

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 4, No 1 (2023)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



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doi: [10.12681/hapscpbs.35184](https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.35184)

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To cite this article:

Peponas, M. (2023). The Greco-Albanian Relations During the Period 1974-1996: From Irredentism to Political Realism. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 4(1), 64–69. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.35184>

The Greco-Albanian Relations During the Period 1974-1996: From Irredentism to Political Realism¹

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Abstract

Greece and Albania are two countries that confronted each other several times during the first decades of the 20th century. The fact that both Albanians and Greeks were living for centuries in the same geographical region (Epirus) caused several disputes and the intervention of the Great Powers. However, after several years of armed or political confrontation (1913-1945), Greece understood the necessity for peaceful coexistence. The effort to re-establishment their relations was not easy because of the power of the nationalistic organizations. This paper aims to describe how political realism prevailed against irredentism.

Keywords: Greece, Albania, Karamanlis, Papandreou, Hoxha, Greek Junta, international relations, history, 20th century, nationalism.

Introduction

The main issues that determined the Greco-Albanian relations during the 20th century were the Northern Epirus and Chams Questions. Both could be considered as implications of the nationalistic movements that rose in the Balkans during the previous period (19th century), as well as the collapse of Ottoman domination. Consequently, after the Balkan Wars and the establishment of the Albanian state (1912 - 1913), thousands of Greek-speaking Orthodox who lived in Northern Epirus were forced to be subjects of the Albanian Prince Wied, and a particularly significant number of Albanian-speaking Muslims who were living in Chameria had to be Greek citizens. In the following years, Athens and Tirana tried to protect those populations, using their compatriots frequently as political tools (Margaritis, 2005; Manta, 2004; Kontis, 1994). Especially the Northern Epirus Question dominated Greek politics, mainly because several Northern Epirots migrated to Greece after the Second World War and created powerful organizations (Skoulidas, 2021: 143-164).

The Greek government maintained the war status against Albania since 1940 to preserve its territorial demands for Northern Epirus. Despite political leaders like Konstantinos Karamanlis believing in the decades of 1950 and 1960 that the re-establishment of the Greco-Albanian relations was crucial for the restoration of the international order in the Balkan peninsula, no one was able to take the political risk to dissatisfy the Epirotic organizations (Skoulidas, *ibid*). Therefore, the tension between the two states remained until the coup that organized the Colonels Makarezos and Papadopoulos and the

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Brigadier Patakos on 21 April 1967 (Woodhouse, 1985).

The establishment of a far-right dictatorship in Greece influenced the Greco-Albanian relations. Paradoxically, despite the ideology of its leaders, the “Junta” decided to approach Enver Hoxha, a profound communist with chauvinistic ideas for the future of his country. The main reason was that, at that period, Albania was afraid of Tito’s attack and continued its distancing from Moscow. Thus, the Greek dictators believed that they could contribute to Albania’s rapprochement with the West - something very favorable for the U.S. government. In this way, in 1970, Greece and Albania signed a commercial agreement in Paris, while the following year Greek embassy in Tirana and the Albanian embassy in Athens began to work again after three decades (Valden, 2017: 124-128; Sfetas, 2021: 170-175).

The Junta’s policy towards Albania did not concern the Northern Epirots, who continued to suffer the hostility of the Hoxha’s regime. That caused the resignation of the leaders of the most significant Epirotic organization, the Central Committee of the Northern Epirus Struggle [Κεντρική Επιτροπή Βορειοηπειρωτικού Αγώνα] in 1972 (Makedonia, 25-1-1972: 1). However, no one in Greece could criticize the decisions of the dictators without facing the danger of prosecution at that period. After the fall of the dictatorship (1974), the new Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis had to find a way to improve the Greco-Albanian relations without sacrificing the Greek minority in Albania.

