

Skender Asani & Mehmet Prishtina

THE ALBANIAN QUESTION AT THE LONDON CONFERENCE OF AMBASSADORS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BULGARIAN DIPLOMACY

DOI: [10.2478/seeur-2014-0014](https://doi.org/10.2478/seeur-2014-0014)

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century - and particularly the first decade of the twentieth century - Bulgarian diplomacy focused its commitments in two directions. First it fought two major projects in Serbia and Greece ('Greater Serbia' and 'Megali Idea') while the other commitment focused on the objectives of state policy in following the developments of the Albanian Question, which was directly related to the revision of the Berlin Congress decisions. These decisions had divided the Bulgaria of San Stefano into three parts: vassal Bulgaria, the eastern autonomy of Rumelia and Macedonia-Edirne, which remained within the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Empire¹. Given the premise that the Macedonian part in itself encompassed ethnic Albanian lands, and that the Albanians were considered the oldest people in the Balkans², but also the weakest side when compared to Serbia and Greece, Bulgarian diplomacy was very interested in following the diplomatic developments of the Great Powers regarding the Albanian question in the Balkans.

During the last period of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, Bulgarian diplomacy took the position that in order to resolve ethnic disputes between Albanians and Bulgarians, an undeniable, unpleasant and constitutional principle should apply, the principle of majority.

¹ Ив. Ев. Гешювъ, Балкансюиятъ Сѣюзъ – Спомени и Документи, София, 1915, 5

² Some historians claim that Albanians are the descendants of the old Pelasgians, others of old Illyrians, Epirotes or Ligurians. In general, all historians agree that Albanians are the oldest inhabitants of the Balkans; Дипломатъ, Албанското Възраждане, София, 1909, 3.

The application of this principle would imply that Bulgaria would get all the areas which were populated by Bulgarian majority entities, with all regions populated by Albanians falling within the Albanian national sphere. The chances for a Albanian - Bulgarian conflict would be eliminated if such an agreement was reached in a humanitarian and peaceful manner (it is self-explanatory that a meeting to argue about bilateral victims that would emerge from the need to give account for the natural geographical boundaries would not take place).

At that time, Bulgarian diplomacy considered that Albanians cannot but agree with this rational proposal due to the limited mutual options in areas of national settlement, because, not only was this a very fair solution and the only acceptable one, but also because, they were weaker than the Bulgarians (by total population), and they would need Bulgarian help to gain their national freedom. The Albanians were reliant on this need for assistance from the Bulgarians, because they would have to fight on four fronts: against the Young Turks - on the whole border, against the Greeks - in Epirus, against the Serbs and Montenegrins in Kosovo Polje and Northern Albania and against the Greek Bishopric in Southeast Albania.³

Information was delivered through Bulgarian diplomatic circles on diplomatic calculations of Balkan states about a possible crisis that would result from the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. For this purpose, the prime ministers of Serbia and Bulgaria, Gueshov and Milovanovic, met on 28 October 1911 in Sofia. At this meeting they discussed, among other things, the proposal of Count Aehrenthal, who had lost all hope for the recovery of the Ottoman Empire and for this reason, to calm the Balkans, considered the formation of an autonomous Albanian state indispensable. In the meeting Prime Minister Milovanovic argued that he considered the Count's proposal to be very dangerous, because he foresaw the inclusion of the Monastir and Kosovo Vilayets into the new state, and having Albanians as neighbors was considered by Balkan Slavs as a serious risk to them. For this reason, Milovanovic proposed to his colleague Gueshov, the division of the territories inhabited by Albanians. The southern parts of Albania and Macedonia would be given to Greece; the northeastern part along the land line Bregalnica-Veles-Durres would be given to Serbia, while the rest would be given to Bulgaria. Prime Minister Gueshov responded with diplomatic language to this proposal, stating that these issues needed further discussion.⁴ Meanwhile, various

³ Дипломатъ, Албанското Възраждане, София, 1909.

⁴ Regarding the Balkan crisis, Bulgaria held two political positions; on one hand it wanted to be included in talks to create the Balkan alliance and on the other not to ruin

political circles in Bulgaria declared that should Skopje be granted to the Serbs during the negotiations, Bulgaria would lose the key to Macedonia.⁵

In this regard, the Bulgarian diplomacy often delivered concrete proposals through the comprehensive Bulgarian press to calm the situation in the Balkans and avoid a possible war, which could only be averted if Macedonia gained autonomy. However, it should be noted that this could have been achieved only if Albania would also have gained the same full autonomy.⁶

During the last period of the Albanian National Renaissance, official and academic policy sources often suggested to the Macedonian population that they should be in solidarity with the demands of the Albanians in order to gain the desired freedom and national self-government, since these developments were in favor of Bulgarian priorities.⁷ Extraordinary activities were conducted also by the Albanian National Movement in Montenegro.⁸ This positive policy towards the Albanian people would change with the involvement of Bulgaria in the Balkan alliance.

