

CONTRIBUTION OF U.S. DIPLOMACY DETERMINING THE FATE OF THE ALBANIAN STATE (1919-1920)

Ibrahim Gashi¹, Zeqirja Idrizi²

¹ *Faculty of Philosophy, University of Prishtina*

² *Faculty of Philosophy, University of Tetova*

Abstract

The end of the First World War found the Albanians in no enviable position, both in the domestic and international level. Kosovo and Macedonia were subjected to occupation, namely violent Reconquista from Serbian, Yugoslav state respectively. The situation became even more difficult, given that the destinies of peoples are determined by the factor of power and the position of the winner. Armies, which had entered Albanian lands, considered themselves part of the Entente Alliance, which won the war. Consequently, they had already made plans for cutting the Albanian lands among them. On the other hand, Albania, in this very unfavorable situation in the Paris Peace Conference (1919) have made the correct efforts historical injustices that had been done in the past and reconfirmation of independence.

The situation was far more complex than can be said, therefore at the last moment, when we face seriously open to question, to reconfirm the independence of Albania and its preparation script fragmentation of Albania between Italy, Greece and the Kingdom of SCS, came the response from American diplomacy and President Wilson for reconfirmation of Albania's independence and accession of Albania state to the League of Nations.

Keywords: *Albania, independence, diplomacy, President Wilson;*

The end of the World War I found Albanian citizens in extremely difficult position, both locally and internationally. Albania was under international military occupation, of invading Italian, French, Greek and Serbian troops. Kosovo and Macedonia were subordinated to violent Serbian recapturing. The situation became even more difficult, when it was known that the destinies of people are determined by the factors of power and the winning forces. Armies that came into Albanian lands called themselves Entente Alliance, who won the war. Consequently, they had made plans to cleave the Albanian lands among them, but the dilemma was who will take the lion's share. On the other hand, Albania aimed that within this community, quite unfavorable, to correct the historical injustices which were done in the past.

With these completely contradictory views and goals, Balkan countries addressed the Paris Peace Conference, which commenced with its work on January 20, 1919. Albania's position seemed hopeless. Italy, according to secret provisions of the London Agreement of 1915, was promised part of Vlora and part of its surrounding area. Serbia, with the blessing of France, was proclaimed (December 1, 1918) Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians (SKS) and Greece with the blessing of Great Britain requested to solve the issue of Epirus.¹

¹ Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, vëllimi i dytë, Prishtinë, 1969, p.451-454;

The situation created after the war ended before the leadership of the time made the urgent task of creating a representative delegation of Albania at the Peace Conference, which would commence its work in the second half of January in Paris. This circumstance highlighted the need of establishing a national government, which then could create a delegation, which would have a representative mandate and legitimacy. On the other hand, the creation of national government had delegitimized the importance of Esat Pasha Toptani, who was under the protection of Yugoslavia (S.K.S Kingdom), who had traveled to Paris in the capacity of the representative of Albania. In these circumstances, on December 25, 1918, the Congress of Durres was held which, although highly influenced by the Italians, brought some decisions on the confirmation of the decisions of the Conference of Ambassadors, expressing the independence of Albania and revision of borders of independence. The Congress appointed the delegation that will represent Albania and Albanians in the Peace Conference, chaired by Turhan Pasha and with the participation of Mehmet Konica and Mihail Turtulli.² In the following days this delegation was amended because of conflicting attitudes about collaboration with Italy, Turhan Pasha was replaced by Luigj Bumçi, in the capacity of the head of the delegation. At the conference, in addition to this delegation, present was also Esat Pasha's delegation. Several other delegations from the Albanian diaspora were also attending the conference, which partially harmonized their stands with the delegation of the Government of Durres, leaving Esat Pasha completely isolated.³

When speaking of the contribution of the organizations of Albanian diaspora, we should mention the very decisive role of two Albanian organizations, the Pan-Albanian Federation "Vatra" founded in 1909 and "Anglo-Albanian Association" founded in London in 1918, which at the conference were strongly lobbying in favor of the Albanian issue against the decision-making powers. Being grateful to the hard work of Vatra activists, and its key figures, such as Noli, Peci, Konica, Kristo Dako, Petro Nini Laurasi etc, Albania was presented with dignity to the United States, respectively to the highest political leadership of this country.⁴

It is important for the young readers to understand that US President Wilson, in his contacts he had with Fan Noli after returning from the ceremony in Mount Vernon on July 4 on his yacht, had assured Nolin that he would firmly commit to restore Albania's independence at the Peace Conference. Referring to the story of our erudite (Noli), President Wilson uttered the following words: "I will have only one voice at the Peace Conference but I will use this voice for the rights of Albania".⁵

The created circumstances at the conference regarding to what they called "The issue of the Adriatic" which had to do with Italian territorial demands on the eastern Adriatic coast, in accordance to the secret agreement with London, as well as Greek demands for the northern border, created underlying difficulties for the Albanian delegation to present its claims to the Committee of Ten. The delegation of the Government of Durres in Paris presented at the Peace Conference

