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# A HOMELAND BEYOND BORDERS: DIASPORA DIPLOMACY AND TRANSNATIONAL NATIONALISM IN THE ALBANIAN STATE-BUILDING PROCESS (1912–1920)

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**ABSTRACT:** *This article examines the role of the Albanian diaspora in the United States, particularly the Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra and Theofan Stilian Noli, in the Albanian state-building process (1912–1920). Through the lenses of transnational and long-distance nationalism, it argues that the diaspora acted not merely as a supporter but also as an active political agent. By analysing Vatra's institutional pillars – press, community networks, the national church, and lobbying – the study shows how the diaspora built an infrastructure that, during the First World War, operated as a de facto “government in exile”. Fan Noli's efforts to internationalise the Albanian question and defend territorial integrity through lobbying and cultural diplomacy highlight the critical role of diaspora communities in advancing national interests during times of crisis and institutional collapse.*

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora, transnational nationalism, Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra in the USA, Fan Stilian Noli, state-building, alternative diplomacy, Balkan Wars, First World War

## Introduction

In recent decades, the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora nationalism have gained a central place in the study of nationhood and state formation, challenging, and somehow exceeding the traditional paradigms that confine political, national, and identity histories largely within the geographic boundaries of the state. These approaches emphasise that diaspora communities are not merely passive observers of developments in their countries of origin or carriers of symbolic memory

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and identity, but rather conscious and organised actors who actively influence the political, diplomatic, and identity-related processes of their homelands.<sup>1</sup>

To better understand how a diaspora transforms from a symbolic subject into a political agent, it is necessary to revisit the conceptual frameworks of transnationalism and long-distance nationalism. As defined by Schiller, Basch, and Blanc, transnationalism involves the creation of enduring social, political, and economic networks connecting migrants with their countries of origin, thus rendering migration a multi-layered and dynamic process.<sup>2</sup> Within this framework, diaspora nationalism, or long-distance nationalism, represents a structured form of national belonging rooted in collective memory, cultural identity, and a heightened sense of responsibility towards the homeland, particularly during periods of crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Before focusing on the strategic agency of diasporas in open political contexts, as emphasised by scholars like Fiona Adamson and Rogers Brubaker, it is important to recognise that transnational linkages between migrant communities and their homelands often have deep historical roots, predating the emergence of modern nation-states and codified international borders. As Nina Glick Schiller, Thomas Faist, and Steven Vertovec have shown, transnationalism is not solely a contemporary or postcolonial phenomenon. Instead, it often reflects long-standing patterns of mobility, communication, and political activism that developed within imperial and pre-national frameworks. The Albanian case exemplifies this dynamic. Well before Albania gained international recognition in 1913, Albanian communities had established dense translocal networks spanning the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans, and migrant destinations like the United States. These historically embedded linkages provided both the organisational infrastructure and the ideological foundations that later enabled the diaspora to act as an influential force during Albania's state-building process.

Building on this historical foundation, scholars have emphasised that, in more open political contexts, diasporas can act as strategic actors, mobilising resources, shaping diplomatic agendas, and contributing to state-building processes through various forms of *soft power*.<sup>4</sup> However, such engagement may also generate tensions

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009); Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, no. 1, (1992), 1–24; Thomas Faist, *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Social Spaces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 202–215.

<sup>2</sup> N. Glick Schiller, L. Basch, C. Blanc-Szanton, *op. cit.*

<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London-New York: Verso, 1998), 58–76; Benedict Anderson, *Long-Distance Nationalism: World Capitalism and the Rise of Identity Politics* (Amsterdam: Center for Asian Studies, 1992); Zlatko Skrbiš, *Long-Distance Nationalism: Diasporas, Homelands and Identities* (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Joseph S. Nye defines "soft power" as the ability to influence the behaviour of other actors not through coercion or material incentives, but through the appeal exerted by culture, values, and the legitimacy of policies. [Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 5–11]. For the role of diasporas as transnational actors exercising political and symbolic influence through networks, identities, and practices that transcend state borders, see: Fiona B. Adamson, "Mobilizing for the Transformation of Home: Politicized Identities and Transnational Practices", *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*, eds Nadje Al-

between the political realities in the homeland and the ideological projections of diaspora communities, which often construct idealised visions of the nation that do not always align with on-the-ground developments.<sup>5</sup>

Against this theoretical backdrop, the case of the Albanian diaspora in the United States during the years 1912–1920 offers a concrete illustration of transnational nationalism in practice. Through the Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra (literally *The Hearth*, symbolising the national home and cultural continuity), Albanian émigrés in America established a political and ideological infrastructure that functioned as the organised voice of the nation in exile, intertwining diplomatic advocacy with the construction of a modern national identity. The figure of Theofan Stilian Noli epitomised this model: a religious leader and public intellectual who actively engaged in international diplomacy to defend Albanian statehood during a period of existential threat.

The political role of the Albanian diaspora becomes clearer when seen in light of the internal crisis that characterised Albania between 1912 and 1920. The independence proclaimed by the National Assembly in Vlora on 28 November 1912 was not followed by the establishment of a functional state. The decisions of the London Conference of Ambassadors (1913), while formally recognising Albania's sovereignty, left the country exposed to territorial claims from neighboring states, while domestic governance structures remained weak or provisional. The outbreak of the First World War, combined with the forced withdrawal of Prince Wilhelm zu Wied from Albania, appointed by the Great Powers to lead the Albanian state, further deepened the crisis. Albania became a battlefield, occupied by foreign armies, and devoid of stable government. Within this institutional and diplomatic vacuum, the diaspora, particularly in the United States, emerged as the most consistent actor articulating Albanian national interests on the international stage.

