



The Durrës Government and its Foreign Policy in Defense of the National Cause

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Abstract

This paper examines the efforts of Albanian patriots to establish a national government following the Congress of Durrës, with the primary goal of defending the Albanian national cause. The government formed at Durrës was tasked with safeguarding the territorial integrity of Albania, both within its current borders and through the reclamation of lands lost after 1913. Drawing on historical documents and testimonies from key Albanian and foreign figures involved in these events, the paper provides a comprehensive account of the political struggle to secure Albania's sovereignty. The analysis includes an exploration of the government's program, which aimed to preserve independence, address border issues, and ensure Albania's representation at the Peace Conference. Ultimately, this paper argues that the actions of the Durrës government were pivotal in shaping the national discourse on Albanian territorial integrity and sovereignty, especially during the critical negotiations of the Peace Conference.

Keywords: Durrës government, Albanian issue, Albanian patriots, territorial integrity, Peace Conference

1. Introduction

World War I left Albania divided into several occupied zones, creating significant challenges for the Albanian National Movement. In the absence of a unified leadership, patriotic circles both within Albania and in the diaspora continued to protest against the expansionist aims of neighboring states that threatened Albanian territory.

With the conclusion of World War I, the need for a central Albanian government became urgent. Italy's public support for Albania's independence provided a potential opportunity to establish such a government.¹ However, the efforts to create a national government were complicated by suspicions that this move might be coordinated with Italian interests. "Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Baron Sonino, and his government initially considered facilitating the formation of an Albanian government, inviting key political figures—Myfid Libohova, Mehmed Konica, Turhan Pasha, and Dr. Turtulli—to discuss this matter. Konica and Libohova were then tasked with traveling to Albania to form the government."²

For the establishment of a legitimate Albanian government, a pan-Albanian congress was deemed necessary.

¹ "The natural consequences of the Gjirokaštër Proclamation on June 3, 1917, and its reiteration on October 20, 1918, by General Ferrero required the establishment of a Provisional Albanian Government, which would present itself before the Peace Conference and have the right to request protection for the rights sought by neighboring states." Selenica, Teki., *Albania in 1927*, Tirana, 1928, pp. 54-55.

² Selenica.T., *op. cit.*, fq.55

However, many contemporary political actors observed that Italy was attempting to influence the direction of the Congress of Durrës to align with its interests. *"Albanian patriots discussed extensively the need to deliberate and determine the directions of national policy. The Italians hurriedly brought their supporters from both northern and southern Albania to Durrës in an effort to control the outcome."* Eventually, Italy became wary of the potential independence of the Albanian government and its ability to adopt policies that would not align with Italian interests. For this reason, *"Fearing diplomatic complications, Baron Sonino instructed the Italian delegates in Albania to prevent the formation of a government and instead propose the creation of a national council."* In this way, Italy sought to reduce the government to an adjunct body that would adapt and operate according to Italian political interests. During the proceedings of the Congress of Durrës, the decisions made took on a national character, independent of Italian control. Its decisions took on a national character, independent of Italian demands. On December 25, 1918, the Congress formally declared the establishment of a government and appointed a delegation to represent Albania at the Peace Conference in Paris, marking a significant step in Albania's assertion of its national sovereignty.

2. Results

After the end of World War I, Albanian patriotic circles sought to align the country with one of the victorious powers to secure its future. Among the options, many believed that support from Italy was crucial for Albania's position in the post-war political landscape. Some prominent figures within the Albanian government and national movement saw Italy as the key to Albania's survival and independence. As one contemporary observer noted, *"The formation of this new government marks the 'de facto' reintegration of Albania as an important factor in Balkan affairs. On the other hand, the creation of the new government indicates that Italy, for its part, has ultimately pursued a policy of restoring Albania as an independent state, and for this, Albanians should be grateful to Rome."*

Given Italy's status as a victorious power, many Albanian patriots believed that relying on Italian support would provide Albania with a strong voice in international affairs, particularly in defending the country's sovereignty. *"We, from the two evils, accepted the lesser one, preferring Italian occupation over that of the Serbs, and thus we encouraged the Italians to quickly seize the territory before the Serbs, as all Albanians would assist them."* This pragmatic approach reflects the difficult choices faced by Albanian patriots in the context of competing regional powers, where aligning with Italy seemed the lesser of two evils to ensure Albania's independence.

