

## The Greek-Albanian Relations During the Interwar Period (1918-1939)

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### *Abstract*

This article examines Greek-Albanian relations during the Interwar Period (1918–1939), a time marked by diplomatic tensions, minority disputes, and foreign intervention. The primary sources of friction were territorial disagreements and the rights of ethnic minorities, specifically the Greek minority in Northern Epirus and the Muslim Cham population in Greece. While Greece prioritized the protection of its ethnic kin, Albania viewed these efforts with suspicion, responding with policies that curtailed minority rights, particularly in education. The evolving domestic politics in both nations, such as Zog's rise to power in Albania and Greece's post-Asia Minor diplomatic retrenchment, further shaped bilateral interactions. Italian ambitions under Mussolini played a crucial role in exacerbating tensions, culminating in Albania's transformation into an Italian protectorate by 1939. Despite occasional periods of rapprochement, notably under leaders like Venizelos and Pangalos, sustained cooperation remained elusive. This study underscores the intersection of nationalism, minority rights, and great-power rivalry in shaping regional dynamics, illustrating how unresolved historical grievances and foreign pressures hindered lasting Greek-Albanian rapprochement during the Interwar era.

*Keywords:* Greece, Albania, Northern Epirus, Zog, Mussolini.

### 1. Introduction

The Interwar Period in the Balkans, spanning from 1918 to 1939, was marked by profound political upheavals and persistent instability. This era began with the conclusion of the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922), a conflict that followed World War I and reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the region. The war's aftermath brought population exchanges, shifting borders, and deep-seated grievances that would fuel inter-state tensions in the following decades. By 1939, the Italian occupation of Albania symbolized the culmination of mounting pressures in southeastern Europe, setting the stage for World War II (Koumas, 2010).

Greek-Albanian relations during this turbulent period were dominated by mutual suspicion and recurring disputes. Two primary sources of friction were territorial claims and concerns over minority rights, both of which were exacerbated by broader regional dynamics. In particular, Greece remained dissatisfied with the international recognition of Northern Epirus as part of Albania, despite the presence of a substantial Greek-speaking Orthodox population in the

area. Successive Greek governments viewed the status of this community as a matter of national interest, fueling irredentist sentiments and complicating diplomatic relations (Papadopoulos, 1981).

Conversely, Albanian authorities harbored deep concerns about the treatment of the Cham Albanians, a predominantly Muslim population residing in Thesprotia, within Greek borders. Allegations of discrimination and forced displacement stoked fears in Tirana, prompting periodic diplomatic protests. These mutual grievances were not isolated disputes but interwoven with the broader strategic contest for influence in the western Balkans (Vickers, 1995).

The role of Italy under Mussolini further strained Greek-Albanian relations. Italy's aggressive policies in the region, driven by expansionist ambitions, heightened tensions and deepened mistrust between Athens and Tirana. Rome's efforts to establish Albania as an Italian protectorate created an environment of insecurity and suspicion, compelling both Greece and Albania to adjust their foreign policies in response to the shifting balance of power (Koumas, 2010).

## 2. The mutual suspicion of the years 1920-1928

As mentioned before, during the Interwar period, Greek governments, at a policy level, focused on ensuring protections for the Greek population in Northern Epirus rather than pursuing territorial claims against Albania. Following the Asia Minor Catastrophe (1922), Greece's economic struggles and diminished international standing often led to a passive stance towards its neighbour states. Accordingly, Athens not only refrained from asserting claims to Northern Epirus post-1922 but sometimes viewed requests for Northern Epirotes protections as an obstacle to good relations with Tirana or Rome (Koumas, 2010).

