

## The 1910 and 1911 Albanian Uprisings and the Dualism of the Greek Foreign Policy



### History

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### Abstract

Convinced that Albanians should continue their fight against the Young Turks because their national existence was at stake, the Albanian's nationalist, Ismail Qemal Vlora remained in constant contact and on good terms with Greek statesmen and politicians both in the anti-ottoman Uprising of 1910 and in the other one a year later. As long as the Greek state was economically and militarily weak and in non-peaceful relations with its neighbors, and as long as the Great Powers were determined to maintain the status- quo, Greece tried to use at its best the situation created by the Albanian uprisings so as to ensure the European intervention, which would open discussions on the unsolved issues in the Ottoman Empire. Two of those issues, Crete and Macedonia, were considered of primary importance and extremely difficult for the Greek politics. The Greek policy towards the Albanian issue had a dual character: peaceful and armed. The former involved any political action intended to channel the Albanian issue to a dual Greco-Albanian state. The latter referred to the strengthening and continuous supporting of the Uprising against the Ottoman Empire in northern Albania. But this was only one side of the Greek policy towards the Albanian issue. In an effort to implement the Megali Idea, Greece prevented the spread of the Uprisings in Lower Albania, whose territories it openly claimed.

The establishment of the Ottoman Constitution in July 1908 did not abate the national problems in the Ottoman Empire. After the suppression of the April 1909 coup, in which the "oppressed" played a paramount role, the Young Turks decided to put into practice their centralizing view of the union, which meant that the Ottoman state would not have Turkish, Albanians, Greeks, Armenians, Macedonians, Arabs, but only united Ottoman citizens who were equal before the law and had the same rights and duties<sup>i</sup>. In August 1909 there was passed the Law on Associations, whose implementation dissolved cultural associations and closed patriotic clubs. The dissolution of fighting units in Albanian and Macedonian territories was achieved through the implementation of the Law on the Prohibition of fighting units in Rumelia and the Law on the Committee. It was also provided for the compulsory military service even for non-Muslim people. The Young Turks considered centralizing even the education system in the Empire. After failing to divert the course of national education, they decided to completely exterminate it. It was founded an inspectorate for non-Turkish schools and it was demanded that Turkish was imposed as an official language in schools and courts. During 1910, the Albanian schools in all over the Albanian Vilayets were closed including the Normal School of Elbasan. Albanian newspapers were banned and publishers in many cases were imprisoned without a trial. Hundreds of Albanian nationalists were either arrested or forced to seek refuge abroad<sup>ii</sup>.

The centralizing policy of the Young Turks did not live up to the expectations of the Empire's people and nations about the Ottoman Union. Union meant preservation and why not flourishing of the cultural autonomy system, according to which they would continue to be first of all Albanians, Greeks or Armenians and then Ottomans<sup>iii</sup>. Their political elites sought for greater autonomy. Most of them dreamt of independence, while the rest of the population saw an

opportunity for preserving and strengthening the existing traditions. Consequently, the centralizing efforts of the Young Turks caused disappointment and resentment among Albanians, Greeks, Armenians, etc.. Some of them were disappointed because the Constitution did not bring about the hoped-for freedom, the material well-being and the free national development. Others were disappointed because they could not maintain the long-established privileges and rights. But all of them were united on one point: The new regime had not brought and would not bring anything good.

In this situation, the Albanians opposed the government's efforts to levy taxes, set up Turkish schools, and use the Turkish language in administration and the Arabic alphabet for writing in Albanian. The Law on banning fighting units, which ordered the disarmament of the civilian population, was greatly felt by them. The brutality of the action increasingly diminished the Albanians' loyalty towards the Porte while the existence of the European Turkey greatly depended on their loyalty<sup>iv</sup>. Even the catholic Albanians were disappointed since they were forced to serve in the Sultan's army and did not have a Canon Law any more. In the meantime, in 1910, the Law on Churches alarmed the Christian population who depended on the Patriarchate. The unpleasant functioning of the Ottoman Parliament and the extreme forms of violence that the Ottoman army used in almost all Albanian territories up to Elbasan, were the last straw to lead to the 1910 and 1911 uprisings in Kosovo and in the Highlands of Shkodra.