Many activists of the Albanian cause, however, viewed reliance on Italy as a potential threat to the country's sovereignty. Despite the proposals put forward by key figures such as Konica and Libohova, the Congress of Durrës, held on December 25, 1917, *"decided to establish a provisional government to address the urgent needs of the homeland. The Congress elected Turhan Pasha as the head of this new government, with Preng Bib Dod Pasha serving as the deputy head."* This new government, formed in Durrës, was seen as a continuation of the previous Albanian governments under Ismail Qemali and Prince Wied. Many of its members, including Turhan Pasha, Dr. Turtulli and Gurakuqi, had previously held positions in Albania's governments before World War I. Recognizing the challenges it would face, especially in terms of political opposition, the government issued a statement to address potential distrust among the people: *"Enemies will do their best to undermine your trust in the government, telling you that it is betraying you, and for this reason, you should not recognize it, but rather recognize a foreign one."* Despite these concerns, the actions against the government came more from political rivals than from the general population. At that time, many Albanians were uncertain about where to turn, caught between conflicting pressures and external influences.

The aftermath of World War I and the widespread lack of basic means of survival left little time or energy for the common people to engage with politics. In the political environment of Albania, where power struggles were a constant, the people were often manipulated for political purposes. As one observer noted, *"It was not the common people who decided, but small groups of intellectuals and the upper class who competed in the struggle for a piece of the pie in this or that government."* This power struggle within the political elite, rather than any genuine popular support, drove the formation and direction of the new government.

Amid these tensions, doubts about the legitimacy and intentions of the Durrës government began to grow. Members of the government themselves admitted to being approached by foreign powers, particularly Italy. For instance, Mehdi Frashëri revealed that *"in 1917, he had been invited to Rome and offered an opportunity to go to Switzerland to publish a French-language newspaper promoting Italian policies in Albania."* This exposure to foreign influence further fueled suspicions about the government's autonomy and its potential alignment with Italy's interests.

The history of the Durrës government is marked by the typical dynamics of Albanian politics—jealousy, fierce competition, and factionalism. These internal divisions, combined with the ongoing tug-of-war between powerful foreign

states at the Peace Conference, created a highly unstable political climate. In this context, the Durrës government struggled to navigate the complex landscape of both domestic and international pressures.

After the conclusion of the Congress of Durrës, the newly formed government issued a lengthy proclamation to inform the people of its program and objectives. The proclamation emphasized the government's firm commitment to defending Albania's territorial integrity and hinted at efforts to revise the borders established in 1913. *"This program is clear and understandable to anyone: Albania for the Albanians, with the borders that God has granted, up to where the sweet Albanian language is spoken."*

The government chose the delegation that would represent Albanian interests at the Peace Conference. This government delegation *"was headed by Turhan Pasha, with members including Monsignor Bumçi, Mehmet Konica, Dr. Turtulli, Luigi Gurakuqi, and later joined by Mehdi Frashëri. Father Gjergj Fishta also participated in this delegation as an expert."*

After World War I, while efforts were underway to restore order in Albania, certain regions such as Korça and Vlora remained outside the influence of the Durrës government. The concerns of Albanian patriots were well-founded, as Albania faced growing uncertainty. Despite expectations of being treated as a neutral country in the post-war settlement, the shadows of the Secret Treaty of London began to resurface, threatening Albania's territorial integrity.

Amid these challenges, some Albanian politicians shifted their focus toward the United States, drawn by the ideals of President Wilson's Fourteen Points. The program was seen as a potential path to realizing Albania's long-held aspirations for international recognition and territorial integrity. Just two weeks after the publication of Wilson's points *"Kristo Dako and Mihal Grameno sent a memorandum to the American president." The memorandum was titled: "The Rights and Demands of Albania for Independence and Territorial Integrity."* In this memorandum, Dako and Grameno sought to draw President Wilson's attention to the Albanian issue, highlighting the suffering of the Albanian people throughout history and expressing admiration for American policy. They argued that past efforts to resolve the Balkan question, which ignored the rights of Albanians, had been futile. They wrote: *"Knowing that all efforts made in the past to resolve the Balkan problem, without considering the rights of the Albanian element, were in vain; knowing that the peace following this war will not be stable and lasting if previous injustices continue; knowing the Allies' stance on a final solution; we are fully convinced that the principles of the noble American people will triumph."*

It is important to note that the United States had never expressed significant interest in the Balkans, much less in Albania. While the U.S. played a crucial role in the Allied victory in World War I, and President Wilson was one of the key figures at the Paris Peace Conference, Albania was not a primary concern for American foreign policy. However, pro-American sentiment began to grow, influenced in part by the Albanian diaspora. Albanian immigrants, who admired the democratic values of the United States, believed that American involvement would bring a positive change to Albania's political and social life.