Meanwhile, hundreds of Northern Epirotes emigrated after the 1921 loss of their homeland, primarily settling in Athens and Thessaloniki. By 1920, the Greek Ministry of Health had registered 150 such migrants (Greek Ministry of Welfare, n.d.), a number that would increase over the following years, enabling the creation of associations. Chief among these was the Northern Epirotic Association of Athens-Piraeus, founded in May 1920, followed by a similar group in Thessaloniki (INR, Skenderis Archive, 1920). Both lobbied for Greece to claim Northern Epirus and improve living conditions for émigrés. It's noteworthy that, during the interwar years, Northern Epirotes consistently held out hope that Greece would reclaim the region, while documenting and protesting abuses against Greeks in the area to increase Greek government awareness (MFA, 1922, F. 14/1).

Characteristically, the Epirotic Association of Corfu sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a telegram on 17 June 1922 mentioned the following:

The Albanian Government, on the one hand, is making advances towards the Greek Government towards the recognition of Albania as a state, on the other hand, it is following its persecutions in Northern Epirus, on all fronts and by all means oppressing them their native populations Robbery gangs of Muslims are formed by the tolerance of these Governors. The authorities of the Prefecture of Gjirokastër and incited it, if not by them, at any rate by the Beys and Agads of that Prefecture, plundering the countryside, exclusively Greek and Christian, are taken as a reasonable occasion to exterminate other gangs of Muslims, and they are, moreover, for the pretexts, those of them from non-patrimonial bodies of "Vatras" are managed (MFA, 1922, F. 14/4).

Also, the expatriate Northern Epirus of Ioannina begged the Greek government in May 1922 to order the occupation of Northern Epirus:

The inhabitants of the North Epirus in Ioannina are in Gen. Having gathered today in view of the exterminating persecution of all Greeks practiced by the Turkalvans in our special homeland, we strongly protest in front of the civilized world and we appeal to the Greek Government, beseeching it warmly as it is order the advance of the Greek Army and liberation of the burdensome Albanian yoke the distressed part of the Greek motherland declaring that in our conviction we are determined to sacrifice everything in defense of our ethnic and human rights that are being violated (MFA, 1922, No. 14/4).

Despite these protests, the influence of the Northern Epirotic Association of Athens-Piraeus remained limited, with fewer than 150 members initially. Until 1924, the Greek state showed little interest, and later regimes, like Theodoros Pangalos' dictatorship (1925-1926), exhibited outright hostility. As a result, the association remained marginal, with its petitions rarely appearing in the Greek press until the School Question erupted in 1933 (see below).

On the other side, at the same years Albania faced a political chaos. In May 1921, Albanian leaders, primarily the Muslim beys, elected Iljas bey Vrioni as prime minister. Vrioni, a descendant of an aristocratic Ottoman family and closely aligned with the conservative Progressive Party, was staunchly opposed to agrarian reform and aimed to strengthen the landowning class' influence. On the other side, Fan Noli's Democratic (or People's) Party, initially comprising northern Catholic leader Luigj Gurakuqi, veteran nationalist Hassan Prishtina, and Ahmed Zogu, promoted economic changes and the westernization of Albania. In their political statements, Noli and his supporters often portrayed the Greeks of Northern Epirus as a threat to Albania's survival (Vickers, 1995).

Indeed, Albania exploited Greece's muted approach and the limited power of the Northern Epirotic associations to intensify oppression against the Greek minority, beginning in 1921. In response, Greece officially appealed to the League of Nations for protection in February 1921, sparking months of negotiations. Albania's primary strategy involved downplaying the size of the Greek minority, claiming it was only 15,000, while alleging—without evidence—that hundreds of thousands of Albanians resided in Greece and Yugoslavia. In contrast, Athens advocated for a range of cultural, educational, and religious freedoms for its minority population, similar to protections given in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania (MFA, 1921, F. 3/5).