This article analyses the ideological and institutional strategies of the Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra and its leading figures, with a particular focus on Fan Stilian Noli, one of its most prominent leaders. Alongside Noli, other key diaspora personalities, such as Faik Konica, Kristo Floqi, Sotir Peci, Kristo Dako, played pivotal roles in shaping the Federation's political agenda and mobilising the Albanian community in the United States. By situating the Albanian case within the broader theoretical framework of transnationalism as an active and effective form of long-distance political engagement, the article examines how this diaspora, despite its relatively limited size, succeeded in creating a distinctive model of national organisation and political representation that exerted measurable influence on the Albanian state-building process.

The case of Vatra supports the broader argument that state-building is not confined solely to territorial boundaries, but can also be articulated beyond them, in the political spaces constructed and sustained by diaspora communities. In this sense, the article aims to contribute to the expanding scholarship on transnationalism and diaspora nationalism by shedding light on underexplored forms of diaspora activism in peripheral contexts, such as the Albanian community in the United States.

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Ali, Khalid Koser, (London: Routledge, 2002), 155–168; Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, (2005), 1–19.

<sup>5</sup> T. Faist, *op. cit.*, 202–215.

## Institutional Mechanisms of Diaspora Mobilisation: The Emergence and Role of the Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra

The transformation of an immigrant community into a structured political diaspora requires more than spontaneous initiatives or local associations. It necessitates a durable institutional infrastructure capable of ensuring ideological cohesion, community networking, and representational capacity. In this regard, the experience of the Albanian diaspora in the United States presents an illustrative case of such a transformation, whereby an immigrant community evolved into an organised political and diplomatic actor in the service of the Albanian national cause.

For early Albanian migration, the United States became the principal destination at the beginning of the twentieth century. The history of the Albanian community in America begins with Koli Kristofori, from the village of Katund in Korça, who is considered in historiographical literature to be the first Albanian settler in the country. Other villagers from Katund soon followed, viewing the New World as an opportunity for economic advancement.<sup>6</sup> The majority of Albanian migrants settled in the state of Massachusetts, primarily in industrial towns, while others established themselves in New York, Hudson, and Jamestown.<sup>7</sup> This geographic concentration and gradual community growth laid the foundations for the creation of an organised infrastructure that would serve as the collective voice of the nation in exile.

Beyond the pursuit of economic stability, the Albanian community in the United States quickly recognised that the American social and political environment encouraged freedom of expression and association – essential preconditions for the emergence of a strong and active diaspora. It was during this period that figures of cultural and national awakening, though the community numbered no more than approximately 5,000, began laying the groundwork for broader social and national organisation. Among the earliest of these figures was Petro Nini Luarasi, an Orthodox priest and Albanian language teacher, who arrived in America in 1904 and founded the patriotic society “Malli i Mëmëdheut” (Longing for the Homeland) in the city of Jamestown. In June 1906, the intellectual Sotir Peci launched the newspaper *Kombi* (The Nation), while around the same time, Fan Stilian Noli arrived in Boston and established the society “Besa-Besë” (Pledge of Honor).<sup>8</sup>

In general, the majority of the Albanian community in the United States adhered to the Orthodox faith but resisted subordination to the Greek ecclesiastical authority. This situation fostered the need for an independent national church. In March 1908, Fan Noli was ordained as a priest in the Orthodox Church of New York and celebrated the first liturgy in the Albanian language at the Knights of Honor Hall in Boston, a milestone in the affirmation of Albanian cultural and national identity. In February 1909, acting on behalf of the “Besa-Besë” society, he founded the

<sup>6</sup> Haris Silajxhiç, *Shqipëria dhe SHBA në arkivat e Washingtonit* (Tiranë: Dituria, 1999), 27; Paskal Milo, *Diplomacia e marrëdhënieve shqiptaro-amerikane* (Tiranë: Universiteti Mesdhetar, 2023) 14.

<sup>7</sup> Beqir Meta, Erjon Dervishi and Hasan Bello, *Vatra dhe shqiptarët e Amerikës 1912–1990* (Prishtinë: Instituti i Historisë, 2022), 18.

<sup>8</sup> H. Silajxhiç, *op. cit.*, 28.

newspaper *Dielli* (The Sun), which soon became the most influential Albanian-language publication in the diaspora. That same year, Faik Konica, an influential figure in Albanian nationalism and former editor of the magazine *Albania*, published between 1897 and 1909 in Brussels and London with Austro-Hungarian support, arrived in the United States. He subsequently assumed the editorship of *Dielli* giving the newspaper a more clearly articulated political and cultural orientation.<sup>9</sup>

At this critical juncture, the Albanian community increasingly recognised the necessity of coordinating its efforts and establishing a unified center of action to represent national interests. The first steps toward unification were taken in March 1911 with the merger of the “Malli i Mëmëdheut” and the “Përlindja” societies in Jamestown.<sup>10</sup> This initiative soon spread to other cities, particularly Boston, where the figure of Kristo Floqi played a key role in unifying the community through extensive travel, conferences, and nationalist advocacy.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in April 1912, on the initiative of the “Besa-Besë” society, the Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra was founded as a federative structure to unify Albanian-American organisations. On 3 June 1912, Vatra was officially registered in the state of Massachusetts. Faik Konica was elected General Secretary, and *Dielli* became its official organ.<sup>12</sup> Under the umbrella of Vatra, the most prominent Albanian societies in America were brought together to form a unified center for representation and mobilisation.