Karamanlis’ realpolitik (1974 - 1980)

Konstantinos Karamanlis returned to Greece in 1974. Firstly, he had to handle a dangerous situation in Cyprus, where the Turkish army had invaded. At the same time, inside the country (especially in the Armed Forces) were remaining several supporters of the Junta. The Greek politician institutionalized the “Metapolitefsi” (the political transition of the state to a democracy) but failed to prevent the occupation of the northern part of Cyprus by the Turks. For the subsequent years, the fear of a Greco-Turkish war determined the foreign policy of Athens (Karamouzi, 2015: 11-24).

Considering Turkey as the most dangerous neighbor of Greece, Karamanlis planned a “realpolitik” in the Balkans. He aimed for the preservation of friendly international relations in the peninsula - something that would offer Athens the opportunity to concentrate on its disputes with Ankara. In this way, he approached Yugoslavia and Romania, two states governed by communist leaders, while also visiting Moscow in 1979 (Triantaphyllou, 1997: 176).

Albania was not a priority for Karamanlis. Despite that, three years before his trip to the USSR (May of 1976), the Greek Minister of Commerce Ioannis Varvitsiotis visited Tirana, signing a five year commercial agreement with the Albanian government. That move underlined the Greek Prime

Minister's intention for a peaceful coexistence of the two states, although Hoxha continued to believe that he desired the separation of Northern Epirus. Varvitsiotis' paradigm followed several politicians in the subsequent period (Ntagios, 2015: 320, 323).

The most notable decision of the Karamanlis government occurred in 1980 when the Greek leader forwarded to the parliament a bill for the end of the state of war with Albania. That was a bold move, considering the power of the Epirotic organizations. Indeed, the intense opposition of the latter caused the cancelation of the plan and contributed to the Karamanlis' loss in the elections of 1981 (Ntagios, 2015: 325).

Papandreou and the end of the state of war (1981 – 1989, 1993-1996)

In 1981, the socialist Andreas Papandreou was elected Prime Minister of Greece. Soon after, his Albanian counterpart, Mehmet Shehu, congratulated him with a warm telegram. Shehu knew not only about the ideological influences of the Greek leader but also his will for a Balkan agreement focusing on cooperation in economy, culture, and foreign policy. Indeed, Papandreou intended to improve his country's relations with its northern neighbors, mainly because -like his predecessor- he believed that Turkey was the real threat to the Greek territorial integrity. As a result, he advised his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Karolos Papoulias, to approach Tirana (Ntagios, 2015: 349-350).

At the same time, in Albania, Hoxha and his colleagues began to understand how isolated the regime was. The tension between Tirana and Belgrade for Kosovo, the continuous clamors of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus, and the distancing with the United States and the Soviet Union simultaneously resulted in constant anxiety for the Albanians. The latter were living in poverty and had no political freedom. Gradually, Hoxha understood his people's displeasure, and, fearing a possible social revolt, he began approaching the West.

In this context, a CIA memorandum created in 1983 mentioned that:

“In a marked departure from its usual xenophobia, Albania is beginning to expand its economic and political contacts abroad. In the past year, Tirana has made some solid gains, concluding a trade pact with China and making progress in its economic relations with Italy. The increase in Albania's international activity, in our opinion, is caused by:

- 1) An acute need for spare parts for Chinese-built machines and an interest in new technology to spur economic development.
- 2) An apparent desire to increase international understanding for its point of view in a deepening dispute with rival Yugoslavia” (CIA, 1983).

Albania's "departure from its usual xenophobia" was helped by the death of Hoxha on 11 April 1985. The Albanian politician had led his country for four decades, smashing the opposition and depressing the minorities. Despite the opinion expressed by authors like Miranda Vickers, his foreign policy caused international isolation and financial devastation for his country. His successor Ramiz Alia was a low-profile leader who understood that numerous reforms had to occur for the survival of the Albanian people. Especially in the Balkans, although he knew how crucial the Kosova and Northern Epirus Questions were for the involved governments, Alia desired to improve Tirana's relationship with Belgrade and Athens. It was the right time for the latter to reapproach Albania and end the state of the war declared in 1940 (Vickers, 2001: 210-211; Britannica, 2023).