Under those circumstances, the League of Nations sent a committee to Northern Epirus, which, in November 1921, confirmed the existence of around 40,000 Greeks and recommended improvements to their treatment by the Albanian government. In particular, the committee pointed out the creation of obstacles on the part of the Albanian side in the teaching of the Greek language. The general impression of the officials of the international organization was that the Albanian authorities treated with suspicion not only the Greek teachers, but also the Patriarchate of Constantinople, considering them as levers of pressure in favor of Athens. (MFA, 1922, F. 13/4; MFA, 1922, F. 24/6; Divani, 2002).

On October 2, 1921, Albania agreed to a final minority protection agreement based on a seven-article draft, stipulating equal treatment for all racial, linguistic, and religious groups in Albania (MFA, 1921, F. 4/1). The agreement allowed each group to maintain schools and religious institutions and prohibited discrimination. Thus, Albania was required to recognize a Greek National Minority around Gjirokastër and in Himarë's four villages (Divani, 2002), under a protective status akin to other Geneva-based member states (MFA, 1921, F. 4/1).

Despite these guarantees of Greek language instruction and Orthodox Christian worship, Northern Epirotes expatriates continued protesting Albanian state policies. Incidents like the violent seizure of Greek churches by Albanian nationalists in 1921 and 1922 and the establishment of an autonomous Albanian Church following the 1922 Synod of Berat only aggravated tensions. Characteristically, Patriarch Meletius IV refused to recognize the move

(MFA, 1922, F. 24/6; Benaki Museum, Eleftherios Venizelos Archive, F. 37/6; MFA, 1922, F. 13/4; MFA, 1922, F. 24/6; Bido, 2020).

Additionally, unresolved ambiguities in the Greek-Albanian border drawing, especially regarding the Greek-speaking villages of Kakavia and Katouna, further complicated relations. To address these issues, in March 1922, the League of Nations sent an International Commission, led by Italian General Enrico Tellini, to finalize the border. The review lasted three years and was marred by Tellini's assassination on August 27, 1923. Rome immediately blamed the incident on the Greek side, with the Italian ambassador in Athens delivering a stern ultimatum demanding moral and financial compensation. At the same time, on August 31, 1923, the Italian fleet bombarded Corfu, then succeeding in capturing it without bloodshed. Finding itself in a tragic situation after the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the Greek government contented itself with appealing to the League of the Nations. There, Mussolini's threats resulted in a new diplomatic defeat for Athens, which was called upon to pay 50 million lire to Italy and to hold official memorial services for the dead Italians. Also, final demarcation, signed on January 30, 1925, set the Greco-Albanian border from Prespes to Mount Bandaros, Aaos river, and Ftelias Bay (Papafloratos, 2009).

Those developments didn't affect significantly Albania: the latter remained deeply divided along religious, social, and ethnic lines, which became increasingly apparent after the state borders were secured and external threats diminished. For example, the northern Catholic groups preferred Shkodra as the capital instead of Tirana and frequently demanded extensive autonomy. Tensions reached a peak when the powerful Catholic Mirditës tribe rebelled against the central government, with their leader Marka Gjoni establishing a short-lived autonomy near Prizren from July 17 to November 20, 1921, with the backing of Yugoslavia (Frashëri, 1964).

This fragmented situation paved the way for the rise of Ahmed Zogu. Born in northern part of Albania in 1895, Zogu had participated in the Albanian independence movement of 1912 and served in World War I with the Austro-Hungarian army. Backed by the southern beys and related to Essad Pasha Toptani, Zogu soon came into conflict with Fan Noli. Thus, seeking to broaden his support base, Zog, then the Minister of the Interior, attempted to subdue the northern Catholic tribes. His successes in curbing these secessionist forces led to his appointment as prime minister on December 16, 1922 (Tallon, 2014).

As prime minister, Zog aimed to alleviate Albania's religious divides. In August 1923, he convened a conference of leading Muslims in Tirana, where he led a push to sever ties with the caliphate, abolish the title of bey, and ban polygamy. These efforts, however, alienated a segment of the Muslim landowning class, forcing Zog to resign (MFA, 1923, F. 24/6).