The creation of Vatra did not merely represent the formal unification of Albanian societies in the United States; it also marked a foundational moment in the emergence of a transnational Albanian political subject. Vatra embodied an institutionalised form of long-distance nationalism that gradually developed the capacity to combine community mobilisation, diplomatic action, and ideological production. It thus became an actor whose aims extended beyond the confines of the immigrant community, seeking to directly influence Albania’s political trajectory by engaging in international debates and articulating an independent model of national representation beyond the borders of the state.

Following its founding, Vatra developed a broad and multifaceted infrastructure to mobilise the Albanian diaspora in the United States and to advance the Albanian national cause. Its activities extended far beyond symbolic representation, encompassing a wide range of social, political, cultural, and diplomatic initiatives. These efforts coalesced into the institutional mechanisms of a well-articulated form of transnational nationalism, functioning through four core pillars: namely, the press and public communication, community networks, religious and educational institutions, and financial and human mobilisation.

**Independent National Press and Public Diplomacy:** The newspaper “Dielli” served not only as an informational platform but also as a powerful instrument of

<sup>9</sup> H. Silajxhiç, *op. cit.*, 32; Ilir Ikononi, *Faik Konica. Jeta në Washington* (Tiranë: Onufri, 2011), 24; Agron Alibali, *Faik Konica. Dritëhijet e një diplomati* (Tiranë: Argeta LMG, 2016), 27, 43–45.

<sup>10</sup> B. Meta, E. Dervishi, H. Bello, *op. cit.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Arkivi Qendror i Republikës së Shqipërisë*/Central State Archive of the Republic of Albania (AQSh), F. 100, D. 40, fl. 2-3. Memoirs of Kristo Floqi on the Establishment of the Vatra Federation.

<sup>12</sup> Beqir Meta, *Federata Panshqiptare “Vatra” (1912–1920)* (Tiranë: Globus R., 2001), 26–27; A. Alibali, *op. cit.*, 45–48.

diaspora public diplomacy. It functioned as a channel of internal communication for the Albanian community in the United States and as a medium for outreach to the American public. During the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, “Dielli” emerged as a leading tribune for the defense of Albanian national rights, warning against the partition of the homeland and encouraging national mobilisation.<sup>13</sup>

Through contributions by Noli, Konica, K. Dako, and other activists, the newspaper articulated concrete political demands and constructed a legitimate narrative for the Albanian national cause.<sup>14</sup> To communicate directly with an American audience, Vatra also launched an English-language monthly journal entitled “The Adriatic Review”, whose first issue appeared in September 1918.<sup>15</sup> This strategic initiative reflects patterns identified in the transnationalism literature, where media play a central role in mobilising diasporas, educating public opinion, and internationalising national claims.<sup>16</sup>

**Local Societies and Branches as an Institutional Network:** After founding, Vatra quickly established branches in various centers where Albanian immigrants lived, including Boston, New York, Worcester, Philadelphia, and others. These branches functioned as a vertically and horizontally integrated organisational network, coordinating community activities in accordance with directives from the central leadership. Meetings, public gatherings, rallies, and information campaigns were organised to promote national awareness, especially during key moments such as the Balkan Wars, the London Conference of Ambassadors (1913), the First World War, and the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920).<sup>17</sup> Such an organisational structure provided the diaspora with internal cohesion and operational discipline, qualities that were often lacking in the political life of the Albanian homeland.<sup>18</sup>

**The Orthodox Church and National Education as Identity Institutions:** The establishment of the Albanian Orthodox Church by Fan Stilian Noli in 1908 marked a major milestone in affirming national identity within the diaspora. Operating independently from both the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople and the Greek Orthodox Church, the new church had a clear mission: to establish a distinct Albanian identity, primarily by separating religious practices from the Greek influence. The first liturgy delivered in the Albanian language in Boston was a deeply symbolic

<sup>13</sup> “I dërguari i Xhon-Turqve, Çifut Bangjer i Selenikut. Salem në Romë”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass., February 29 1912, 3; “Atdhetarët organizohen. Komiteti i Bukureshtit”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass., December 5, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Beqir Meta, “Komuniteti shqiptar në SHBA dhe ndikimi i tij në marrëdhëniet midis dy vendeve”, *Marrëdhëniet shqiptaro-amerikane gjatë shekullit XX* (Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2023), 166.

<sup>15</sup> *The Adriatic Review*, vol. 1, no. 1, *Dielli*, Boston Mass, September 1918.

<sup>16</sup> For the press as a powerful instrument of public diplomacy, see: Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cosmopolitan Communications: Cultural Diversity in a Globalized World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> “Mesh e parë të Kishës së re në Southbridge”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass, October 17, 1912, 2; “Mitingu i Math i Vjeshtës së Dytë”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass, December 19, 1912, 2; “Mbledhja e Lonsdale-it”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass, October 24, 1912, 1; “Fjala e Z. Telford C. Erickson në Hartford. Conn”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass, October 14, 1913, 1–2; Mehmed Bey Konica, “Memorandum on Albania”, *The Adriatic Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, Boston Mass, October 1919, 52–58; Charles Woods, “Albania at the Peace Conference”, *The Adriatic Review*, vol. 1, no. 9, Boston Mass, May 1919, 342–349.