The idea of a greater American role in Albania was not new. As early as 1914, U.S. Ambassador to Albania, William W. Williams, had called for American intervention. Having witnessed the chaos and anarchy that plagued Albania that year, Williams argued that the United States could play a key role in restoring stability. He suggested, *"The people of the United States of America are trying to help the Albanian people by ensuring peace and stopping anarchy. They could guide the Albanians to form a temporary government until they find the right path to work and advance in self-governance."* Despite these hopes, the Albanians' expectations of American support were tempered by the reality that their fate would likely be shaped more by the interests of the European powers than by the idealism of Wilson's Fourteen Points.

Recognizing this, Albanian politicians prepared for any eventuality. The government delegation to the Paris Peace Conference was composed of the most prominent political figures of the time. They were supported by the Albanian diaspora, which sent delegations from major centers of emigration, such as the United States, Turkey, Romania, and elsewhere. These delegations sought to exploit every opportunity to advocate for and defend the national rights of Albanians on the international stage.

Albanians in America played a crucial role in advocating for the protection of Albania's national rights, with key figures such as Fan Noli, Faik Konica, Kostë Çekrezi, Kristo Dako, and others leading the effort. These individuals worked tirelessly to inform the U.S. administration and persuade it to adopt a supportive stance on the Albanian issue.

In their campaign, Albanians were also supported by prominent international figures, including Colonel Herbert, American diplomat Erikson, and French senators J. Godart and D'Estournelles de Constant. Colonel Herbert had been a staunch supporter of the Albanian cause since 1913-1914, and his influence in British politics was significant in bringing Albania's plight to the attention of the British government. On February 28, 1918, Herbert's initiative led to the founding of the Anglo-Albanian Society, "which included notable members such as Lord Leamington (Vice-President), Miss Edith

Durham (Honorary Secretary), Lord Treouen, Sir Samuel Hoare, and Members of Parliament Walter Gines and Emery.” Herbert’s commitment to Albania was so strong “that the Albanians, in recognition of his support, even offered him the Albanian throne. While he declined the offer, he went on to establish the Anglo-Albanian Society to further the cause of Albania’s independence.” This international support, particularly from figures like Herbert, played a pivotal role in shaping Albania’s future. These advocates were guided by the principle of self-determination for nations, a belief that aligned with the ideals set forth in Wilson’s Fourteen Points, which further supported the Albanian cause.

Albania entered the Peace Conference in a delicate position. While its government had been established through the will of Albanian patriots, it lacked international recognition, which would pose a significant obstacle during discussions on the Albanian issue at the conference.

The victorious powers of the Entente were still unwilling to grant Albania full independence. Although Albania’s allies had openly expressed territorial interests in the country, the Entente powers had their own agendas. France, the host of the Peace Conference, had no direct territorial interests in Albania but was willing to make concessions to Greece and Serbia. Italy, meanwhile, had declared its intention to secure a base on the Albanian coast, with Vlora being a key area of interest. Greece and Serbia, both Entente allies, renewed their territorial claims—claims that had been made since 1913—and expected compensation for their contributions to the war effort. These two Balkan countries had the backing of the victorious powers.

In light of these competing interests, Albania appeared to be at a disadvantage. The country needed to convince the Council of Great Powers of its rights and sovereignty. As historian Macmillan notes, “Poor Albania, with so many powerful enemies and so few friends. The Albanians were the indigenous Illyrian inhabitants of the Balkans, who had been pushed into the most miserable and impassable areas by the invasion from the south and west by the Slavs.” Amid this complex and hostile environment, the stance of the Durrës government at the Peace Conference would be a crucial test. While Albania’s fate was not entirely in its hands, the hopes of Albanians both at home and abroad rested on the outcomes of the conference in Paris.

3. Conclusions

This study highlights the significant role played by the Albanian delegates at the Congress of Durrës, who resisted Italian pressures and voted in favor of establishing a provisional government rather than a committee. This decision marked a critical moment in Albania’s efforts to assert its sovereignty.

The Congress also determined the composition of the Albanian delegation to the Peace Conference, with the goal of ensuring representation from all major regions of the country. This strategic decision underscored the importance of a unified national presence at the international negotiations.

Following the election of the government, the focus of the Albanian people turned toward Paris, where the Peace Conference was set to take place in January 1919. Albanians hoped that the conference would address territorial injustices, particularly the exclusion of Kosovo and Çameria, from the newly defined borders.

In summary, the Albanian representatives at the Peace Conference sought a revision of the territorial settlements imposed by previous agreements. They hoped that the principle of self-determination, championed by President Wilson and the American delegation, would guide the decision-making process. These hopes were fueled by the participation of the United States in the conference, which offered Albanians optimism that their national rights would be recognized and respected.

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