


<p><b>THE ADMISSION OF ALBANIA TO THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS</b></p>		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>History</b></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> League of Nations, Albania, independence, oil concessions, admission, etc.</p>
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**Abstract**

The aim of this research is to bring to the public one of the most significant moments in the history of modern Albania. At the end of World War I the winning powers (Entente Allies) had to set up a new world order. For this purpose a Peace Conference was convened in Paris in January 1919. But, Albania was not included in new European projects, since its independence and territorial integrity was not respected. At the same time a new international organization – League of Nations – emerged. The League of Nations was an international organization whose mission was to maintain peace and collective security around the world. Therefore, the Albanian political elite viewed admission to the League as their best hope to preserve Albania. Albania's request for admission was rejected on the ground that the political and legal status of Albania had to be confirmed. In the meantime, news about the discovery of oil resources in Albania attracted the attention of British diplomacy. In exchange for granting a concession for oil exploration and exploitation to a British company, the British government facilitated Albania's admission to the League of Nations. The paper "The Admission of Albania to the League of Nations" aims to elaborate on the circumstances that led to the rejection and then the admission of Albania to the League of Nations, to argue that economic and strategic factors and interests are the main determinants of international policies. Albania's membership in the League was of critical importance for political affirmation, preservation of its independence and territorial integrity. The perspective used in this paper is based on a comparative and chronological approach. This approach combines archival sources with contemporary literature to take a literal interpretation of historical developments.

**Introduction**

The World War I brought the breakdown of the international order, which had been in place for almost a century, leaving any operating leverage behind, which means there were neither a framework for a post conflict resolution and no political actor/institution to uphold international peace. The border disputes produced by the collapsing empires and the need to regulate undefined territories emerged as new problem of international affairs (Aytekin Emre Cavit, 2022, p.1216).

The new circumstances following the end of World War I affected almost all states in Europe. Albania was affected, too. Although during the World War I Albania was not aligned with any of the warring blocs, its territory became an arena of battle between the warring forces. These operations were accompanied by the destruction, looting and burning of settlements, while around 70,000 people died as a result of war, famine and epidemic diseases (Prifti et.al, 2002, p.98). A total anarchy reigned in Albania. The establishment of state institutions that had begun in 1913, and that had been carried out with many difficulties (Meta et.al., 2022, p.198), was interrupted. As a result, relations between residents were regulated according to Albanian customary law (Iseni Arburim & Mikeli, 2023, p.52).

Despite the fact that the war had ended, Albania was still occupied by Entente forces (Italian, French, Serbian and Greek). Their position in Albania was related to the decision of the Supreme Council of the Allies for the Peace Conference to deal with the issue of Albania

(Gurakuqi, 2011, p.16; Milo, 1988, pp.100–101), since the Great Powers did not recognize the independence and territorial integrity of Albania, which they had granted in 1913 (Puto, 2012, p.284).

The decision that the issue of Albania should be addressed at the Peace Conference shows that the Great Powers once again presented the Albanian issue for consideration. This had to do with the territorial integrity of Albania and the determination of its legal status (Dibra, 2005, pp.36–37).