Albania's government remained absorbed with its domestic problems, which Zogu's resignation did little to solve. In this context, political assassinations continued to increase, and no party managed to secure a decisive electoral win, leading to a revolt in June 1924 under Fan Noli. Soon after, Prime Minister Shefqet Verlaci quickly resigned, while Zog fled to Yugoslavia for safety (Frashëri, 1964).

Fan Noli, a Catholic clergyman and scholar, took over Albania's leadership and initiated extensive agrarian, political, and educational reforms. However, his methods proved harsh, which undermined proclamations of free speech and land redistribution, as potential rivals faced severe repression. Discontent with Noli's rule spread, and Zogu seized the opportunity to return. On December 13, 1924, Zog, now leading an armed force of 5,000 men, invaded Albania from Yugoslavia, supported by Yugoslav troops, his tribal connections, and White Russian fighters seeking refuge after their defeat by the Bolsheviks. He also received financial support from Greece and Northern Epirotes, hoping he would adopt a flexible stance towards them. Although these hopes soon faded, Zog's forces took Tirana on December 24 without resistance (Divani, 2002).

To distance himself from previous political regimes, Zogu promptly scheduled elections, declaring Albania a “democratic state without monarchy.” However, it quickly became apparent that he did not intend to relinquish power. As president, Zogu consolidated control through assassinations of political rivals like Luigj Gurakuqi, suppression of Fan Noli’s followers, and persecution of the Kosovo Committee. The latter was created by Kosovo Albanians, aiming to integrate the disputed region into the state of Tirana. Its dissolution by Zogu served to maintain friendly relations with Yugoslavia. In this context, although Albania now had a constitution and an elected government, Zogu maintained veto power over legislation and control over the military (Vickers, 1995).

The establishment of Zogu’s regime initiating a phase of Greek-Albanian rapprochement. In late 1925, Zogu assured Greek diplomats of improved conditions for Northern Epirots, pledging to honor their educational and religious freedoms (HLHA, Eleftherios Venizelos Archive, F. 1/584). On his behalf, the Greek dictator General Theodoros Pangalos, reciprocated with diplomatic goodwill gestures, sending the pro-Albanian Alexandros Kontoulis as ambassador to Tirana. Kontoulis strongly supported Tirana’s views, including establishing an autocephalous Albanian church (Kollaros, 2022).

Pangalos’s motives are debated, but it seems he sought to use friendly relations with Albania as leverage to strengthen ties with Rome, in case of a new Greek-Turkish conflict. Besides, he believed the economic revival of Epirus and Balkan stability would follow peaceful coexistence. In this context, by 1925, Greece eagerly pursued peace with its neighbors, given its lingering Asia Minor wounds (Divani, 2002).

This warming of relations led to trade, shipping, citizenship, extradition, and refugee agreements between Greece and Albania from August to October 1926. However, anticipating a high financial burden related to compensating expropriated Albanian properties, the Greek Parliament rejected these agreements after Pangalos’ fall (Manta, 2004).

As about his domestic policy, Zogu claimed his goal was to maintain order, and to achieve this, he sought the allegiance of the unruly northern tribes, often using large financial incentives to buy loyalty. This practice, however, depleted state funds, pushing Zogu to establish trade agreements with Italy and Britain, particularly for the exploration and sale of oil discovered off the Albanian coast in 1919. While these agreements brought foreign capital into Albania, they also gave Italy significant influence over the country’s economy (Divani, 2002).

British interest eventually waned when the Anglo-Persian Oil Company deemed Albanian oil prospects unviable, leading to a shift in British policy. Consequently, Albania signed the Pact of Friendship and Support with Italy in November 1926, followed by a second treaty in 1927, establishing Albania as an Italian protectorate. These agreements stipulated that any threat to Albania’s territorial integrity would be considered an attack on Italy, paving the way for Italian settlers to establish a foothold in Albania (Motherwell, 1928; Yzeiraj, 2021; Manta, 1996; Xhelaj, 2013).