² Lush Culaj, Roli i "Komitetit Mbrojtja Kombëtare e Kosovës" për çështjen shqiptare në Paqën e Versajës, *Gjurmime Albanologjike*, 26, 1996, p. 152;

³ Haris Silajxhiq, *Shqipëria dhe SHBA në arkivat e Uashingtonit*, Tiranë 1999, p. 64;

⁴ Ibid, p. 65;

⁵ Seminari ndërkombëtar i Federates Panshqiptare "Vatra", Nju Jork, 28-30 nëntor 1969, p. 91-92;

on February 15, the first memorandum, and immediately after that the memorandum the second memorandum, which was heard on February 24 by the Council of Ten mainly consisted of the Heads of Governments and Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the five super powers, who convened the conference. In this memorandum, the independence of Albania is considered as obtained by the decision of 1913 and required the correction of territorial mistakes which had to do with the ethnic areas, populated by Albanians according to the Congress of Berlin (1878) and the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1913.⁶ Albanian demands passed to the Commission for the Greek issue, attended by representatives of the US, the UK, France and Italy. The attitudes of disadvantage and mentioned powers which were not unique at the southern border with Albania and perseverance of Italy in maintaining the Albanian coast, created quite negative environment, making the voice of the Albanian delegation, on 24 February, sound purely formal and remained without any hope.⁷

Another unfavorable circumstance was when Albanian issue and the issue of Adriatic was postponed for later review, was the concern of the grand Quartet (US, Britain, France and Italy) regarding the drafting of the peace treaty with Germany, known as the Treaty of Versailles. Only when the Versailles Conference ended and when the agreement was signed on June 28, 1919, the Great Powers turned to other European Affairs, which made a mess not easy to resolve.⁸ Now Albanian, Greek and Yugoslav issue was reduced and will be treated within the Adriatic issue. A special importance was the firm attitude presented by American diplomacy towards Albania, which also softened the position of Britain and maybe somehow would turn the situation in favor of the Albanian issue. To further clarify, the requirements of Italy to extent in some parts of the Ottoman Empire had faced firm opposition of President Wilson and his diplomacy. Despite the London Agreement, on which Italy was called, Wilson drew remarks regarding Italy's insistence with Rijeka, as its unilateral intervention in Albania⁹.

Lloyd George explained that Italian protectorate over Albania was announced without consulting the allies. At this moment, President Wilson said: "Albania should be independent". Moreover, President Wilson said that he had received news from Albania, residents opposed to be under Italian protectorate. The President further said that "Albanians are terrified to be subdued by Italy" and convincingly reiterated his view that "Albanians should be allowed to their independence."¹⁰

In reality, the danger of Albanian disintegration did not pass. At the end of 1919 and in the early 1920, it became more emphasized. President Wilson temporarily withdrew from the conference due to the health condition (heart attack)¹¹.

On the other hand, in the wake of the English-French initiative on resolving the Adriatic issue was the draft of January 14, the most draconian proposal for Albania, under which was said

⁶ Historia e popullit shqiptar, p.454-456;

⁷ Arbër Hadri, Presidenti Ulison dhe Çështja Shqiptare, Instituti i Historisë, Prishtinë, 2012, p. 90;

⁸ A. Hadri, op.cit, p. 92

⁹ "Papers relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States 1919" cited from: Arber Hadri, Op.cit. f. 98;

¹⁰ A. Hadri, op. cit. p. 144;

¹¹ Ibid, p. 146;

that “to be recognized the right of Italy on Vlora and its mandates on Albania, whilst Albania's northern border would move into the south line of the river Drina”.

Albanian regions in the northern line would cross the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and will be organized in the form of the autonomous region, as the autonomous provinces of Czechoslovakia. The southern border of Albania will be determined at the point of Berat, whilst the Greek issue was proposed by the Commission, leaving Gjirokastra and Korça under Greek jurisdiction.¹²

In January of 1920, these attitudes were a deviation from previous positions of France and Great Britain and the opposition to President Wilson's attitude on the issue of the Adriatic. Meanwhile, Wilson recovered in late January and returned to the White House to continue with his work. Here he begins a very firm political debate towards the issue of Adriatic. American policy opposed British-French project for Albanian separation. According to senior staff of the State Department, nothing could irritate President Wilson more than the “effort without any right to annex Albanian lands”.¹³

In the last paragraph of instructions given by President to the Secretary of State, he stated that it's time to acknowledge counterparts that they should choose between the new order with the United States or the old order without the US. Determined attitude of the American Government and the President, they clearly informed English – French representatives that any attempt to definitively resolve the issue of Adriatic without consulting the US party was determined to fail. Regarding the issue of the Adriatic, President Wilson was ready to accept a choice that will be realized as a bargain between Yugoslavian and Italian interests, but with the provision that it does not imply compensation at the expense of a third nationality. Referring to the scholars, respectively experts of this issue from the field of history such as Arbër Hadri, President Wilson solely assumed Albania to be torn into three parts, which was the plan of France and Great Britain. “President Wilson strongly opposes any injustice against the Albanian people for the benefit of Yugoslavia, just as it is in contradiction with the Yugoslav people for damage benefit of Italy”.¹⁴

As a result of the extremely persistent attitude of President Wilson on finding a solution and on the outlined principles, Albanian and Adriatic issues were finalized with a settlement, to be valued in a due time in order to respect political concepts by all three powers.

