the people of Balkans", as a mean against the Italian intervention in the Peninsula and apparently hid his hegemonic intentions. Also Pasic estimated the Italian protectorate over Albania as another source of conflict in the Balkans, similar to the question of Bosnia-Herzegovina" (Milo, 1991, p. 75). Thus, Albania held the old and preferred position of the Great Powers as a chattel of barter (Milo, 1987, p. 126).

The government of Yugoslavia, to maximize its benefits, sent a note to the Great Powers on 17th May, 1919. It requested that the new Albanian-Yugoslavian border should overpass the Black Drin River until it joins the White Drin and there it follows the Drin bank up to the mouth of the Adriatic Sea. During the later correspondence, Beograd used the well known alternative: in case Italy was present in Albania, Yugoslavia claimed its right to annex the Albanian territories on the right side of Drin" (Milo, 1987, p. 127).

When the neighbors' threat of the Albanian independence and the territorial integrity was evident, with

the approval of the Great Powers, the government of Albania intensified the diplomatic activity to protect the Albanian question. Through the memoranda sent to the Head of the Peace Conference, George Clemenceau, the Albanian delegation opposed the unjust claims of the neighbors on the country division. "We have requested for the Albanians the right to have a free and an independent life with all the privileges of a sovereign state and we have protested against every threat of our integrity and against the provisions of the Secret Treaty of London (1915) that foresees the division of Albania, giving Shkodra to Yugoslavia, Valona to Italy and Northern Epirus to Greece. But, it seems that we have not insisted much on our people's decision to energetically refuse every new fragmentation of Albania and on its strong will to become a factor of stability in the Balkans building a State like other civilized and modern countries, all the Albanians together, despite the region or the religion. The continuous charges of our opponents, who pretend that we are building "a new small Turkey" in Europe, with the aim of grabbing the most civilized minorities, are only pretexts to hide their unjustified intentions" (AIH, A.V.25, p. 1).

In order to avoid the threat of the Albanian sovereignty, the political class revealed to the High Council of the Peace Conference their readiness to accept a mandate for a certain period of any Allied powers, not interested in Albania that will lead towards progress. According to the ex-British Commissioner in Albania, Harry H. Lamb, in the note sent to the Prime Minister of Britain, Lloyd George, on 20th June, 1919, cited: "The general feeling of Albanians is against the Italian protectorate. They aspire to the "independence" lead by a High Commissioner European or better American. In case of impossibility for an American, they want a British one. If the protectorate is unavoidable, an Anglo-Saxon or French one will be accepted gladly, but everyone is against Italians, because the force of their hatred is equal to their tensioned relations" (AIH, A.V.53, p. 11).

The Albanian problem remained overhanging because of the "Adriatic question". The deepening contradictions between Italy and Yugoslavia and the Cabinet reshuffle made Italy change its foreign policy in the Balkans. The government of Francesco Nitti that came into power in June 1919 accepted the compromise alternative to provide the support of Greece. Thus, on 29th July, 1919, was signed the secret agreement T. Tittoni – E. Venizelos. According to it, "Italy was going to support, at the Paris Peace Conference, the Greek pretensions on Southern Albania, instead of the Greek support of the Italian demands to provide the mandate for "the remaining" Albania and the right to invade Valona and its strategic hinterland" (AIH, A.V.51, p. 66).

The Italian-Greek compromise was encouraged in principle by France and England. But, the Yugoslavian government opposed it firmly because it felt excluded from the plan of Albania's fragmentation between the two neighbors. For that reason, Beograd began the attacks invading other territories in the Northern Albania. Yugoslavia insisted to annex the region of Shkodra using the historic and the economic arguments, too, which were rejected by the representatives of the Albanian delegation in Paris. "Possessing the whole coast of the Adriatic, from Fiume to Kotor, Yugoslavians can't provide as an argument the necessity to exert influence over the Albanian territories along the coast... The interest of Albania is greater than that of Yugoslavia to work the lands in the North, which economic and trade development has been damaged badly due to the annexation of Albanian cities of Peja, Gjakova, Prizren and Dibra from Montenegro and Serbia. Moreover, the Yugoslavian authorities' demand to manage the River of Drin and Buna is refused from the Albanians who will invest alone or in cooperation with the Great Powers" (Albania and the Peace Conference, 1921, p. 28).

