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THE GEOPOLITICS OF LONDON ONE CENTURY LATER: THE LAST REGIME OF UNCHANGED EUROPEAN BORDERS

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The borders which divided brothers and united enemies

1. Introduction

In one of my first books published in 1991¹, I wrote that after the collapse of European border regimes of Versailles, Yalta and Helsinki, the only European border regime to survive was the one established in London. Twenty-two years ago, I thought that border regimes established in Europe, (as a result of diplomatic conferences following great wars), reflected the geopolitical reality of the times back then, and as such, were in no way permanent. Despite the fact that these great powers decided to establish borders after these conferences (by proclaiming the borders as “unchangeable”), as time went by, the European political map has continuously changed. Since the Peace of Westphalia, (1648)², to the Vienna peace (1815), and up to the Berlin peace (1878), borders were initially fixed on diplomatic tables as “unchangeable” but later, would change due to new realities in the field.

¹ Blerim Reka, *Vitet e Shpresës*, Zëri, Prishtina, 1991

² When European borders were established, based on the principle of sovereignty.

European borders were in essence borders of war.³ Each new war would draw new borders. The latter would then become internationally codified in diplomatic conferences⁴. However, with the eruption of a subsequent war, a new peace would define new borders. And so it would go on continuously: an ongoing clash of history with geography.⁵ As a consequence, the nations of the Europe could not agree on a common school book on the history of Europe. While in 2008, as a result of an OSCE project, a common school book of the History of the Balkans was published; the same, at least as of the end of 2013, has not been achieved with regard European history, because of different interpretation of the European wars.⁶

For the Albanian nation in the Balkans, this was a century of clashes between geography and history. New geographies (after European diplomatic conferences) would draw new borders, changing the existing realities, by dividing nations unjustly, and by rewriting history supported by the argument of force. By dividing brothers, and uniting enemies. Otherwise, how does one explain the fact that a century ago, three out of the four main events of the new Albanian political history, occurred outside of the political borders of “London” Albania? The key events that led to the independence of Albania developed outside of today’s Albania. National unification occurred in Prizren

³ Before and after the peace of Westphalia, every war in Europe, brought upon the consequences of drawing new borders. The same occurred in the Balkans. The so-called Balkan Wars (1912-1913) were not what they claimed to be by the Balkan states which initiated them as “liberation wars”, (since three months before the occupation of Skopje by the Serbian army- 12 October 1912), the Albanian insurgents from Kosovo on 12 August 1912 had liberated Skopje from the Ottoman army. Similarly, the Montenegrin army had acted by occupying Shkodra, just as the Greek army on 6 March 1913 had occupied Ioanina. Also, see Edith Pierpont Stickney *Southern Albania 1912-1913*, (Stanford University Press, 1926).

⁴ The greatest paradox of all was that the Conference of London was called two weeks after the declaration of independence of Albania (28.12.1912) on 16 December 1912, in order to define its legal-international status and its external borders, whereas as the Conference progressed in time, it became a conference of mutilating its territorial integrity and awarding Balkan states who were waiting for the bargain of Balkan wars to the detriment of neighbors (Albania and Macedonia). The London Conference for Albania, and the Bucharest Conference for Macedonia. See more, Valentina Duka, *Histori e Shqipërisë 1912-2000*, Tiranë, 2007, Jacques Bourcart, *Shqipëria dhe shqiptarët*, Tiranë, 2004, Mehdi Frashëri, Kuftime (vitet 1913-1933), Tiranë, 2005, Arben Puto, *Historia Diplomatie e çështjes shqiptare*, Tiranë, 2003.

⁵ Blerim Reka, *The Geopolitics and the Techniques of EU Enlargement*, Aspect, Brussels, 2010

⁶ Even in a meeting in Berlin in October 2013, more than 120 representatives of the universities, institutes, and museums of Europe could not reach agreement on a common school book of the History of Europe (According to Radio DW, and Слободен Печат, 25.10.2013, c.10)

(1878), language unification in Manastir (1908), and liberation unification took place in Shkup (1912). The final event alone, the declaration of the state, occurred in Vlora within the boundaries of contemporary Albania. The political platform erected in Prizren for national political unification was followed by the unique cultural platform in Manastir, and later, with their implementation, through the military platform in Shkup. There was no other option. With these three national platforms a state platform was inevitable. The declaration of independence in Vlora was only the crown woven in Prizren, Manastir and Shkup.