The primary importance for Great Britain and France, as two decision-making powers at the Conference, was the realization of the promises given to Italy under the London Treaty of 1915,\* which provided for the division of Albania between the Entente allies: Italy, Serbia and Greece (Goldstein, 2001, pp.143–144). The Albanian delegation openly admitted that Albania was without allies and too weak to defend its interests at the Peace Conference (Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, 1919, p.66). The Conference treated Albania as a bargaining chip between the interests of the Great Powers and their Balkan allies. Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes claimed finally some northern areas of Albania, while Greece claimed Gjirokaster and Korca, two cities in south of Albania (Dervishi, 2020, p.124). Italian claims in the Balkans, which were based on the London Treaty of 1915, clashed with those of the Balkan states vis-à-vis Albania, and thus a situation of political conflict was created and named the “Adriatic Issue”. In order to resolve this issue, the Great Powers approved the Memorandum of 9 December 1919. This provided recognition of Albania's independence under the Italian mandate, - a violation of Albania's political and territorial integrity (Çami & Verli, 2015, p.670; Šišić, 1920, pp.49–50). But this solution did not satisfy the interests of the conflicting parties. Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, were left unsatisfied. Due to Italian pressure and, in the alternative, the Secret Treaty of London's implementation, as well as the dissatisfaction of the Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom, France and Great Britain took the initiative to solve the “Adriatic Question” through the partition of Albania. In this way, France and Great Britain presented on 13 January 1920 the Memorandum for the settlement of the “Adriatic Issue”. In the framework of the solution of the Italian-Kingdom SCS problem, Fiume was given to Italy, while in exchange Albania was divided into three parts: Vlora was given to Italy, Shkodra and some northern territories were given to the Kingdom of SCS, while Korça and Gjirokastra were given to Greece (*Bashkimi i Kombit*, 1944, pp.3–4; Šišić, 1920, p.83). This solution was rejected by the Kingdom of SCS due to internal disagreements (Krizman, 1975, pp.26–27; Vinaver, 1985, p. 16).

During the efforts to find a solution to the Adriatic Question, Britain and France had not consulted the United States of America at all. They tried to find solutions that would benefit their interests and put the USA in the lead. This was even more apparent when the secret agreements

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\*In April 1915, Great Britain, France and Russia signed the Secret Treaty of London. This treaty rewarded Italy with coastal cities in the north and south Adriatic. It also provided a possible protectorate over Albania. ...see further:(Temperley H. W. Y, 1921, pp. 384–391)

contradicted Wilson's principles of open negotiation. Therefore, during the month of February, the USA government did not agree with the schemes for the settlement of the Adriatic Question. Its main objection was the splitting of Albania into three parts. Under US pressure, on 26 February 1920, the British and French prime ministers withdrew from their positions. Finally, on 6 March 1920, Wilson insisted on the development of direct Italian-Kingdom SCS talks for the solution of the Adriatic Question, based on the agreement of 9 December 1919 (Dibra, 2005, p.90). Wilson's note excluded the inclusion of the Albanian issue in the Italian-Kingdom SCS talks. Wilson declared that: *"He would not accept any plan that would give the Kingdom of SCS land compensation in the northern part of Albania for what it would take elsewhere"* (Stavrianos L.S., 2000, pp.712–713).

The developments at the Peace Conference and the USA support for Albania encouraged the Albanian political elite in search of a diplomatic solution for the territorial integrity of Albania. In this way, the Albanian political elite turned their attention towards the League of Nations, an international institution formed on 10 January 1920 at the Paris Peace Conference. In fact, the idea for the creation of the League of Nations originated from President Wilson's 14 points presented to the US Senate. After the end of World War I, these points were to be implemented to achieve a new world order. Through these points, President Wilson envisioned a world in which peace, economic freedom, reduction of armaments, open negotiations, self-determination of people (Irish, 2022, p.1694) and cooperation of nations would prevail to guarantee political independence and territorial integrity alike for large and small states (Fisanov et.al., 2022, p.147; Makmillan, 2006, pp.555–557). So, in other words, the aim of the new world order instituted by the League of Nations were "to promote international cooperation and to achieve peace and security" and these aims were to be achieved: by acceptance of obligations not to resort the war; by prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations; by the firm establishment of the understanding of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments; and by maintenance of justice and respect to all treaty obligations in the dealings of the organized people with one other (Tsaugorias, 2020, pp.4–5).