<sup>18</sup> For the ways in which the diaspora creates internal cohesion and capacities for sustained action, see: Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge University Press, 2003).

act, both religious and political. It signified not only religious independence from the Greek Church but also the founding of a national institution capable of affirming Albanian identity in a way that resonated with American social and civic values.

This ecclesiastical movement formed part of a broader agenda to strengthen national identity among the Albanians, who were religiously diverse, comprising Sunni and Bektashi Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics. As part of its strategy, Vatra also sought alliances with American Protestant churches to secure moral and political support for the Albanian cause. One notable alliance was formed with the Methodist Episcopal Church, whose adherents made up nearly one-third of the American population at the time.<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, efforts to establish Albanian-language schools and organise cultural clubs were conceived as part of a comprehensive effort to preserve and transmit national identity across generations of the diaspora, a form of cultural institutionalisation beyond the territorial boundaries of the Albanian state.<sup>20</sup>

**Financial and Human Mobilisation:** Vatra also developed a sophisticated system for mobilising both economic and human resources. In 1912, it organised fundraising campaigns to support Albanian insurgents and civilians affected by the First Balkan War. Beyond humanitarian relief, Vatra also financed diplomatic representation efforts. It supported Albanian-American delegations at the London Conference of Ambassadors (1913) and the Paris Peace Conference (1919), published informational brochures about Albania in foreign languages to raise international awareness, and established sustained contacts with official Albanian delegations.<sup>21</sup>

One notable example was the fundraising drive launched in June 1917, known as the Save Albania Campaign. Vatra initially requested \$40,000 from its members, but the response far exceeded expectations: contributions reached \$150,000.<sup>22</sup> Another crucial aspect of mobilisation was the recruitment of young Albanian men in the United States to form volunteer units destined to fight for Albania's independence and territorial integrity.<sup>23</sup> During the First World War, Vatra organised an extensive campaign to prepare approximately 4,000 volunteers in America who would fight alongside the Entente forces in Albania.<sup>24</sup>

This multi-dimensional mobilisation underscores the high level of institutional organisation achieved by the Albanian diaspora: from journalism and local branches to religious institutions, schools, finances, and military volunteerism, the community constructed a national infrastructure in exile. Through its institutionalised and disciplined network, Vatra operated as a sophisticated form of transnational nationalism, positioning the Albanian diaspora as a crucial agent in the state-building process between 1912 and 1920.

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<sup>19</sup> B. Meta, *op. cit.*, 175.

<sup>20</sup> For the idea of the institutionalisation of national culture within the diaspora, see: Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Refat Xh. Gurrazezi, *Historia e Federatës "Vatra"* (Globus R: Tiranë, 2006), 50–72, 105–115.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>23</sup> B. Meta, *Federata Panshqiptare*, 21, A. Alibali, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> "Dy fjalë për Vulnetarët dhe Nacionalistët", "Shqiptarët të Amerikës dhe Atdheut", *Dielli*, Boston Mass, April 17, 1914, 1; *Rekord i Kuvendit të Federatës "Vatra"*, 7-18 korrik 1918, Boston Mass, 1918, 18–45.

## The Ideological and Political Strategies of Vatra and Fan Noli

The institutional mechanisms of mobilisation would have been insufficient without a coherent ideological and political strategy to provide meaning, direction, and legitimacy. In this regard, the figure of Fan Noli represents a rare synthesis of a cleric, an intellectual, and apolitical activist, who articulated a clear vision for Albania's future based on the principles of independence, secularism, the rule of law, and a Western political orientation.<sup>25</sup> Under his leadership, and that of the broader Albanian intellectual elite in the United States, the Vatra Federation developed a well-defined ideological platform that articulated the model of the Albanian state the diaspora sought to shape and support.

**Inclusive Nationalism and Self-Determination as Foundations of Legitimacy:** Vatra and Fan Noli embraced an inclusive nationalist ideology aimed at transcending regional and religious divisions among Albanians, emphasising a shared ethnic identity and the right to self-government. This vision was reflected, among other things, in the proclamation of Vatra's National Assembly on 29 December 1918, which called upon Albanians in America: "Contribute [...] so that we may win a Greater Albania, fully independent with Kosovo, Chameria, and all the other purely Albanian regions, and so that we may live free, happy, and proud under the shadow of Skanderbeg's flag".<sup>26</sup>

This mobilising rhetoric was not unique to the Albanian diaspora. Similar ideological frameworks could be observed among other Balkan diasporas of the period. For example, the Greek diaspora actively promoted the Megali Idea, advocating for the unification of all historically Greek territories, while Serbian émigré communities engaged in transnational lobbying for Yugoslav unification and the expansion of the Serbian influence in the region.<sup>27</sup> Like Vatra, these diaspora movements utilised press