Albanians were the last nation in the Balkans who created their national state, or as Paskal Milo has written, “the last nation who declared an independent state in the Balkans”⁷. There are many theoretical explanations explaining why the Albanians delayed their state-building, but at least two factors remain crucial; the lack of a unique national political program, and the lack of national political leadership among the Albanians. I’m afraid, that even after a century, Albanians still lack both of these factors.

So, during the last century, European borders changed as time progressed. And they will continue to do so. Diplomatic efforts to fix the European border *status-quo* were only temporarily fruitful, since in this world, as everything else, borders are not permanent. History has provided us with many examples of international definitions of borders but it has also provided us with examples of their replacement.

Therefore, after the change of the borders fixed at Helsinki (1975), at Yalta-Potsdam (1943-45) and at Versailles (1919), logically, one would think that the only remaining regime with unchanged borders in the 20th Century should also change; the one established by the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1913.⁸

⁷ Paskal Milo, *Politika e Jashtme e Shqipërisë 1912-1939*, Toena Tiranë, 2013, page 1.

⁸ More precisely, the Protocol of Florence (17.12.1913); But, beforehand, there was another treaty, (the London one on 20 May, 1913), between European Powers and the Ottoman Empire, according to which, Turkey would release all territories in the West of the Enos-Media line in Rumelia. Also, there was another Treaty to the detriment of the Albanians, called the Secret Treaty of London on 26 April 1915 between Britain, France and Russia, on one side and Italy on the other side. According to Cako: “*It is known that in order to withdraw from neutrality and in order to gain the military engagement of Italy against Austria-Hungary, besides the important territories that Austria-Hungary would gain after the war, in addition to Southern Tirol and Trieste, with a part of Northern Dalmatia, it was ensured to be supported with some other Albanian territories such as Sazan and the territory between Osum- Vjosa and river Drin. This biased treaty by the party who had won the First War, would not be implemented in the*

Formally unchanged, because in reality, these borders also experienced the first cracks in the beginning of this century, with the independence of Kosovo, at the end of a century-long colonization of Kosovo by Serbia. After almost a century, a part of the borders delineated on the map at London are no longer valid in the field. The geopolitics of Prishtina in 2008 has replaced the geopolitics of London in 1913. After one century the colonization of Kosovo by Serbia, which came about after the occupation of Kosovo by the Serbian army in October 1912, during the so-called Balkans War (October 1912), was finally broken.⁹ “This Balkan War, created, [as one international analyst rightly said], only hatred, suspicion and fear among Balkan nations”¹⁰.

European geopolitics and that of the Balkans are not, as we have seen, the same as they were a century ago; neither is the constellation of forces in Europe and beyond. Today the position of the six European powers which sanctioned the division of the Albanian nation 1913 is different, with the exception of Russia. However, besides the remaining five European powers, (which have evolved since the London geopolitics of a century ago), today the USA, the current global power, is of the same opinion, although it was not involved in the decision-making in London in 1913.

case of Albania, due to various reasons. The Italians, after the First War, remained in those territories to continue occupation in accordance with this treaty which was not accepted by the Albanians. The discovery of oil by the Austro-Hungarians in Balls in 1917, invoked jealousy in great companies of the USA and Great Britain, which influenced the support towards an independent Albania in 1913, through a series of consequent steps, such as the Congress of Lushnje, the War of Vlora and the murder of the “prime minister” of the Government of Durres, E.P Toptani, the only person among Albanians engaged by pro ANTANTA in the battles in lower Macedonia, along with French and Greek armies” (Alfred Cako, “100 vjet nga Konferenca e Ambasadorëve (29.07.2013).