Bulgarian diplomacy was in possession of adequate information to expand further the insurgent movement in the summer of 1912. Also, the nationwide spirit against the Young Turk regime, suggested that the Albanian Question be considered as a European problem requiring final resolution.

These events in the ethnic Albanian lands were followed with great interest by Bulgarian diplomacy and which assessed them as very serious, with a deep revolutionary and nationwide character. Protagonists of these events were former members of the Ottoman parliament and leaders of the National

relations with the Albanians until the latter's interests conflicted with Bulgarian interests. This unsustainable policy towards the Albanians was held, because Bulgaria was not fully confident about this alliance; Ив. Ев. Гешювъ, Балкансюиятъ Съюзъ – Спомени и Документи, София, 1915, 14; Румяна Божилова – Боби Бобев, България и Албанският Въпрос в началотона XX В, Исторически преглед, година. XXXVIII, София, 1982, 39; Лубомир Иванов, Бугарската политика спрема Република Македонија, София, 2008, 33 – 35; Андрей Тошев, България и нейните съседи, София, 1943, 180.

⁵ А. Тошев, Страници изъ миналото на сръбско – българските отошения, София, 1941, 30.

⁶ Афтономия на Македония и Албания и воиниете в Балканот, “Македония”, бр.20. София, 29. 02 (12.03) 1912,1; Skender Asani, Shkaqet e kryengritjes shqiptare antiosmane të vitit 1912 sipas burimeve bullgare, “Kosova”, Prishtinë, 2004, 120 – 129.

⁷ Дипломатъ, Албанското Възраждане, София, 1909, 36.

⁸ Страшимир Димитров – Кръстьо Манчев, История на Балканските Народи 1878 - 1918, София, 1975, 364.

Movement, including the former deputy of Pristina, Hasan Prishtina, who was presented in the Bulgarian press as having considerable national virtues and intelligence.⁹ Bulgarian diplomacy was concerned about the entrance of Albanian insurgents into Skopje and paid particular attention to these developments, adding that the goals of an autonomous Albania included its expansion from the Adriatic coast to the left flow of the river Vardar, including Skopje and continuing down to Thessaloniki. These goals of the Albanian National Movement violated the interests of the Balkan states and according to Bulgarian diplomacy these were the reasons for speeding up the process for the formation of the Balkan alliance.¹⁰

At the London Conference of Ambassadors, the Russians were very concerned, because they had invested heavily in the creation of the Balkan Slavic alliance in its efforts to defeat the Ottoman Empire, but after the First Balkan War the Balkan states began to fight for territories amongst themselves. Bulgarians and Greeks were fighting for Thessaloniki, while Serbs and Bulgarians fought for the borderline of Vardar and the borders of Albania. Russian diplomacy was concerned about the conflict between the Balkan states, because information available to them showed that the Austro-Hungarian Empire stimulated the disruption of the Balkan alliance as a key element to increase its influence in the Balkans.¹¹ This problem would reach its climax in the conflict for the territory of Macedonia (the majority of which were territories that belonged to the Vilayets of Monastir and Kosovo, which were inhabited by an Albanian majority), which at the time was the apple of discord between Bulgaria, which regarded it as its territories, and Serbia, and that proved to become the primary reason for the beginning of the Second Balkan War in June 1913.¹²

The London Conference of Ambassadors discussed the borders of Albania. On this occasion, the government of Vlora sent a delegation to London, which in early January 1913 presented to the Conference a memorandum whereby it requested the inclusion of all Albanian-populated areas (Kosovo Vilayet, Monastir, Scutari and Janina) within the borders of Albania. The Greek and

⁹ Движењето в Албанија, “Вардар”, 2 (15) .04, Софија, 1912, 1.

¹⁰ Кирил Коларов. Прѣдъ новата карта на Балканитѣ, Современа Мисль, Софија, година III, X. 1913, 514.

¹¹ В.П.Потемкин, Историја дипломатије – Дипломатија новог века (1872 – 1919), Свеска друга, Београд, 1949, 201; Muhamet Shatri, Dokumente britanike për çështjen shqiptare në Konferencën e Ambasadorëve në Londër 1912 - 1913, dok.441, Tiranë, 2012, 557.

¹² Државен Архив на Република Македонија (më tej ДАРМ), ф.1.17.24/50; Arben Puto, *Historia diplomatike e çështjes shqiptare 1878 – 1926*, Tiranë, 2010, 133 – 134.