In Athens, Papoulias was sure that the survival of the Greek minority was related to the improvement of Greco-Albanian relations. Also, he criticized the policy of the previous governments as stiff; for him, only a friendly Albania could guarantee the protection of the rights of the Northern Epirots. Thus, on 28 August 1987, Papandreou and his Ministerial Council declared the end of the state of war that occurred with Albania until 1940. That was a hard decision that attracted the hostility of the opposition (Ntagios, 2015: 358). The latter underlined that the government did not receive any Albanian promise about the improvement of the position of the Greek minority as a bargain for the resolution. In fact, apart from Papandreou and Papoulia's hopes, Tirana continued its hostile behavior, considering the Northern Epirots as separatists who could cause trouble to the communist regime (Kontis, 1994: 175).

The opposition parties were not the only groups that disagreed with the policy of the Greek government. The Epirotic organizations also declared their antithesis, referring in their protests to the hostility of the Albanian government against their compatriots. Those views were radicalized further during the decade of 1990 when the communist regime fell, and thousands of refugees from Albania (both Northern Epirots and Albanian) migrated to Greece. Papandreou's successor, Prime Minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis (1990 - 1993), visited Tirana in December of 1991 and tried to discourage a further exodus of the Greek minority. Obviously, advice like those was not enough to stop the devastated people from approaching the Greek frontiers for a better future. Hence, the migration continued till the first years of the 21st century (Vickers, 2001: 218-219).

In this context, the radicals believed it was the right time to act. In April of 1994, a group of the Greek terrorist organization Front for the Liberation of Northern Epirus (Μέτωπο Απελευθέρωσης Βορείου Ηπείρου) attacked against an Albanian barrack at the village Episkopi. The terrorists killed two soldiers and injured four others. A period of suspicion was followed in both countries. Some months after the attack, the CIA quoted:

“Relations between Albania and Greece have deteriorated sharply following a violent border attack in April, the latest incident in three years of strained bilateral ties. Greece has stepped up accusations of Albanian “repression” of its ethnic-Greek minority, while Tirana fears Athens has designs on the Greek minority region in southern Albania” (CIA, 1993).

The attack in Episkopi could be considered a violent reaction against the re-establishment of Greco-Albanian relations and the end of the state of war between the two parts. Despite very few things about the Font for the Liberation of Northern Epirus revealed, it was apparent that the Greek government did not encourage actions like that. Papandreou, just like Karamanlis, believed that the support of the Greek minority in Albania had to be peaceful and that both peoples needed to coexist harmonically. His successors followed his path.

Conclusions

The study of the history of contemporary Greco-Albanian relations offers some great lessons. The most significant is that the nationalistic cries always resulted in great disasters for the two countries. For example, the terrorist attack in Episkopi embarrassed Greece worldwide, and incidents like the murder of the Northern Epirot Aristotelis Goumas by Albanian nationalists in Himara in 2010 caused dangerous diplomatic implications. The same thing happened in 2018 when Albanian policemen killed Konstantinos Katsifas (a Greek local of Bularat) in an armed confrontation. Each of those episodes fed the Greek and Albanian extremists and caused several problems for the governments.

In fact, the struggle of political realism against irredentism stigmatized Greco-Albanian relations during the period 1974-1996. Political leaders such as Konstantinos Karamanlis and Andreas Papandreou understood how necessary it was to improve their country's relations with Albania because that could lead to political stability in the Balkan peninsula. In this context, they decided to confront the irredentistic Epirotic organizations, executing a "realpolitik" at any cost. That resulted in the security of the peaceful coexistence of the Greek and Albanian peoples.

On the other side, the critics against them had a correct point: the improvement of Greco-Albanian relations must not occur at the expense of the Northern Epirots. The survival of the latter remains significant for both moral and strategic reasons. Morally, those populations inhabit the same region for centuries; Northern Epirus was the homeland of their ancestors, the place where Greek culture was always present. Strategically, Athens could use its minority as a channel for communication and cooperation with Tirana. So, a requirement for the preservation of friendly relations with Albania is the execution of a more energetic policy by the Greek government: Athens must preserve with every

means the legally recognized freedoms of the Northern Epirots and use them to approach its counterpart.

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