On September 1, 1928, Zogu abandoned his Turkish-sounding surname, declaring himself “Zog I, King of the Albanians.” Knowing that the northern Catholics might resent a Muslim monarch, Zog strategically placed Catholic clan leaders in prominent military roles and declared Albania would have no official religion. Under a new constitution, the Albanian king gained extensive legislative, judicial, and executive authority through 234 constitutional articles. Although formally a democratic constitutional monarchy, Zog held absolute power (Vickers, 1995).

### 3. The Italian aggression and the events of 1928-1939

Following the fall of Pangalos' regime (1926), Greek-Albanian relations soured, as no subsequent Greek government matched his conciliatory approach toward Tirana. Thus, until Venizelos' 1928 electoral victory, the two nations frequently aired grievances before the League's Council of Ministers, with Albania decrying oppression against Chams and equating it to Northern Epirotes' grievances. Chams, even though they were Muslims, were excluded from the Lausanne Agreement (1923) after a related appeal by Albania to the League of Nations in March 1924. From that period, the goal of Tirana to use the population in question – according to Eleftheria Manta – is evident as a “counterweight to the Greek minority” (Manta, 2004). Also, the Albanian government increased persecution against the Greek population in Korçë exacerbated tensions, although Venizelos' 1928-1932 administration temporarily improved relations due to Zog's respect for him (Divani, 2002).

Tensions between Athens and Tirana reached new heights in 1933, following the Albanian government's decision to amend Articles 206 and 207 of the 1928 Constitution. These constitutional changes ostensibly aimed to nationalize education, ensuring free state-run schooling for all Albanian citizens. However, the reforms quickly revealed ulterior motives: under the guise of promoting universal access to education, the Albanian government banned private schools, effectively shuttering the Greek minority's educational institutions. This policy directly targeted the Greek community's ability to sustain its cultural and linguistic heritage, intensifying existing frictions between the two countries (Benaki Museum, Eleftherios Venizelos' Archive, F. 399/68).

In reaction to this assault on Greek education, Vasileios Mattheou Sachinis, a wealthy banker from Dropoli, discreetly founded the “New Friendly Society” in Gjirokastër in 1933. Modeled after earlier nationalistic organizations, its mission was to protect and preserve Greek education in Northern Epirus. The organization quickly gained financial backing from the Greek state via the Greek consulate in Gjirokastër and, during the 1933–1934 school year, mobilized Greek communities in Northern Epirus to boycott Albanian state schools. This grassroots resistance saw Greek families refusing to enroll their children in the state-mandated education system, triggering sharp reprisals from the Albanian authorities. Reasonably suspecting Athens of orchestrating this defiance, the Albanian government responded with a wave of mass arrests targeting prominent Greek community leaders in Northern Epirus. The ensuing atmosphere of fear and repression was widely condemned in the Greek press, which described the situation as an “intolerable state of affairs” (Papadopoulos, 1981).

Public opinion in Greece grew increasingly inflamed, with nationalist rhetoric beginning to resurface by early 1934, even as the country faced political and economic instability. Despite mounting public pressure, Prime Minister Panagis Tsaldaris opted for a realistic approach. Rather than issuing provocative irredentist declarations or risking military escalation—at a time when Greece was politically and economically disadvantaged—Tsaldaris directed the New Friendly Society to pursue legal remedies through international institutions. Indeed, on January 2, 1934, representatives of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus filed an appeal with the League of Nations. The League referred the case to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which finally vindicated Greece (Papadopoulos, 1981).

This episode exemplified the broader challenges faced by Greece in balancing nationalist aspirations with the constraints of international politics. While it underscored the vulnerabilities of the Greek minority in Albania, it also demonstrated the Greek state's capacity to adapt its tactics to changing geopolitical realities, leveraging international institutions as a platform for addressing minority rights. The case further illuminated the intersection of education, identity, and nationalism, illustrating how cultural institutions could become battlegrounds in broader struggles for political sovereignty and ethnic autonomy.