The creation of the League of Nations marked a new era in multilateral cooperation. The Convention required the League's members to solve problems between them peacefully and in accordance with international law. This is done by respecting each other's political independence and territorial integrity (Degtyarev & Yevhen, 2019, p.96) Being aware of the dangers faced during the proceedings of the Peace Conference in terms of its existence, and since the Albanian question had not been resolved at this instance, the Albanian government turned to the League of Nations in the hope of preserving territorial integrity and its independence, especially when some territories in the north and northeast were still occupied by military forces of the Kingdom of SCS, and Greek military forces in the south. Membership in this organization was considered by the Albanian government as a guarantee for a fairer treatment of Albania's status and borders at the decision-making tables of the Great Powers. She took advantage of the fact that on 15 November 1920, the first session of the Assembly of the League of Nations would open in Geneva,

Switzerland. To enter into the discussion agenda as early as 12 October 1920, the head of the Albanian delegation at the Peace Conference, Pandeli Evangjeli, addressed a letter to the Secretary General of the League of Nations, Sir Eric Drummond, in which, on behalf of the Albanian people, he requested that Albania be accepted as a member of the League of Nations and to participate in the first session of the Assembly (Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, 1921b, p.136; Swire, 2005, p.273).

Following the procedures foreseen for the membership of the applying states, the Secretariat of the League of Nations, through a note dated 20 October 1920, forwarded to Albania the basic requirements that had to be met. In this note, which was sent on behalf of the Secretary General, the Albanian government was required to meet the conditions outlined by Article 1 of the Convention: “*every self-governing state, dominion or colony named which does not appear in the Annex, may become a member of the League of Nations if voted in favour by two-thirds of the Assembly, with the condition of providing clear guarantees of respect for international laws and regulations, prescribed by the League of Nations, in understanding of the military, naval, aviation and armament forces*” (*Application of Albania for Admission to League of Nations – Memorandum by the Secretary General*, 1921, p.2). In other words, the Albanian government was expected to provide arguments for the organization and character of the Albanian state, which would become more specific as the debate continued. The Albanian government was required to submit to the Secretariat of the League of Nations: (1) authentic copies of the Declaration of Independence together with accompanying acts, and (2) authentic documents proving that other countries had recognized Albania *de jure* or *de facto* (*Application of Albania for Admission to League of Nations – Memorandum by the Secretary General*, 1921, p.2).

In response to the above-mentioned request, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, Mehmet Konica, sent an informative note to the Secretary of the League of Nations, Sir Eric Drummond, dated 8 November 1920, through which he informed him about the political and legal status. He cited that Albania was declared a state by the London Conference in the year 1913. Its independence was recognized by the powers of the time, the authentic acts of which will be deposited at the League of Nations by Fan Noli, the special emissary of the Albanian government.

The Albanian government also provided the requested data related to Albania’s security system or its military forces, as conditions in Article 1 of the Convention. Since Albania did not possess naval and air military formations, it had at its disposal a gendarmerie force with a total number of 9,800 gendarmes, while in the future it envisioned the construction of a military system with no more than 15,000 soldiers, the possession of several ships to deter smuggling at sea and some aircraft for postal services (*Application of Albania for Admission to League of Nations – Memorandum by the Secretary General*, 1921, p.5).

Although the first session of the Assembly of the League of Nations started on 15 November 1920, the Albanian government managed to deposit the required documentation some

days later due to communication problems. In order to prove that Albania was declared a state by the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1913 and to submit other legal acts related to its status, the Albanian government sent a special delegation headed by Fan Noli to Geneva. From this moment, the entire handling of the issue of Albania's international status passed from the hands of the Albanian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference, to the hands of the special delegation to the League of Nations. The first thing this delegation did upon arriving in Geneva was to submit the required documents to the Secretariat of the League. Extracts from the international acts of 1913-1914 were presented: the Treaty of London of 1913, the Decision of the Conference of Ambassadors of 29 July 1913, and the Organic Status of Albania of April 1914 (Dibra, 2005, pp.126–127). In addition to the deposition of these documents, Fan Noli through a letter that was addressed to Lord Cecil, chairman of the session dealing with membership in the League of Nations, argued that: (1) the government of Albania was recognized *de jure* in 1914 by the six Great European Powers and the Balkan states such as Romania, Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria, which had established their regular diplomatic representatives in Durres. The Government of Albania had reached several agreements with the governments of Italy, Serbia and Greece, which meant *de facto* recognition of Albania; (2) Albania's borders were established by the London Conference in 1913 and were defined in detail by the International Boundary Commission, which were recognized by the six Great Powers; (3) Albania as a self-governing state had a parliament, a government and a Regency Council. In the end, Noli gave guarantees that the Albanian government would respect all international laws (*Application of Albania for Admission to League of Nations – Memorandum by the Secretary General*, 1921, pp.22–25).