In front of its neighbors' political and economic intentions, as evidenced by the Tittoni-Venizelos secret agreement and the military intervention of Yugoslavia, the Albanian delegation, on 14th August, 1919, protested at the Great Powers, as follows: "Such a behavior always seems like their will is the fragmentation of a nation and administer punishment in absence without taking into consideration its life. This course of action towards Albania is totally against the principle of small peoples' rights issued by the proclamation of President Wilson and all the Representatives of the Great Powers" (Albania and the Peace Conference, 1921, p. 15).

Despite the Albanian delegation efforts to provide legal equality and the right national solution, the Albanian problem continued to be treated as a supplement to the "Adriatic question" that the Great Powers used to accomplish the compromise policy with the Balkan countries. Referring to the analysis of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs (FA), T. Tittoni, on 27th -28th September, 1919, he quoted: "France and England admitted to confess like us the Italian ownership of Fiume (Rijeka) – rejected by President Wilson, - but they reached a consensus with Wilson that the port and the railway of Fiume (Rijeka) will be under the League of Nations and Dalmatia, except Zara will be given to Yugoslavia. While Italy will have the control over Albania that, with the Channel of Corfu neutralized, is going to provide Italy the absolute ownership of the Strait of Otranto and, thus, of the Adriatic" (The Academy of Science of Albania. The Institute of History, 1975, pp. 407-408).

The treatment of Albania as a mean to compensate the neighbors for the division of the spheres of influence in the Eastern Adriatic constrained the representatives of the Albanian delegation, L. Bumçi, L. Gurakuqi and M. Frashëri to meet in Paris the Italian Minister of FA, Tommaso Tittoni, on 26th October, 1919. They discussed about the Italian stance on the Albanian question and its objectives hidden behind the Tittoni – Venizelos agreement. The Italian minister declared: "1. We requested the mandate over Albania trying to help you organize your civil and financial administration and the police and military. We have no intention to govern Albania whose people will live in full independence. 2. Regarding the Northern Albania, I can assure you will have the borders decided on the Conference of London till 1913. 3. Concerning the border of Southern Albania, no decision is taken yet. ...5. While the agreement between Italy and Greece doesn't threaten the interests of Albania. There are too many conditions, thus our vote for the question of Northern Epirus is free as for Thrace. 6. Asked for the case of Valona, Mr. Tittoni answered that ...Italy has no intention to occupy or govern Albania, it has so much to do back home" (The Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania (AMPJ), D. 8, V. 1919, p. 73).

The Great Powers continued their diplomatic activity at the Peace Conference to find a solution to the complicated "Adriatic question". The French representative, G. Clemenceau, the British one, Eyre Crowe and that of America, Frank Polk finished a memorandum on 9th December, 1919. According to it, the Great Powers expressed their will to acknowledge the independence of the Albanian state. They thought it will have the necessity, based on the article 22 of the Pact of the League of Nations, for the administration and the assistance of one of the Great Powers. Italy was given the charge of this duty because of its geographical position and economic capacity... 2. The government of Yugoslavia has the right to build and exploit the railways across the Northern Albania in the North of parallel 41°15' and the privileges of the international transport there. 3. The right to control the developments of the Buna River belongs to the Council of the League of Nations which has the possibility to delegate it to Italy or Yugoslavia with the necessary restrictions (The Academy of Science of Albania. The Institute of History, 1975, p. 491). The northern and eastern borders will remain that of the Conference of London 1913. The southern ones are opened to discussion with the Greek government, except Argirocastro which is given to Greece (Dibra, 2005, p. 69).

The memorandum of 9th December, 1919, gave dissatisfaction to Rome due to the solution of the Fiume case and to Athens of its limitations on the problem of Koritza. Also, the Yugoslavian government disagreed with the content of the memorandum which made its pretensions illegal. "At first Yugoslavia denied its southern border totally predominated from Albanians; changed with the provision of "regional correction". Secondly, they protested against the Italian control over Albania that was considered a threat to them. Thirdly, Yugoslavians pretended the valley of Drin as the direct path along the Southern Serbia – which they had in legal possession – by the sea, but their right to build a railway dismissed the reasons for other pretensions. Fourthly, they confessed that the Buna River had flooded the territories of Montenegro in the North of the Lake of Shkodra, not navigable apart from small boats, which was under the League of Nations" (Swire, 2005, p. 249).