Serbo-Montenegrin delegations presented their positions regarding the borders of the future autonomous Albania as well, whereas the Bulgarian delegation declared that Bulgaria's views should be clarified in historical and political aspects.¹³

The Bulgarian delegation suggested to the London Conference of Ambassadors, that in terms of the borders, the decisions of the Conference of Ambassadors of the Great Powers, summoned in Istanbul in 1876 should be taken into account. The 1876 Conference was called aiming to draft a reform plan for Rumelia (the European part of the Ottoman Empire SA MP), and also dealt, inter alia, with the definition of borders of the regions inhabited by Bulgarians. According to the organic regulation plan elaborated by this conference, Bulgaria was divided into two major provinces, one oriental province with Tarnovo as its capital, and the other an occidental province, stretching to the borders of Albania with Sofia as its capital city.

Through this document, Bulgarian diplomacy proposed to the London Conference of Ambassadors that, for the definition of borders of Albania, the decisions of the Treaty of San Stefano, based upon which the Principality of Bulgaria's border with Albania was determined in accordance with decisions of the Istanbul Conference should be taken into account. According to their proposal, the border should begin at the point where the Veleshta and the Drin i Zi river meet and continue along this river to the eastern border on the west of Ohrid, followed by Starova towards the Gramos mountain.

Bulgarian diplomacy wanted the border issue and that of the future autonomous Albania, opened at the meeting of Ambassadors of the Great Powers who had also taken part in the Constantinople Conference, to be determined according to the conclusions of the latter. In fact, Bulgarian diplomacy wanted to reconfirm the decisions of the Constantinople Conference of 1876, through which Bulgarian expansionist goals which included territories clearly inhabited by Albanians would be realized.

After being informed about the Albanian government's memorandum on the issue of borders, the Bulgarian delegation decided to address the ambassadors participating in the conference through diplomatic papers to oppose the details presented in the memorandum of the Albanian government. The Bulgarians argued that:

¹³ ДАРМ, МФ – 464, Notice se la delegation bulgare sur la question des frontieres de L'Albanie.

"The authors of this document have allowed themselves to lay claim to virtually the entire western Macedonia. These claims even violate the principles on which Albanian autonomy was formed - the principle of nations. Indeed, Albanian patriots would like to include in the future Albania the cities of Skopje and Monastir together with territories which reach to the city of Prilep and Veles!"

Bulgarian diplomacy assessed that the claims of the Albanian delegation were unrealistic, and every other border would not only be contrary to law and equity, but would also create abnormal relations between autonomous Albania and its neighbors. The Bulgarian population in regions bordering Albania would never be subject to a solution that included their homes becoming part of the future Albania, something that had a cruel outcome in the past. Among other things, it was claimed in this note that the Bulgarian nation, which in the current war sacrificed people and money resulting in the creation of an autonomous Albania, could not accept a similar injustice.

From this document it is clear that Bulgarian diplomacy, on issues related to borders, shared the same claims as the other states of the Balkan alliance in terms of the annexation of territories inhabited by Albanians and the Bulgarians hoped to carry out their major projects. In its final paragraphs the Bulgarian delegation's note emphasized that:

"Bulgaria wants to establish good neighborly and friendly relations with the future Albania. Therefore, incorporation within Albania of parts of Bulgarian lands would be contrary to this aim. This is also the reason why we remain hopeful that the Ambassadors of the Great Powers will fulfill a new duty of equality and political maturity, assuming the same principles which formed the basis of their work in the Constantinople Conference".

In the First and Second Balkan War, Serbia had managed to give life to the "Greater Serbia" project of Ilija Garašanin. The Great Powers, who wanted to avoid a comprehensive European war, were also in favor of this project. In this regard, they accepted the status quo in the field, which included violent displacement of the Albanian population from its ethnic territories. This explains why in the eastern Albanian regions an anti-Serb uprising erupted in September 1913, that gained a significant following and kept the Serbian authorities worried, because Serbia wanted to keep the territories it had gained on the field. Serbia relied on the support it had from Russia which helped confirm Serbian occupation of the Albanian territories at the London Conference of Ambassadors.