The documentation submitted by Albania was elaborated by the Fifth Sub-Committee at the League's session held on 8 December 1920. Robert Cecil (South Africa), chairman of the second sub-committee of the fifth committee of the Assembly, presented the report to the Assembly regarding the request of Albania. He stated that: *"The Italian government has given up its rights over Albania, but the status of this country has not yet been determined by the powers. The Albanian government has not been recognized either de jure or de facto by any power. Moreover, Albania's borders are not defined by any treaty or international agreement"* (*Journal of the First Assembly of the League of Nations*, 1920, p.174). At the end, Robert Cecil proposed Albania's admission to the League of Nations. The representative of France, Mr. Vivian, did not agree with Lord Cecil. He also did not recognize the agreements of 1913-1914 and therefore requested that the recognition of Albania be postponed until a new international agreement would determine the international status of Albania. The representatives of Italy, China, and the Kingdom of SCS also voted in favour of this proposal. In the end, with 13 votes in favour of Vivian's proposal, the sub-committee decided that: *"...the acceptance of Albania should be postponed until the international status of the state is clearly defined"* (Bland & Price, 1986, p.13).

Meanwhile, in order to facilitate Albania's admission to the League of Nations, the Albanian Society in London was also engaged. Its membership included prominent figures in English politics, such as Colonel Aubrey Herbert. In a letter that this society addressed to the

League of Nations, published in one of the London newspapers on 10 November 1920 it was emphasized that the departure of the Italian military forces from Albania marked the first step towards peace in the Balkans. A similar act would also have to be followed by the SCS Kingdom and Greece. This is because both countries linked the occupation of part of the Albanian territory in the north and south with the Italian occupation of Vlora. The governments of both countries had stated that the situation could change if Italy left Albania (Destani & Tomes, 2012, p.380). Colonel Herbert also wrote to Lord Cecil on 29 November 1920. In this letter, he asserted “*From the point of view of the League, the membership of Estonia, Latvia, etc., may be opposed for many reasons. These countries can be attacked by Russia, which is not in the League. However, these objections do not apply to Albania, which is surrounded by states that are members of the League*” (Destani & Tomes, 2012, p.381).

While Albania’s request was being considered by the League of Nations, news about the existence of oil resources in Albania had already been confirmed. A special interest in these sources had been shown by the British government. This is because in this way the interests of the British navy could be met in the Mediterranean, instead of bringing them from Iran 7,000 miles away (Vllamasi, 2012, pp.318–320). The British government’s interest was shown as early as March 1920, when the British government sent a “special mission” to Albania headed by Sir Harry Eyres, who would later hold the post of British minister in Albania. In talks with the Albanian Prime Minister Iliaz Vrioni, Eyres brought the message that the British government would ensure Albania's admission to the League of Nations, in case the Albanian government would give the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (AP) the exclusive right for the exploration of Albanian minerals on an area of 200,000 ha, and, subsequently, to exploit oil in Albania on an area of 50,000 ha. In this period, the Albanian government had neither experts nor knowledge or technology for oil, therefore it considered the existence of oil a great fortune. The Albanian government accepted and a preliminary agreement was reached (Kadria, 2022, p.123).