<sup>25</sup> Fan Noli was born in 1882 in Ibriktepe (known in Albanian as Qyteza), a village in Eastern Thrace, northwestern Turkey, which was home to a community of Orthodox Albanians. At the age of 24, he settled in the United States, where he took advantage of new opportunities and began building a support base for his future independence campaign. There, he completed his education in the arts at Harvard University's Faculty of Philosophy (1912), becoming fluent in several languages and deeply familiar with Western political and literary traditions. Noli quickly emerged as one of the leading figures within the Albanian émigré community, actively participating in cultural and political initiatives aimed at advancing the Albanian national cause. His early intellectual work focused primarily on the humanities (poetry, prose, translation, history, and the arts) and was characterised by a growing ethos of Albanian romanticism, with a strong emphasis on enriching the Albanian language and promoting literacy in the mother tongue, both considered key aspects of cultural nationalism. For more on Fan Noli's education and activities, see: Koço Bihiku, *A History of Albanian Literature* (Tirana: The "8 Nëntori" Publishing House, 1980), 101–119; Fan Noli, *Ligjërime (1906–1964)*, përgatiti N. Jorgaqi (Tiranë: Dudaj, 2002); Nasho V. Jorgaqi, *Jeta e Fan S. Nolit, Vëll 1 (1882–1924)* (Tiranë: Ombra GVG, 2005); Ilir Ikononi, *Fan Noli. Vëllimi i parë. Apostulli* (Tiranë: UET Press, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> R. Gurrazezi, *op. cit.*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> For comparative perspectives on diaspora-driven nationalism in the Balkans, see: Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Dejan Djokić, *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918–1992* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2003); Ulf Brunnbauer, *Globalizing Southeastern Europe: Emigrants, America, and the State since the Late Nineteenth Century* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016).

campaigns, financial mobilisation, and diplomatic advocacy to advance national projects from abroad, often framing their goals within broader discourses of ethnic unity and historical entitlement

This political vision, however, evolved over time in response to shifting regional dynamics. At the onset of the Balkan Wars, Vatra's leadership adopted a pragmatic stance toward the Ottoman Empire, viewing it as a temporary ally against the expansionist ambitions of the Balkan states, with the aim of preserving the territorial integrity of Albanian lands.<sup>28</sup> In line with this strategy, the concept of "Albanian territories", as employed by Vatra and its press, conveyed a nationalist conception of space, grounded in ethno-linguistic and historical narratives. Those territories included regions such as Kosovo, Chameria, and parts of present-day Montenegro and North Macedonia, inhabited by significant Albanian-speaking populations and were regarded by diaspora activists as integral components of the imagined national homeland. However, following the definitive collapse of Ottoman authority, Vatra fully embraced the goal of complete Albanian independence, framing it as an inalienable right rooted in the principle of self-determination.<sup>29</sup>

As geopolitical realities shifted and Ottoman authority collapsed, this ideological transition – from pragmatic alignment to assertive claims of self-determination – was forcefully articulated through Vatra's communication platforms. Through its articles, *Dielli* denounced the Balkan Alliance's plans to partition Albanian territories and framed the principle of self-determination as a cornerstone of international justice.<sup>30</sup> Although Vatra consistently emphasised the protection of Albania's territorial integrity, particularly in reference to the borders proposed in 1913, it also supported the inclusion of territories perceived as historically or ethnolinguistically Albanian. This dual emphasis reveals a complex dynamic between a pragmatic diplomatic posture aimed at international recognition and a broader nationalist vision shaped by diaspora ideals, an ambivalence not uncommon in early twentieth-century nationalist movements across the Balkans. In this context, Vatra's communication strategy not only reinforced diaspora identity but also sought to influence international public opinion by framing the Albanian cause as a legitimate demand for justice.

This ideological orientation also aligns with key scholarly interpretations of nationalism. It corresponds to the modern concept of an "imagined community," as theorised by Benedict Anderson, wherein national belonging is constructed through a collective imagining of unity that transcends actual divisions.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, this ideological orientation resonates with early trends in Albanian historiography, most notably the work of Stavro Skendi, a leading Albanian-American scholar of Balkan

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<sup>28</sup> "Mesh e parë të Kishës së re në Southbridge", *Dielli*, Boston Mass., October 17, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *The Albanian Struggle in the Old World and New*, Compiled and written by members of the Federal Writers Project of the Works Progress Administration of Massachusetts, Sponsored by The Albanian Historical Society of Massachusetts (Boston: The writer, inc., publishers, 1939), 50.

<sup>30</sup> B. Meta, E. Dervishi, H. Bello, *op. cit.*, 31; Isa Blumi, "Defining social spaces by way of deletion: the untold story of Albanian migration in the postwar period", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 29, no. 6, (2003), 949–965.

<sup>31</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 2006), 5–7, 15–16.

history and nationalism. In his seminal study “The Albanian National Awakening (1878–1912)”, Skendi emphasised that Albanian national consciousness did not emerge along religious lines, as was often the case in other Balkan contexts, but was deliberately constructed as a supra-confessional identity grounded in shared language, historical memory, and cultural heritage. For Skendi, this inclusive model of nationalism represented a strategic response to Albania’s internal religious diversity, encompassing Sunni and Bektashi Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Catholics, which posed significant challenges to nation-building efforts. Diaspora actors, particularly those within Vatra, drew upon this tradition to reinforce the principle that Albanian identity must transcend sectarian divisions in order to achieve political unity and international legitimacy. This emphasis on inclusivity distinguished Albanian nationalism from more ethnically or confessionally exclusivist movements in the region, thus making inclusivity a defining feature of Albania’s state-building discourse.<sup>32</sup>

**Western Orientation and Ideological Diplomacy:** Vatra deliberately cultivated a distinctly pro-Western political identity. Its goal was to position Albania as a modern state in harmony with European civilisation, capable of functioning within an international system governed by the values of law, democracy, and coexistence. According to Vatra, Albania’s state-building path had to pass through Europe, necessitating a complete severance of ties with the Ottoman Empire, including the rejection of any attempt to install an Ottoman prince as ruler of the Albanian Principality.<sup>33</sup> At the end of the First World War, this strategy was articulated through the embrace of Wilsonian principles, which placed the right of small nations to self-determination at their core.<sup>34</sup>

This ideological diplomacy was consistently expressed in the public discourse of diaspora leaders. Through articles, memoranda, and contacts with American political circles, Vatra emphasised that Albanians sought an independent and peaceful state, governed by the rule of law and integrated into modern Europe.<sup>35</sup> This narrative aimed not only to persuade the international community but also to foster a modern political consciousness within the Albanian diaspora itself.