The deepening of the gap as never before between Albanians and Turks imposed the need for Allies. The Albanian political elite had realized that it was powerless all alone against the Ottomans. The common consequences of the Ottoman's centralizing policy were a good premise for uniting the empire's peoples and nations in order to oppose it. Convinced that Albanians should continue their fight against the Young Turks because their national existence was at stake<sup>v</sup>, Ismail Qemal Vlora remained in constant contact and on good terms with Greek statesmen and politicians both in the anti-ottoman Uprising of 1910 and in the other one a year later.

There were a wide range of reasons why Greece was sensitive to the developments in the northern Albanian territories.

After the Greco-Ottoman War of 1897 and the unilateral declaration of union with Greece by the Cretan Assembly (September 24, 1908), the Crete's issue or the Girit's issue as it was known in the documentation at the time, became sensitive again in early 1910. Cretan officers asked their government to formalize their alliance with Greece<sup>vi</sup>. This request was strongly opposed by the Muslim population on the island, and the Ottoman Empire threatened to deploy troops and take control of the situation there. Indirectly, it accused the Greek government for instigating the operations in Crete and began preparations for war. There were sent reinforcements in the Greco-Ottoman border and fortifications started being built. Meanwhile, local authorities were urged to gather volunteers and to organize solidarity rallies in defense of the rights of the vulnerable Muslim minorities in Crete.

In this tense situation, the Porte was also facing the Uprising in Kosovo. At those moments, the strengthening of the Albanian movement was convenient for Greece because it would shift the Porte's attention away from the issue of Crete and it would also weaken the Ottoman military force that could be sent on the island. Although it officially attempted to maintain a good relation with the Ottoman state<sup>vii</sup>, Greece, being powerless, would take advantage of any complications in the Balkans in order to fish in troubled waters.

As long as the Greek state was economically and militarily weak and in non-peaceful relations with its neighbors, and as long as the Great Powers were determined to maintain the *status-quo*, Greece feared to appear active in the Balkan affairs. Instead it tried to use at its best the situation created by the Albanian uprisings so as to ensure the European intervention, which would open discussions on the unsolved issues in the Ottoman Empire. Two of those issues, Crete and Macedonia, were considered of primary importance and extremely difficult for the Greek politics. This situation made the official Athens both cautious and interested in utilizing the Albanian efforts and why not hoping to pull chestnuts out of the fire for the cat's paw.

On the other hand, the Albanian uprisings could have fatal consequences for the Ottoman state as they might serve as a catalyst for other movements in Macedonia, Arabian territories, etc.. Administration of the uprisings and particularly the disarmament of Albanians by the Ottoman army were considered a hard long task. It required the use of a large army, and it could even paralyze the reorganization of the Ottoman army, which could influence the latent aspirations of the Balkan's peoples and countries<sup>viii</sup>. The Ottoman Empire was in a difficult situation. If the soldiers were dislocated from other provinces of the country to be used in the repeated, dangerous battles with Albanians, the maintenance of the *status-quo* would be threatened and the slumbered nationalist aspirations of the Balkan countries would be awakened. Indeed, the occurrence of uprisings, the difficulties they inflicted on the Porte, lured the Balkan countries, which were thinking how to draw conclusions from the interesting new panorama in their borders.

The orientation of the Greek policy towards relations with Albanians and their Uprising was also influenced by the Italian policy. Having been interested in the Balkans since 1876, Italy sought to enter peacefully in the Albanian territories. The historical ties that existed between Rome and the Arbëresh community in southern Italy, whose members supported the gain of autonomy for the Albanian territories, according to the Ottoman Vizier Mehmed Ferid Pasha, clearly expressed Italy's intentions. According to a general assessment he made in May 1906, "Italy was determined to strengthen and extend its influence in the Albanian territories, aiming to turn the Adriatic Sea in an Italian lake."<sup>ix</sup> The preoccupation of the Italian press and politics was high at the time of the Albanian uprising. In the international policy circles, it was increasingly reinforced the idea that Italy was taking an active part in the preparations of a general uprising in Albania. Furthermore, a significant part of arms trafficking was mediated by Italian consular offices in the Adriatic coastal cities<sup>x</sup>.