⁹ For the process of the colonization of Kosovo by Serbia, see: Blerim Reka *E drejta e vetëvendosjes- dimensioni juridiko- ndërkombëtar i problemit të Kosovës*, (Shkup, 1996); Blerim Reka, *The Geopolitics and the Techniques of EU Enlargement*, (Brussels, 2010); See also: Балканските Војни- Историска Читанка 3, (Настава по модерната историја на Југоситочна Европа, CDRSEE, Фондација Институт за Отворено Општество Македонија, Скопје, 2007, стр. 13).

¹⁰ Ibid. p.15

2. One century later: five crucial questions regarding the London Conference of Ambassadors

In the year marking the hundredth anniversary of the conference, we decided to organize this scientific international discussion, aiming to gather local, regional and international scholars and diplomats, to shed light on this historical event which defined (and unfortunately, sealed) the fate of the Albanian nation in the Balkans, throughout the last century.

I believe that during the academic discussion of this conference, we will arrive at the answers to five key questions:

Was this truly a conference, or “an afternoon tea party”?¹¹ (as the British foreign secretary would call it in his memoirs);

Were there diplomatic decisions reached at the conference and if so, what evidence is there to support such a claim? (respectively, are there official minutes from the conference?).¹²

¹¹ Grey E. *Memoires*, Payot, 1927 p.246. According to him, this conference was in fact “a commission of friends, whereas tea and coffee was served until 7 in the evening, and whereas it was decided to support the Christian alliance Greece-Serbia-Montenegro-Bulgaria, to the detriment of the Muslims in Albania”.

¹² Some authors, such as Cako, call upon the “11 points of the conference of London” see Alfred Cako, “100 vjet nga Konferenca e Ambasadorëve (29.07.2013). According to him, these were the 11 points of the London Conference: “1. *Albania is established as an autonomous, independent principality, inheritable by rights, from the predecessors, and ensured by the six Powers. Its independence shall be defined by six Powers.* 2. *Every form of independence between Turkey and Albania is excluded.* 3. *Albania is neutral; its neutrality is guaranteed by six Powers.* 4. *Civil administration and finances of Albania will be performed by an International Commission consisting of delegates from the six Powers and a delegate from Albania.* 5. *The mandate of this commission (KNK) would conclude after 10 years and it could extend, if need arises.* 6. *The Commission would be responsible to draft the detailed organization of all branches of administration in Albania. Within a period of six months, a report would be drafted for the Powers, containing the results and decisions towards the administrative and financial organization.* 7. *Independence would be set in six months. Until the projection and final formation of a national government, the local existing authorities and the gendarmerie would be under the control of KNK.* 8. *Public order and safety would be enforced by an international gendarmerie. This gendarmerie would be under the direction of foreign instructors and officers, who would exercise their command.* 9. *These officers would be selected by the Swedish army.* 10. *The mission of foreign officers and instructors would not be confused with the similar service or the employment of local officers engaged, or not with the gendarmerie.* 11. *The salaries of*

If there were no decisions, was there an international treaty signed by representatives of the six European powers?

If there was such a treaty; it should have entered into force, only after the ratifications by national parliaments of these states, (which, however, never took place).

And finally, even if formally there was evidence of diplomatic decisions (on Balkan borders), established in 1913¹³, how real can these borders be today? (out of the border regime of the Balkans at that time, only four states in the region (Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria and Greece), were forseen, whereas we now have seven including three new ones; Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

Therefore, the answers to these five key questions during this scientific conference could perhaps further illuminate the London Conference of Ambassadors.

3. The “tea at five” geopolitics: the balance or de-balance of powers at the London Conference

Albanian scholarship tends to approach the London Conference of Ambassadors (1913) from the point of view of the victimization of the Albanians. This approach is correct. It was a conference convoked to end the war between the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans States and to decide about the future status of Albania, which declared its independence on 28 November 1912. This conference would sanction the end of the Ottoman Empire, and would ensure recognition of the state of Albania by six European powers. The final decision of this conference (of: 29.07.1913) recognized Albania as “The autonomous, sovereign and inherited principality under the guarantees of the

these officers would be covered from the income of the country, guaranteed by the Powers” Others like, Danaj, consider that there is no evidence to support the existence of a formal decision of this conference. For British documents on the Albanian matter of that time, see also Muhamet Shatri: “*Dokumente britanike për çështjen shqiptare në konferencën e ambasadorëve në Londër 1912/1913*”, (Instituti i Historisë, Tirana and Toena, Tirana, 2012).