Based on the reasons mentioned above, Beograd formally refused the proposals of the Great Powers presented by the memorandum of the end of December. Thus, the Yugoslavian delegation's point of view to

reach a general compromise on the "Adriatic question" was expressed in the note of 8th January, 1920. They were ready to make concessions of Dalmatia and Fiume instead of territorial pretensions to the North of Albania. N. Pasic insisted on the strategic borders and the mandate for the Northern Albania, if the Peace Conference would not reaffirm the independence of Albania within the borders of 1913. He was the mouthpiece for the annexation intentions of Albania among Serbs government circles" (Milo, 1991, pp. 82-83).

Due to the difficult position in the international arena, the Albanian delegation in the name of the Temporary Government of Durres, revealed to the Head of the Peace Conference their dissatisfaction regarding the alternatives proposed to solve the "Adriatic question", which determined the Albania's fate, too. They opposed the policy of the Great Powers to use "Albania as a token of barter to end the conflict of interests derived from the contradictory intentions of the neighbors". ...Though it is difficult to make compromises with the liberty of one people, in order to keep out the danger, we are ready to make concessions to our neighboring countries that have to do with the territorial integrity and the sovereignty of Albania. In the note of 8th November, 1919, we expressed to the Conference authorities our approval to leave the Yugoslavians the free transition of San Gin valley and the railway. This proposal does not mean that Yugoslavia has the right to build the railway or to intervene in our political and economic developments. According to the Greek pretensions, we will guarantee not only the protection of the orthodox Albanian minorities of the Northern Epirus, but also their municipal autonomy. Referring to the Italian purposes to control the Adriatic, we can reach an agreement orally or written that despite the position of Italy there, it is constrained to respect the supreme rights of Albania on Valona and its hinterland (Albania and the Peace Conference, 1921, pp. 59-60). These proposals of the Albanian government faced with the indifference of the international factor.

In order to satisfy the demands of the Albania's neighbors, in particular Yugoslavia, the prime ministers of Britain and France, respectively Lloyd George and G. Clemenceau, in the absence of the American representative, reached a compromise with the Italian homologous, F. Nitti, on 13th January, 1920. The agreement foresaw the fragmentation of Albania between the three neighbors, quite the same as the secret Treaty of London (1915). According to it, Fiume belonged to Italy, while Yugoslavia received as compensation the North of Albania with Shkodra centre which possessed "autonomy" like the region of Rutene in Czechoslovakia. Koritza and Argirocastro were annexed by Greece, while Italy was given the ownership of Valona and its hinterland and the mandate for the remaining territory of the Albanian state of 1913s (The Academy of Science of Albania, 2007, p. 135).

This new compromise agreement between the Great Powers was unacceptable to the Albanian delegation which sent a letter of protest to the Head of the Peace Conference, on 15th January, 1920, as follows: "We feel a deep sadness about such decisions that are not in conformity with the principle of nationality and the right of people to self-determination. These decisions help to separate and fragment the whole people that are used as a token of barter. Albania is a neutral independent state since 1913. Thus, we can't admit the loss of our independence and integrity without protesting. Italy has no legal rights on Valona and its hinterland except the force against the small and weak Albania. Greece and Yugoslavia have no rights on other Albanian territories. Giving Italy or any other power the mandate for Albania is in contradiction with Article 22 of the Treaty of Versailles. The intervention of the interested neighbors in the internal situation of Albania will threat its independence and provoke tensions in the Balkan" (The Central State Archive of Albania (AQSH), F.30, D.7, p. 60).

The Albanians' protest was supported by the American diplomacy that operated in accordance with principles, such as: the right to self-determination, the end of the secret diplomacy, the protection of small people etc. The President Wilson declared that he could not accept a document that broke every principle of justice and signed not in the presence of the American representative. During his speech, he quoted: "The President agrees that the British and the French governments have not forgotten the interests and the welfare of the Albanian people. The American government understands that Yugoslavia admits the

agreement reached between Britain and France to divide Albania into three parts: but our government firmly opposes every decision that damages the Albanians to satisfy the Yugoslavians, as much as rejects each effort to damage Yugoslavians in favor of Italy. The President thinks that the difficulties between Muslims and Christians will increase, if Albania comes under the control of nations that do not speak their language and don't have the same political system or equal economic capacities" (Zavalani, 1998, p. 256).