The abovementioned developments interfered with Greece's interest and its long-standing work in Lower Albania. Since 1904, the Greek vice-consul in Durres pointed out the unbearable obstacles

placed by the Italian propaganda, which openly worked against Greece<sup>xi</sup>. This concern was obviously expressed not only in the field but also in the Greek high political circles. In the spring of 1907, Greek Prime Minister informed the Austro-Hungarian minister in Athens about his government's concern regarding Italy's plans which reached as far as Epirus<sup>xii</sup>. The establishment of the "Pro Albania" Committee in Rome in April 1911, its calls for fundraising and gathering volunteers to help their Albanian brothers and the sympathies shown by the Italian press toward the rebels<sup>xiii</sup>, were alarm bells ringing for the Greek political circles.

In this situation, the Greek policy towards the Albanian issue had a dual character: peaceful and armed. The former involved any political action intended to channel the Albanian issue to a dual Greco-Albanian state. In view of this goal it was claimed to help the Albanians' spiritual emancipation, aiming their breakaway from the Italian and Austro-Hungarian influence. The latter referred to the strengthening and continuous supporting of the Uprising against the Ottoman Empire in northern Albania. According to the internal official Greek correspondence, the uprisings in Northern Albania weakened the Ottoman military strength, increased the Albanians hatred for the Turks and thus modeled the national consciousness of the Muslim Albanians and held unextinguished Europe's interest for Albania<sup>xiv</sup>. For the official Athens, it was considered appropriate and more practical that the demands of the Albanian uprisings were limited to the attainment of privileges previously enjoyed by the Albanians, and not spread to the emergence of autonomous trends<sup>xv</sup>. According to Athens, the conditions for solving the Albanian issue were not ready yet, while the lack of solidarity between Albanians and their political leaders was quite evident.

In support of the program for strengthening the friendly ties with the Albanians, destined to play an important role in the Ottoman Empire in a near future, in 1910 the Greek government supported Ismail Vlorë's proposals to help publish books in Albanian, learn the Albanian language in Greek schools and form a Greek-Albanian committee based in a European city. The Committee had to take over the running of the Albanians' political activity. It would have to set up branches in Albanian territories, "which will communicate between them and will be linked to the Greek-Albanian committee, take all necessary measures to protect our [Greek and Albanian] rights against any common enemy<sup>xvi</sup>." At the same time the official Greece spoke in favor of writing the Albanian language with the Latin alphabet, although the press continued to support the Greek alphabet<sup>xvii</sup>.

A year later, the Greek government took other measures, consisting in:

- The establishment of an Albanian-language department at the National University of Athens, under a bill on universities which was expected to be voted in the Greek Parliament in June 1911;
- Teaching Albanian as a Foreign Language in Albania's Greek schools;
- Free publication and distribution of essential school textbooks;

- The schooling of several Albanian Muslim students in one of the Greek high schools at Greek government's expenses;
- Housing and support for Albanian refugees in Greece as well as economic assistance for expatriate Albanian leaders in Montenegro;
- Publication of the Albanian newspaper "Shkreptima" in Cairo, in support of the Albanian rights and Greek-Albanian relations<sup>xviii</sup>.

In order to support them, the Greek consul of Manastir, Mavronidis came into contact with the Albanian ruling circles. While explaining the course of Greek policy for supporting the Albanians' national and cultural efforts and for giving due importance to friendly relations with them, he asked for their cooperation<sup>xix</sup>. He also promised support to open schools in the Albanian language and to use it in Greek schools.

Leonidha Naçi, a former Albanian language teacher in Korça, after obtaining in Athens the necessary diploma for working as a teacher, was appointed by royal decree the Albanian language teacher in Corfu's Greek trade school. Opening an Albanian language course in Corfu, especially when the Porte was placing obstacles to the establishment of national schools in lower Albanian territories, was alluring to the Albanian nationalists. For these propaganda purposes there were used the scholarships to Vlahos high school in Corfu which were given to four southern Albanians by the Greek government<sup>xx</sup>.