¹³ Formally, the borders of Albania, were not defined by the London Conference, but between the six great powers (France, Great Britain, Italy, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia) with the Florence Protocol, on 17 December 1913); See: Muhamet Shatrii *Dokumente Britanike për Çështjen shqiptare në Konferencën e Ambasadorëve në Londër 1912-1913*, Instituti i Historisë Tiranë – Toena, Tiranë, 2012.

six powers"; corrected the initial recognized status of Albania as proposed at the beginning of the conference, (on: 7.12.1912), as a state "under Ottoman Porte".¹⁴ So, the London Conference of Ambassadors internationally recognized the new state of Albania, (as the first collective international recognition). But, this recognition required the payment of a high price: Albania as a state was recognized not in the entire national territory inhabited by Albanians. It was a divided recognition of the new state.

Contravening the balance of powers, the basic principle of international relations, the London Conference created the opposite: a geopolitical imbalance in the Balkans, by recognizing a small Albania and establishing a great Serbia. As Aristotle said: "The worst form of inequality is to try to make unequal things equal". Convened after the declaration of Albania's independence (in order to define its international status), as time passed it became a conference of Albania's mutilation¹⁵. Or, as British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey described in his memoirs: *"We defined nothing, not even the details of Albanian borders... Serbia and Montenegro wished to take some regions of Albania, as part of the war bargain.."*¹⁶

That international decision on the borders of Albania was taken without the presence of Albanian representatives, because the secretariat of the London Conference of Ambassadors prohibited the delegation of the Government of Albania from officially taking part at the Conference table.¹⁷ So, Albania's future was decided outside of Albania without Albanians.

The granting of Kosovo to Serbia was compensation for not allowing Serbia (Russia) an exit to the Adriatic sea. How artificial these diplomatic border carvings were can best be proven by the paradoxal consequence of the London Conference of 1913: Albania remained bordered by Albanians. No other European state has its own people on the other side of all its borders. As

¹⁴ Paskal Milo, *Politika e Jashtme e Shqipërisë 1912-1939*, Toena, Tiranë, 2013, f.55

¹⁵ This conference began its work in St James Palace in London on 17 December 1912 and concluded on 29 July of the same year. See more: Mehdi Frasheri *Kujtimet (Vitet 1913-1933)*, Tiranë, 2005; Valentina Duka, *Histori e Shqipërisë 1912-2000*, Tiranë, 2007

¹⁶ Grey E. "Memoires", Payot, 1927 p.246; see also: Muhamet Shattri *Dokumente Britanike për Çështjen shqiptare në Konferencën e Ambasadorëve në Londër 1912-1913*, Instituti I Historisë Tiranë – Toena, Tiranë, 2012

¹⁷ Paskal Milo, *Politika e Jashtme e Shqipërisë 1913-1939*, Toena, Tiranë, 2013, f. 40.

the British Ambassador at St. Petersburg wrote: “based on ethnic principles, Serbia has no right to request a part of Albania”.¹⁸

Nevertheless, our task at this conference today is not to undertake political decisions. Neither is it to change or remove borders. Rather, it is to scientifically shed light on the decisions undertaken a century ago, in light of the realities at the beginning of the 21st century when borders in Europe have become relative. Why are the borders of the Balkans not relative as well? After one century, the borders have not become less significant in the Western Balkans, and still remain the key threat to regional stability.

The renowned historical personality, the American President John Kennedy said:

“Geography has made us neighbors.

History has made us friends.

Economics has made us partners, and necessity has made us allies.

Those whom God has so joined together, let no man put asunder”..

¹⁸ F.O., (Doc. No.31), quoted by Muhamet Shattri: *Dokumente Britanike për Çështjen shqiptare në Konferencën e Ambasadorëve në Londër 1912-1913*, Instituti I Historisë Tiranë – Toena, Tiranë, 2012

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