Albania was not only regarded as a stone in the diplomatic game, but as a sphere of direct and immediate interest, especially when Italy and the Kingdom of the SCS clashed in Albania. An Albanian state recognized in the international arena and accepted in the League of Nations would extinguish the territorial claims of the SCS Kingdom, while on the other hand it would serve as a shock absorber for the Italian-Yugoslav problem (Dibra, 1998, p.70; *The Edinburg Evening News*, 1920, p.7).

Another argument that prompted the shift of Britain’s and France’s attitude towards Albania was the political changes in Greece, namely the fall of Prime Minister Venizelos. In the plebiscite organized on 5 December 1920, King Constantine I, who was the brother-in-law of German Emperor Wilhelm II and was known for his pro-German attitude, returned to power. The disagreement between King Constantine I and Prime Minister Venizelos concerned Greece’s participation in the First World War. Greece had abandoned its policy of neutrality when Britain and France supported Prime Minister Venizelos. France and Britain did not support King

Constantine, and consequently revised their support for Greece's territorial expansion (Jelavich, 1983, Vol. II, p.172).

Not being openly identified with supporting Albania, in order to remain friendly with the Allies, the Foreign Office instructed representatives of its dominions to push forward Albania's admission to the League of Nations. The role of the Dominions highlighted the conflicting principles in British foreign policy. British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon declared "*we are at one moment maintaining the position that the British Empire, as to its foreign policy is one; at a moment we claim a separate and entirely independent position for each Dominion in the important sphere of foreign policy presented by the League of Nations*" (Goldsten & McKercher, 2005, p.188).

On 17 December 1920, at the plenary session of the Assembly, Lord Robert Cecil, N.W. Ravel and Saiyid Ali Imam, representing South Africa, Canada and India, which were British dominions, supported the Albanian claim. Lord Cecil declared that Albania's status was fully compatible with immediate admission to the League of Nations, and rejected the opposing theses that were heard during the Fifth Sub-Committee meeting. The secret treaties of the war and the bargains that were made behind the scenes of the Peace Conference remained only on paper. They did not affect Albania's position as a recognized international state (Puto, 2009, p.289).

In support of the claims of the dominions, the British delegate Herbert Albert Fisher stated that his delegation had made a new and serious study of Albania's position. He had decided to support its immediate accession. Britain had a strong influence among League members, and its proposal was also supported this time by France and Italy. The final vote was sensational. With 35 votes in favour and 7 abstentions, none against, Albania was accepted as a member of the League of Nations. That same day, on 17 December 1920, the Albanian delegation was invited to take a seat at the session of 18 December (Arkivi Qendror Shtetëror, 1921a, p.13). In this way, Albania became the first country to join the international organization without first securing diplomatic recognition (Destani & Tomes, 2012, pp.382–383).

Albania's membership in the League of Nations was of great importance for its political future. First, the recognition of Albania as an independent and sovereign state was reaffirmed; secondly, the admission constituted an act of collective recognition of the government in power, which enabled the establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries, and thirdly, it opened the way to solving problems with neighbours.

## Conclusion

At the end of the First World War, the Great Powers disputed the political independence and territorial integrity of Albania on the grounds of not recognizing the acts they had signed during the years 1913-1914. The basis of these arguments lay in the promises that the allies of the Entente had given to Italy in 1915 to side with it during the First World War. But the economic

and strategic interests of the powers are always the diplomatic determinants of the fate of small nations. As one of the main powers of the Entente, Great Britain facilitated Albania's membership in the League of Nations, in exchange for oil concessions that were very significant for its navy. Albania's membership marked for Britain the configuration of its policy for the Balkans. This model was to use Albania as a buffer between Italy and the Kingdom of SCS to cushion the political balance in the Balkans. On the other hand, Albania's membership in League of Nations was of critical importance for its political future. First, the recognition of Albania as an independent and sovereign state was reaffirmed; secondly, this act constituted an act of collective recognition of the government in power, which enabled the establishment of diplomatic relations with other countries, and thirdly, it opened the way to solving problems with neighbours.

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