One such American policy prevented the formalization of one of the solutions proposed by the European forces, of which none would be in favor of Albania. With this attitude, the Paris Peace conference ended (on January 21, 1920), with the proposal that the Adriatic issue should be resolved in the next Conference of Ambassadors.

Meanwhile, noticing the goal of European diplomacy, Albanians intensified their actions for establishing the state. In January 1920, Albanians organized the Congress of Lushnja, by creating the new national government headed by Sulejman Delvina, in order to take measures to extend its control even on those areas that were currently in the hands of Italian state or Yugoslavia,

¹²Paskal Milo, “Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 198-1927, Tirana, 1992, p. 84-85; Albrecht Carrie, Italy at the Paris conference, cited from A. Hadri, op.cit, p.

¹³ Haris Silajxhiq, Op. cit. p. 126;

¹⁴ A. Hadri, op. cit, p. 184;

emphasizing the necessity of establishing the military segment. These actions of Albanian factor in the consolidation of state defined many Albanian issues in the field of diplomacy in the following stages. National Council in order to maintain American support, addressed a letter to the US Senate in which he was call “noble feelings of the American nation, the only one who can raise the voice for the salvation of small nations and also the only one who can take measures necessary for the salvation of Albania from imperialist intentions from neighboring countries”.

The attitude of President Wilson in the following months was firm with respect to Albania. The answer of President Wilson sent on March 2, 1920 to France and Great Britain, was the open protection of justice regarding the Albanian issue, dividing it from the issue of the Adriatic: “he accepted an agreement between Italy and Yugoslavia, but conditionally not to violate territorial interests of third nations”, considering here Albania. Later the US delegation explained the position of the US President, that the “Albanian issue should not be included in joint discussions between Italy and Yugoslavia and that he will not accept in any way any plan that would give Yugoslavia a part of the northern Albanian region as compensation deprived elsewhere”.¹⁵

The second half of 1920 was crucial for the future of Albania. Commencement of the fights for separation of Italy from Vlora, momentarily threatened the independence of Albania, because the powers already agreed that Vlora should remain with Italy. However, the successful fight and Italy’s departure from Vlora on September 2, 1920, was a grand victory that was followed by the departure of Yugoslav forces from what was considered “strategic line” in the north, which it held since 1918. These successful actions in the internal plan was supported by the policy of the United States of America and President Wilson, who managed to convince the British diplomacy to support the idea of full membership of Albania in the League of Nations, the addressing of Lloyd George with the following words “we didn’t have proper approach when we established the borders of Albania, according to the aspirations of Greece and Yugoslavia and primary goal is to be submissive to aspirations of the Albanian people for a final resolution of this issue”.¹⁶

Britain began to play a positive role regarding the issue of Albania in the League of Nations, the fact that the Albanian resources were becoming increasingly attractive. With admission of Albania to the League of Nations, in December 1920 a very delicate stage and more important stage in Albanian history was successfully closed.¹⁷ However, recognition of Albania was quite long. On 28.08.1922, the State Department sent a note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania, with which informed that “the US government led by successful attitude of Albanian National Government, de jure also recognizes the Government of Albania”.

Unwavering support of President Wilson and the United States of America throughout Peace Conference was decisive for Albania and Albanians. With a very long and consistent approach during the whole time, was often left alone against everyone. President Woodrow Wilson managed to remove from the agenda of the conference, every plan that foresaw tearing of Albania. Without exaggeration, his contribution, a hypothetical but very logical prognosis, meant that “the

¹⁵ H. Silajxhiq, op.cit, p 85;

¹⁶ Kaliopi Naska, Këshilli Kombëtar 1920, Tiranë, 2000, p. 10-16; Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, p. 465-468;

¹⁷ Historia diplomatike e Çështjes Shqiptare, Tiranë, 2003; p. 336;

independent Albania, as it became at the Paris Peace Conference would not be existing without the contribution of President Wilson and the United States”.

In conclusion, without drawing any direct parallel line but notwithstanding the great contribution of the US, we can say that the maximum was done in the present circumstances to correct historical injustice made against Albanians. Also, the US will return back again later to the issue of Albania in the second part of the century, known as the issue of Kosovo and again the US will extend its crucial and decisive contribution already known by all for its right solution. Thank you, America!