The cultivation of a Western-oriented national identity by diaspora actors like Vatra aligns with broader theoretical frameworks that emphasise the role of normative models in shaping nation-building strategies. As scholars such as Rogers Brubaker and Thomas Faist have noted, diaspora communities often serve as conduits for the transfer of political ideas, institutional models, and normative frameworks from host societies to homelands. In the Albanian case, the exposure of diaspora elites to American and Western European democratic ideals profoundly shaped their vision of statehood. Vatra’s ideological diplomacy thus exemplifies what Joseph Nye defines as “soft power”: the capacity to influence international outcomes through the appeal of values and ideas, rather than through coercive means.<sup>36</sup> By aligning Albania’s national aspirations with the dominant liberal internationalist discourse of the time,

<sup>32</sup> Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening 1878–1912* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 231–237, 309–320.

<sup>33</sup> “Një problem i rëndë. Të zgjedhurit e Mbretit”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass, December 5, 1912, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Midis dy pikëpamjeve”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass., January 14, 1919, 1.

<sup>35</sup> B. Meta, “Komuniteti shqiptar në SHBA.”, 165–176.

<sup>36</sup> J. S. Nye, *op. cit.*, 5–11.

particularly the Wilsonian emphasis on self-determination and democratic governance, Vatra sought to increase Albania's legitimacy in the eyes of global decision-makers. This strategic orientation also served to differentiate Albanian nationalism from more irredentist or ethno-exclusive movements in the Balkans, presenting it instead as a modern, peaceful, and internationally responsible nation-building project.

**A Vision for a Secular and Functional Albanian State:** The ideological strategy of Vatra focused not only on political independence and international alignment but also on defining the model of the Albanian state. Fan Noli and his associates articulated a clear vision for a secular state with modern institutions and an effective administration. This vision was consistently reflected in *Dielli's* editorials, which advocated for the separation of religion from both the state and the educational system as a necessary condition for ensuring national unity in a country characterised by religious diversity. This perspective was progressive for its time, aiming to neutralise the divisive potential of Albania's multi-religious composition within the nation-building process. Furthermore, Vatra directly pressed Albanian governments to pursue the "path of civilisation" through structural reforms such as eliminating blood feuds, disarming the population, implementing a national taxation system, and establishing a professional and merit-based administration.<sup>37</sup> In its vision, the drafting of a constitution and the organisation of national elections were seen as essential steps toward building a functional and inclusive state.<sup>38</sup>

This vision did not remain confined to the diaspora. In his roles as a member of parliament (1920)<sup>39</sup> and later as prime minister (1924), Fan Noli sought to translate this political program into concrete state practices. His efforts in educational reform, secularisation, and Western alignment demonstrate that the diaspora's ideological strategies were not merely rhetorical exercises, but rather served as a blueprint for Albania's institutional development.<sup>40</sup>

**The Symbolic Construction of Identity and the Role of Art and Literature:** In addition to his political initiatives, Fan Noli actively contributed to the symbolic construction of national identity, employing poetry and art as strategic instruments to cultivate collective consciousness within the diaspora. Written in 1917, at the height of the First World War, his poem "Jepni për Nënë" ("Give for the Mother") exemplifies the purposeful use of literature as a medium for articulating and disseminating nationalist ideology. The figure of the "Mother" serves as a symbolic representation of Albania, while the call for sacrifice and unity directly addresses the emigrant community, framing national loyalty as both a moral obligation and a spiritual devotion. Far from being a mere aesthetic exercise, the poem functions as a vehicle of cultural mobilisation, reinforcing national belonging and supporting the broader project of nation-building among Albanian émigrés.

<sup>37</sup> "Nacionalistët janë themel i Shqipërisë", *Dielli*, Boston Mass., April 10, 1914, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Beqir Meta, "Federata Pashshqiptare "Vatra" dhe Ismail Qemal Vlora", in: *Ismail Qemal Vlora dhe elita politike shqiptare në procesin e shtetndërtimit*, ed. Ledia Dushku (Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2021), 158–159.

<sup>39</sup> *AQSh*, F. 152, V. 1921, D. 25, fl. 2-3.

<sup>40</sup> Adrian Brisku, "Renegotiating the Empire, Forging the Nation-State: The Albanian Case through the Political Economic Thought of Ismail Qemali, Fan Noli, and Luigj Gurakuqi, c. 1890–1920s", *Nationalities Papers* vol. 48, no. 1, (2020), 168–171.

This sentiment is poignantly captured in the following verses by Noli:

“What says that poor widowed soul  
A queen without a crown  
Cheek-torn, hair undone  
Soul and heart aflame.  
Half-dead: ‘O Albanians  
do not wound your Mother!’  
Fear not, Mother, stand your ground  
for your sons are here in America.”<sup>41</sup>

As Rogers Brubaker has emphasised, the diaspora can function as a “field of collective action”, in which national identity is constructed through a wide range of cultural and expressive practices.<sup>42</sup> In this sense, Noli’s poetry constitutes a distinctive form of ideological production that merges aesthetic sensibility with political mobilisation. It illustrates that national identity in the diaspora is not shaped solely through political discourse but also through symbolic works that engage and activate collective emotions.