In Albania, despite ongoing disputes with Yugoslavia over Kosovo and Greece concerning the status of Northern Epirus, Zog eventually recognized that the most serious threat to Albania was Italy. By the early 1930s, Mussolini had adopted an increasingly aggressive approach, using Albania's economic difficulties and a 1925 loan as leverage (Frashëri, 1964). Meanwhile, Zog faced mounting internal dissatisfaction; Northern Epirotes held a deep-seated distrust of any Albanian government, while Albanians grew more critical of his administration. Zog tried to suppress dissent by orchestrating political assassinations, such as the 1933 killing of Hasan Prishtina in Thessaloniki, and briefly attempted liberal reforms between 1935 and 1936. However, these actions only intensified public discontent (Vickers, 1995).

Zog's position worsened in June 1936 with the appointment of Count Galeazzo Ciano as Italy's Foreign Minister. From the start, Ciano—a fervent proponent of Albania's annexation by Italy—envisioned Albania as a colony for millions of Italians (DDI, vol. XI, no. 171 and 304). While these plans developed slowly, Italian influence over Albania increased steadily: by summer 1938, Italy accounted for over 92% of Albanian exports and 82% of its imports. Given this economic control, Mussolini issued an ultimatum on March 25, 1939, demanding that Albania become an Italian protectorate (Vickers, 1995).

The subsequent Italian invasion reflected Mussolini's strategy, which aimed not just at economic or political dominance but at bold territorial expansion. The intervention in Albania, following years of economic and cultural entrenchment, was a stark example of Italian imperialism (DDI, Ottava serie, Vol. XI, no. 635). Thus, on April 7, 1939, some 40,000 Italian soldiers landed in Vlorë and faced little resistance. Zog fled to Greece with his family and close allies; his radio calls urging Albanians to resist were largely unheard, as few citizens owned radios. Subsequently, the Italians established a compliant government under Shefqet bey Verlaci, while in 1941 King Victor Emmanuel III formally united Italy and Albania. Zog would never return to his homeland (Frashëri, 1964).

#### 4. Conclusions

The Greek-Albanian relations during the Interwar Period (1922-1939) reflect a tumultuous chapter in Balkan history shaped by ethnic disputes, diplomatic maneuvers, and external power dynamics. Central to these relations was the unresolved issue of minority rights, particularly concerning the Greek-speaking population in Northern Epirus and the Muslim Cham community in Greece. Both nations pursued competing narratives of victimization and entitlement, often turning to international organizations such as the League of Nations for mediation. Despite occasional diplomatic overtures, mistrust remained entrenched, fueled by nationalistic aspirations and historical grievances.

The interwar period also saw the significant influence of external powers like Italy, whose aggressive expansionist policies destabilized the region further. Italy's strategic ambitions culminated in the 1939 occupation of Albania, effectively ending any possibility of Greek-Albanian reconciliation before World War II. The Italian intervention highlighted the fragility of regional autonomy in the face of great power politics, reducing both Greece and Albania to weak peripheral players in a broader European struggle.

Domestically, both countries grappled with political instability that hampered consistent foreign policy strategies. In Albania, the consolidation of power by King Zog offered a semblance of stability but also provoked internal dissent and dependency on foreign aid. Greece, recovering from the Asia Minor Catastrophe, was often preoccupied with internal challenges, limiting its ability to assert a cohesive Balkan policy.

Ultimately, Greek-Albanian relations during the Interwar Period illustrate the complex interplay of national identity, minority rights, and geopolitical ambition. While the

bilateral disputes reflected deep-rooted historical issues, they were inseparable from the broader international context of the time. The unresolved legacies of this period continued to shape the Balkan political landscape well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leaving a historical imprint that resonates in the region's contemporary dynamics.

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