The Allies gave an answer to President Wilson on 26th February, 1920. Referring to the Albanian question, they said: "The prime ministers of France and Great Britain would like to emphasize their estimation of the interest that the American government expresses in the future of the Albanian people and they assure the President Wilson that they share the same respect for his principles. They declare their conviction that reconsidering the Albanian question they can find a solution that meets the aspiration of Albanians for self-government, taking into consideration the demands of the interested groups, together with the necessity to guarantee Yugoslavians an exit to the Adriatic Sea across Shkodra. Thus, they are ready to stimulate the interested governments to express their wills in conformity with the American viewpoint" (Puto, 2001, p. 254).

The correspondence between the Great Powers continued with the note of 6th March, 1920 that USA sent to the Allied Powers of the Peace Conference, explaining that the Albanian case would not be included in the common discussions between Italy and Yugoslavia concerning the solution of the "Adriatic question" (Puto, 2009, p. 208). Consequently, the Albanian problem will be treated solely by the European diplomacy. It was "the policy of President Wilson, during January – March 1920, that played a decisive role in impeding the fragmentation of the Albanian state. There were some reasons that determined the stance of Wilson. At first, Americans couldn't admit new compromises on the "Adriatic question" reached without their consensus. Secondly, the disagreements on this case showed the wide specter of the diplomatic contradictions between America, Britain and France at the Paris Peace Conference" (Milo, 1991, p. 91).

Apart from the American support, the Albanian representatives Luigj Bumçi and Dr. Mihal Turtulli intended to provide the upholding of the British diplomacy, during their journey in London from 5th up to 27th March, 1920. They wanted to convince the British government of the Albanian nation's rights and their ability to build an independent and sovereign state. They aimed at informing the Foreign Office about the neighbors' compromises against Albania. Based on the report sent to Aqif Pashë Elbasani, the Head of the High Council of Albania, on 1st April, 1920, the Albanian delegates presented the international opinion about Albania and their suggestions for the diplomatic activity of the Albanian government in the future in order to become a factor of stability and peace in the Balkans and wider. "A big problem for our national case is the foreign perceptions that Albanians are in contradiction with themselves. ...in London, we noticed that many Albanians have requested Greece, Italy or Yugoslavia at the Conference; some others have asked for the protection of the Christians in case of building a small Turkey. Our enemies go on saying heinous slanders against us, especially against our Muslim brothers, who are called Turks that want to continue the old Turkish traditions. ...you should know that not only the English and the Americans, but also the French and the Italians don't like Turks. Thus, we are trying by all means to oppose the enemies' slanders and to show the international opinion that Albanians have nothing to do with Turkey or any other country, but they are fighting for the liberty and the independence of their fatherland. ...Greeks should be certain that their efforts to annex Argirocastro will encourage Albanians to cooperate with the opponents of Greece. Otherwise, if they don't ask for Argirocastro, the relations between the two neighbors will be improved. ...If the Italians leave out the demands for the mandate and the invasion of Valona, we will always be grateful to them, so they can benefit much more from Albania rather than being enemies. Concerning the English and the French, we have to make them known that our intention is being a factor of stability and living freely and friendly with our neighbors" (Shllaku, 1944, pp. 58-60).

The Albanian government continued to lobby for the right solution of the national case, now separated from the "Adriatic question". It tried to consolidate the internal situation and improve the image of Albania in the international arena in order to provide the support of the Great Powers.

3. Conclusions

The Great Powers didn't analyze the Albanian problem as a specific question at the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920). This fact influenced in losing the opportunity to guarantee the national rights of Albanians and to divide accurately the borders in conformity with the ethnic criterion. The Albanian cause was discussed indirectly, as a supplement of the "Adriatic question". Thus, the fate of Albania had to be determined by the rivalry between Italy and Yugoslavia for influence in the Eastern Adriatic. As a consequence, the Albanian territory was used to satisfy the neighbors' demands, respectively Yugoslavia requested the North of Albania with Shkodra center; Greece asked for the "Northern Epirus", while Italy intended to provide the mandate for the remaining Albanian state, the full ownership of Valona and its hinterland.

So, the threat of the independence and the territorial integrity of the Albanian state was the result of the compromise diplomacy of the Great Powers, especially of France and Britain with the interested neighboring countries. Only the diplomacy of the American President, W. Wilson, during January – March 1920, dismissed the fate of Albania from the "Adriatic question". In accordance with principles, as the right of people to self-determination and against the secret diplomacy, Wilson brought to the end the exploitation of Albania as a token of barter to realize the unjust claims of the neighbors, with the approval of the European Great Powers.

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