Regarding the second aspect of the Greek government's program, the one on strengthening and supporting the uprisings in northern Albania, in early April 1911, the Greek vice-consul of Durres, Th. Apostolopoulos was authorized by his superiors to temporarily stay in Shkodra, a city that was very close to the uprising active area. On 8 May, the Greek Foreign Ministry instructed its consulates in Ioannina, Gjirokastra, Preveza and Manastir (Bitola) to show understanding and support towards the rebel movement in the North<sup>xxi</sup>. In support of this policy, the Arvanitas Lieutenant Kondulis arrived in Cetina where he sent 25,000 francs and several crates of weapons and ammunition to the insurgent highlanders<sup>xxii</sup>. From there, he briefed extensively and continuously the Greek government about the Albanian uprising, the reaction of the Great Powers' consuls, Montenegro's attitude and above all, the movements of the Albanian political factor as in Ismail Vlora's case. Meanwhile, from Corfu and Himara which was far from the Ottoman eye, there were massively smuggled weapons for the insurgents<sup>xxiii</sup>. Furthermore, Albanian nationalists took refuge in the Greek territory, which was a tradition that Greece had relied on either for winning over the Albanians or for exercising pressure through them on the Sublime Porte, for other matters<sup>xxiv</sup>.

But this was only one side of the Greek policy towards the Albanian issue and of the instructions coming from Athens. In an effort to implement the Megali Idea, the political view in Greek's foreign policy, in the Circular of 8 May 1911 the Foreign Ministry categorically ordered its consular officials that the movement should be maintained within the clean Albanian areas and not be extended into the South. They should also "explain to the homogeneous inhabitants of their

areas that the expansion of the Albanian uprising poses a risk to Greece's national interests and suggest that they distance themselves from any movement or commotion resulting from the uprising." <sup>xxv</sup>.

The officials had to strictly obey the instructions of the circular by not providing any form of help for spreading the uprising in the South.

The moment the Albanian issue left the framework of the Ottoman domestic policy and took a European dimension, the Greek Foreign Minister, Ioannis Grisparis in a second instruction in June 1911, informed the Greek consulates in the Rumelia Vilayet that Greece would eagerly follow the events in its northern border because it was very unlikely to find any solution to the Albanian issue without somehow impinging on Greece's high interest. Although in the abovementioned correspondence, Greece declared its interest for the establishment of an Albanian state, which was considered a "sincere friend" and an "indispensable ally", it stated without hesitation that "there would never be accepted a solution to the Albanian issue if it impinged its interests in Epirus" <sup>xxvi</sup>. For the official Athens, the policy on Epirus was fully determined to maintain the deeply Hellenic character which it claimed that it was officially recognized by the Treaty of Berlin <sup>xxvii</sup>. The next instruction, on July 14 stipulated that, any action targeting the expansion of insurgent movements in Epirus would face opposition from the government of Greece <sup>xxviii</sup>.

In view of this policy, it tried to keep the Orthodox population of Ioannina vilayet as far as possible from the Albanian National Movement trying to stop the spread of the uprising there. The successful inclusion of them in the uprising would eventually consider the southern provinces as Albanian. For this reason, Athens responded negatively to Ismail Vlora's request to involve the 1910 riots in Himara in the uprisings in the North. The population of Himara was advised not to cooperate, but instead to deliver to the Great Powers a written protest against the centralizing policies of the Sublime Porte and to this end, all Greek consular officials worked intensively.

In July 1911, there were expelled from Greece the Albanian nationalists who were trying to organize an uprising in the southern areas. Fazil Toptani, who had been residing in Corfu since May 1911, had to leave at the request of the Greek government <sup>xxix</sup>. A second expelling order came for Nikolla Ivanaj, a reliable man for the Italian-Albanian Committee, who held active links with the Albanian clubs in Albania from Corfu. It also stopped the smuggling of arms toward the Albanian territories.

With these deliberate measures, Greece prevented the spread of the Uprising in Lower Albania, whose territories it openly claimed. This policy was manifested in the Greek press, which radically changed its attitude. It began to praise the tranquility and peace of the "Epirus" Christians, portraying them as an example of loyalty towards the Ottomans in contrast with the Muslim Albanians. Similarly, in its sheets, there started to appear complains about the movements of Muslim Albanians in the south, who were labeled as compulsive oppressors of the Christian element <sup>xxx</sup>.

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