**Political Strategy and Alternative Diplomacy of the Diaspora during the First World War:** Fan Noli early recognised that Albania’s fate would be determined not on the battlefield but at the diplomatic negotiating tables. While influential figures within Albania, such as Aqif Pasha Biçaku, Ahmet Zogu, and Esad Pasha Toptani, sought to maneuver internally through alliances with the Great Powers and neighbouring Balkan states, Noli oriented his activism towards an alternative strategy. His approach continued to focus on two main directions: mobilising the diaspora as a political force and shaping international perceptions, with the clear aim of safeguarding Albania’s national interests at a time when the country faced existential threats. In this sense, Noli’s strategy represented an effort to create a united political and diplomatic front to support Albania’s national cause during a period of acute uncertainty

In a context where diaspora elites had no direct control over Albanian territory, they leveraged their status as respected intellectual figures to influence international discourse. Vatra, by then a consolidated organisation, provided a powerful platform for financial, logistical, and political mobilisation. This structured engagement demonstrated that, in times of crisis, the diaspora could transform itself into a legitimate representative actor, thanks to its institutional organisation and ideological clarity.

During the First World War, Noli built his strategy upon a clear analysis of three possible scenarios for Albania’s future:

*First*, in the event of an Entente victory, Albania would likely fall under the influence of Italy, Serbia, and Greece, facing a significant risk of territorial partition. Noli regarded this outcome as the most dangerous, particularly given the expansionist ambitions of these neighboring states.

*Second*, in the case of a victory by Austria-Hungary and Germany, Albania might gain some additional territory but would come under the strong political

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<sup>41</sup> The poem “Jepni për Nënë” is available in full at <https://letersishqip.com/fan-noli/krijime-letrare/jepni-per-nenen> (accessed April 3, 2025).

<sup>42</sup> B. Brubaker, *op. cit.*, 5.

influence of the Central Powers, leading to a partial loss of sovereignty. Although this scenario could ensure Albania's survival as a state, it would subordinate its independence to external control.

*Third*, Noli considered a compromise peace, without a decisive victory by either side, as the most favourable option. In his view, this scenario could maintain Albania's territorial integrity, as the Great Powers would have little interest in further partitioning the country, thereby providing a degree of stability in an otherwise volatile international environment.<sup>43</sup>

The creation of a unified political front among the Albanians, with a single leadership center, was, in Noli's view, the central mission of the Albanian diaspora in the United States and Europe. For this reason, close coordination among nationalists, regardless of their location, was deemed essential. A single external leadership body needed to be established, which, through diplomatic and propagandistic means, would coordinate collective efforts to defend national interests and secure support from international political actors and public opinion, thus paving the way for the creation of a government-in-exile. Fan Noli's strategy also envisioned the establishment of national committees in Europe aimed at protecting Albanian interests and raising awareness among European public opinion. He proposed the creation of a National Committee in London to represent the Albanian diaspora and advocate for Albania's rights during postwar negotiations. This could be followed by a second committee in Lausanne, Switzerland, a neutral country that had become a hub for political activists who had fled Albania. These committees would serve as focal points for promoting the Albanian cause internationally.<sup>44</sup>

Toward the end of the First World War, Noli and Vatra intensified their efforts to win the sympathy of the United States, particularly after President Woodrow Wilson emerged as a strong advocate for the self-determination of small nations. They sought to frame Albania as a paradigmatic case for the application of Wilsonian ideals, thereby countering Italian territorial ambitions and securing international recognition for the Albanian state.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Diaspora's Impact on Albanian State-Building and International Diplomacy**

Taken together, the factors discussed above demonstrate that the political activism of the Albanian diaspora constituted a fundamental pillar in the state-building process of modern Albania. It played a critical role in articulating a coherent national agenda that was both responsive to the geopolitical realities of the time and effective in projecting Albanian interests within an international system dominated by Great Power diplomacy. Many of the ideas and strategies that informed Albania's post 1920 state formation were rooted in the diaspora's political debates and organisational experience during this formative period.

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<sup>43</sup> Sali Kadria, *Nacionalizmi shqiptar në vitet 1912–1924* (Tiranë Botimet Albanologjike, 2020), 258.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> For a detailed account of Fan Noli's activities and the Albanian diaspora in the United States during the First World War, see: I. Ikonimi, *op. cit.*, 206–210, 221–225, 228–230, 234–237, 255, 262, 274–277.

*First*, the diaspora helped preserve political continuity and national representation at a time when the Albanian state either did not exist or was under existential threat. Between 1913 and 1918, in the absence of a functioning government and amid foreign occupations, the Vatra Federation acted as the national voice on the international stage, sustaining the Albanian question through the press, diplomatic engagement, and organised lobbying. The Albanian Declaration of Independence of November 28, 1912, clearly reflected the aspirations of Albanians in America who, through the efforts of Fan Noli and Faik Konica, had developed a concrete vision of Albanian statehood in exile.

Subsequently, during the London Conference of Ambassadors (1913) and the Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920), representatives of the Albanian diaspora played a decisive role in defending Albania's sovereignty and territorial claims. The intervention of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who opposed European plans to partition Albania, was according to American missionary and political advocate Charles Telford Erickson, partly the result of coordinated pressure from the Albanian diaspora in the United States. Erickson, who closely monitored Balkan affairs during and after the war, referred to this mobilisation as “the storm of protests from the Albanians”,<sup>46</sup> highlighting the significant role that organised diaspora activism played in shaping favorable American diplomatic positions. In this context, the Albanian diaspora not only sustained the political continuity of the nation in exile but also demonstrated that transnational actors, through coherent strategy, cultural legitimacy, and international advocacy, can play a decisive role in state formation and global diplomacy.