At the beginning of the London Conference of Ambassadors, Bulgarian diplomacy aimed at the realization of its territorial claims in the Vilayets of

Monastir and Kosovo, relying on the Russians. As a result of the Bucharest Agreement of 10 August 1913, not only did Serbia take the disputed territory which it had been offered as part of the Balkan Alliance, but Greece received a large part of Bulgarian territory. After the Second Balkan War, the Bulgarians sought an alliance with the Albanians against Serbia and Greece, suggesting that they are willing to compromise with ethnic Albanians concerning borders, while the Serbs wanted to impose the decisions of the Bucharest Agreement, where the Bulgarians had made major concessions in terms of Albanian-inhabited territories.¹⁴

Since Serbia had triumphed in the Second Balkan War, in addition to cementing its position at the London Conference of Ambassadors, it also opened the way for realizing its century-long goals of occupying the valley along the river Vardar establishing a border with Greece. Not only were the eastern territories inhabited by Albanians threatened, and Austro-Hungarian influence in the Balkans weakened by these goals, but Bulgaria's hopes to implement the project of San Stefano would also be set back.¹⁵ In order to push its claims in Macedonia, the government in Sofia actively supported the nationalist Macedonian movement, which aimed for a unification of Macedonia with Bulgaria. The war against Serbia was the first aim of this alliance. In order to strengthen this alliance as much as possible, Bulgaria sought to expand its force by recruiting Albanians who were promised the return of the ethnic Albanian territories of the Vilayets of Monastir and Kosovo. The Albanians were willing to unite with any forces opposing Serbia.¹⁶

At this time, the Serbs assumed that since the beginning of the Balkan crisis, Austria-Hungary feared this issue could take on Pan-European dimensions, and in such case it would suffer the greatest damage. Serbia also believed that during this period Austria-Hungary used the decisions of the Great Powers for its own goals and committed itself to divide the Balkan Alliance by seeking the independence of Albania. The mobilization of Albanians on borders played into the hands of Austria-Hungary, and it used this as an excuse to nullify previous decisions of the London Conference of Ambassadors. The newspaper "Политика" ("Politika") reprinted French newspapers articles reporting from Vlora which reported on the commitment of Austria-Hungary and Italy to change the borders in favor of Serbia and

¹⁴ Државен Архив на Република Македонија (hereinafter ДАРМ), ф.1.17.24/50

¹⁵ В.П.Потемкин, Историја дипломатије – Дипломатија новог века (1872 – 1919), Свеска друга, Београд, 1949,204 – 206.

¹⁶ Paskal Milo, *Politika E Jashtme e Shqipërisë I*, Tiranë, 2013,162.

Montenegro.¹⁷ The Great Powers were careful that the Balkan crisis not gain a European dimension, because they were not ready for a comprehensive war and therefore were ready to accept the situation created in the Balkans.

The Albanian uprising was directed against Serbia and Montenegro, which annexed territories inhabited by Albanians through the decisions of the London Conference of Ambassadors. Albanian insurgents were well armed with Mausers, machine guns and large caliber cannons, which, according to Serbian military authorities, indicated that Austria and Italy were providing Albanians with arms.¹⁸

According to information possessed by the newspaper "Политика" ("Politika"), the top Bulgarian military officer Markov went to Durrës as a representative of the Bulgarian government in order to enter into negotiations with the leaders of the uprising. Based on information from the newspaper "Политика" ("Politika"), Markov promised the Albanians the support of the Kingdom of Bulgaria, if they rose against Serbia, Greece and Montenegro. The officer promised the Albanians that Bulgaria would supply the Albanian state with a large amount of weapons. Bulgaria would also send heavy artillery and instructors to train the Albanian army in the use of cannons and machine guns. Markov met with many leaders of the Albanian insurgency and attempted to win over Esad Pasha.¹⁹ According to information from a newspaper in Vlora, a cooperation agreement was signed between VMRO and Isa Boletini and Bajram Curri. It was further stated that Jane Sandanski had managed to win over these two Albanian leaders in the war against Serbia and Montenegro.²⁰

In late November 1913, the representative of Vienna in Sofia was authorized to declare to the Bulgarian authorities that, it was in the interest of Bulgaria, to not provide support for maneuvers directed against the person of Prince Wied, and that it had a natural interest for Albania to become a factor to be acknowledged in the future in the Balkans. In early December, Vienna and Rome also made demarches to Prime Minister Radoslavov and the foreign minister to cease stimulating the actions of armed Albanian-Bulgarian groups.²¹

¹⁷ Вести из Албаније, "Политика", бр.3465, 05.09.1913, Београд, 1913, 3.

¹⁸ Врење у Албанији, "Политика", бр.3466, 06.09.1913, Београд, 1913, 1.

¹⁹ Врење у Албанији, "Политика", бр.3466, 06.09.1913, Београд, 1913, 1

²⁰ Извештај Политици, "Политика", бр.3466, 06.09.1913, Београд, 1913, 1

²¹ Paskal Milo, *Politika E Jashtme e Shqipërisë I, Tiranë*, 2013, 163.

Skender Asani is Director of the Institute of Spiritual and Cultural Heritage of Albanians in Skopje.