*Second*, the diaspora played a critical role in formulating a new political vision for Albania, grounded in the principles of self-determination, national unity, and Western alignment. The principles articulated by Vatra and Fan Noli, state secularisation, the separation of religion from education, the development of a modern administration, and Albania's integration into the international order through the League of Nations, became integral components of the political agenda pursued by successive Albanian governments in the immediate postwar years. Many of the key diaspora figures (Fan Noli, Sotir Peci, Kristo Floqi, among others) returned to Albania and translated their experience in political organisation into the country's emerging institutional structures. A notable example of this transfer was Fan Noli's appointment as Albania's Delegate to the League of Nations in 1920, where he continued to advocate for Albanian sovereignty on the international stage.

This influence was also strongly felt in multilateral diplomacy. While the official Albanian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference, led by Turhan Pasha Përmeti, struggled to gain the attention of key decision-makers, Vatra launched an extensive campaign of information dissemination and lobbying in the political centers of Western Europe. In the United States, it continued to mobilise public opinion through press outlets, conferences, English-language articles, and public demonstrations in cities such as Boston and New York. It pioneered a form of informal diplomacy that often complemented, and at times surpassed, the official efforts of the state delegation.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Gjendja e Shqipërisë pas shpjegimeve të Erickson-it”, *Dielli*, Boston Mass., June 26, 1919, 1–2.

<sup>47</sup> B. Meta, “Komuniteti shqiptar në SHBA...”, 165–176.

## Conclusion

The experience of the Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra (1912–1920) provides a paradigmatic illustration of how a “homeland beyond borders” can be politically constructed through diaspora activism. In a period marked by existential uncertainty for Albania, the diaspora in the United States assumed functions traditionally reserved for sovereign states, diplomatic representation, political articulation, and national mobilisation, through a transnational infrastructure anchored in ideological clarity and institutional discipline.

This institutional consolidation allowed Vatra to assume a quasi-state role abroad, particularly during moments of acute crisis for Albania. Under the leadership of Fan Noli and Faik Konica, Vatra operated as a proto-government in exile. It built a four pillar model, independent press, community networks, religious-cultural institutions, and financial-human mobilisation, that enabled the diaspora not only to preserve national continuity but to actively shape the international representation of Albania. This form of diaspora diplomacy served as a counterweight to both internal political fragmentation and external pressures from regional powers.

Beyond its structural coherence, Vatra’s strength lay in its ideological direction. Crucially, Vatra articulated a vision of Albania as a secular, democratic, and Western-oriented state, grounded in the principles of self-determination and inclusive national identity. Its ideological diplomacy, expressed through media campaigns, lobbying efforts, and political memoranda, positioned the Albanian cause within broader global narratives of post-imperial self-governance, particularly in relation to Wilsonian ideals.

Seen in this light, the Vatra case challenges the traditional notion of state-building as a strictly territorial process. It demonstrates that diaspora communities, through transnational nationalism and soft power strategies, can act as pivotal agents in the political reimagining of nationhood. In the Albanian case, such activism proved essential in defending territorial integrity, securing international recognition, and shaping the foundational political vision of the modern state.

In sum, the Vatra experience not only illuminates the transnational dimensions of Albanian statehood, but also contributes to a broader understanding of how diaspora diplomacy can sustain and legitimise national projects in contexts of fragmentation and transition. It calls for a rethinking of the homeland–diaspora relationship, not as a unidirectional support dynamic, but as a co-constitutive force in the making of modern states.

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A HOMELAND BEYOND BORDERS:  
DIASPORA DIPLOMACY AND TRANSNATIONAL NATIONALISM  
IN THE ALBANIAN STATE-BUILDING PROCESS (1912–1920)

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*Summary*

This article analyses the critical role of the Albanian diaspora in the United States, particularly the Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra and Fan Noli, in the process of Albanian state building between 1912 and 1920. Drawing on theories of transnational and long-distance nationalism, the article argues that the diaspora emerged not merely as a supporter but as an active agent in political representation, diplomatic lobbying, and the construction of a national identity beyond territorial borders.

Through the institutional pillars of Vatra: press, community networks, religious and educational institutions, and financial mobilisation, the Albanian diaspora created a transnational infrastructure that operated as a de facto government-in-exile during the First World War. Fan Noli's ideological leadership was central in articulating a vision for a secular, democratic, and Western-oriented Albanian state, while mobilising international support for Albania's sovereignty at critical junctures such as the London Conference and the Paris Peace Conference.

The article highlights how the diaspora's activism compensated for the absence of a functional state, influenced American and European political circles, and contributed significantly to the defense of Albania's territorial integrity. It emphasises that diaspora diplomacy, expressed through media campaigns, political lobbying, and ideological production, proved vital for safeguarding national interests during periods of existential crisis.

Ultimately, the experience of Vatra challenges traditional understandings of state building as confined to national territories, demonstrating that diaspora communities can serve as co-constitutive actors in the formation of modern states. The Albanian case offers a paradigmatic example of how a "homeland beyond borders" can be politically and diplomatically constructed through organised transnational activism.

**KEYWORDS:** Diaspora, transnational nationalism, Pan-Albanian Federation Vatra in USA, Fan Stilian Noli, state-building, alternative diplomacy, Balkan Wars, First World War

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