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**The Orthodox Church in Albania and
Greek-Albanian Relations 1919-1922**

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The Orthodox Church in Albania and Greek-Albanian Relations 1919-1922

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Abstract

This paper examines the role that the Orthodox Church in Albania played in Albanian-Greek relations from the end of World War I to the establishment of a national Autocephalous Orthodox Albanian Church in 1922. As a result of the political and social structure that was in place during the Ottoman Empire, religion played a significant role in post-Ottoman politics. This was amplified in countries like Albania, where no national religious institutions existed. At the end of World War I, Greece used its influence towards the Patriarchate of Constantinople to increase its opportunity to annex the *terra irredenta* of Korçë and Gjirokastër, while Albania tried and managed to *nationalize* religious communities that existed in its territory. The mainly Orthodox, Albanian-speaking Area/Region/Diocese of Korça where religion became the outmost battlefield between Albania and Greece is the area of research for this paper. The way politics used religious communities on one hand, and the way religious communities used their influence towards politics on the other hand, constitute the core analyses of this paper. The theoretical approach of religion as a soft power in International Relations distinguishes two main levels of the religious communities, firstly its role as a *political* structure (bishops, priests) that can be influenced by state organization and secondly its *divine* authority, which constitutes its inner strength and can be used to influence the faithful population toward a national or social idea. As such, the paper focuses on Albanian-Greek diplomatic battle as well as on the religious battle between the Albanian-speaking Orthodox populations the Greek religious hierarchy. The results that are acquired from this paper can be used in other similar situations throughout the territories that once were part of the Ottoman Empire, as they have as their basic premise the *Millet System* based on which the Sultans governed their empire.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Religion, Soft-power.

Introduction

The Great Powers recognized Albanian sovereignty on July 1913, after Albania's independence on November, 28th 1912. Albania was the only nation with no national religious institutions, while Albanians were the only multi-religious ethnic group (Muslims 52%; Orthodox 20%; Bektashi 18%; Catholic 10%) in the Balkans. Korçë and Gjirokastër were claimed by Greece since 1913 as "Northern Epirus". Both areas were included in Albania in the Protocol of Florence. A number of Greek-speaking villages were located south of Gjirokastër. However, its vast majority as well as the entire population of Korça was Albanian-speaking, half-Orthodox. Greece claimed that every Orthodox Albanian was Greek, as being under the Ecumenical Patriarchate spiritual leadership, which since 1860s acted as a Greek foreign relations instrument. It unilaterally annexed those territories in 1915. However, the national schism between the pro-Entente Government of Eleutherios Venizelos and pro-Central Powers King resulted in Korça's and Gjirokastër's occupation by France and Italy respectively. The rest of Albania was controlled by Austro-Hungary. Since Great Powers' chosen Prince Wied left the country in 1914, Albania had no national authorities. Later Bishop Theophan Noli had established an Albanian Church in America, in an attempt to 'nationalize' every church in Albania. The people of Korça, a stronghold of Albanian nationalism, managed to convince French authorities to create a local administration, unofficially called the "Albanian Republic of Korça". Local councils, elected by the priests, ran churches and schools. They introduced Albanian in schools and Church liturgy; seriously undermining the Greek claim on Orthodox Albanians. Bishops were expelled during the war for their anti-Albanian stance, including the Metropolitan of Durrës Iakovos Ngigilias, a Greek from Asia Minor. On July 1919, Italy and Greece signed the Venizelos-Titoni Agreement, which set the mutual support of each-others claims towards Albania. France and Great Britain agreed to the Venizelos demands, disestablishing the "Republic of Korça" and executing its leader, Themistokli Gërmenji. Albania's borders were to be set in the Paris Peace Conference. On January 1920, an independent Albanian Government was created seeking the reestablishment of 1913 borders. Korça became the outmost battlefield between Albania and Greece and the Orthodox Church would play an important role to the developments.

Reinstating Greek Influence

On August 11th 1919, Venizelos asked the Ecumenical Patriarchate to send Iakovos as Exarch to Korça, instead of Ioakeim, who had been selected. (Kondis, 1995) The Patriarchate ordered Iakovos to go to Athens and get under Greek Government orders. He was to be sent to Korça along with the Greek

occupation Army. Greek diplomat Kalevras was to be appointed governor “in order to cover the true role of the Greek Hierarchy.”¹

Just a few kilometers before getting to Korça, they were informed that Greece would not advance. The French Colonel who ran the town had asked for a postponement, because of massive Albanian protests. Venizelos, being aware of the Albanian national sensitivity in Korça, instructed his representatives to “explain [to the people] the high role that Albanians² in Greece have”. He would accept Albanian schools and an extensive autonomy. (Kondis, 1995)

Kalevras was appointed General Governor of Epirus, while the army stepped back. The only one who entered Korça was Metropolitan Iakovos. His mission was political: to prepare the population for the Greek occupation. (Stratigakis, 1956) But the situation in Korça was tense, as Iakovos was informed: Albanians would forcefully react in case of a Greek intervention. His first achievement would be reinstating Greek language in Churches, just like during the Ottoman rule, which had been replaced by Albanian language since 1914. (Kondis, 1995)

The new French Commander of Korça, Colonel Cretin was instructed by his Government to cooperate with and back up Iakovos requests. The main focus of Iakovos was the opening of Greek schools for Orthodox Albanians. Those schools would create a propaganda tool, as well as extend the network of his collaborators.

In November 1919, Cretin allowed the opening of four Greek schools, a decision that according to him “immediately provoked an outright concern of the Albanian circles, which naturally, see this as a proof of a Greek propaganda.” (Çami & Pollo, 1969)

Iakovos allowed a two-hour per week teaching of Albanian, considering this to be enough, since “everyone knew the language”. The rest of the teaching was done in Greek, a language not spoken by the population. He managed to open more than 21 schools, extending his network to tens of teachers and hundreds of pupils, who under the French rule had limited options. (Kondis, 1995)

The reaction towards his propaganda made Iakovos afraid, asking Cretin for more guards assigned to protect him. Cretin reported that “his role has made people see him as an agent of Greek propaganda” and this would not happen if Iakovos “would keep the balanced stance he is supposed to”.

Cretin felt Iakovos was an obstacle even to Greece’s goal. He reported that his presence could be justified at first as “a mission of peace... to secure the population of Greek Government’s good will”. However, two months later, in December, his exaggerated requests and attitude became “a serious obstacle to the implementation of the Grecophile policy, which I am implementing, according to your instruction”.

¹This is accepted by Iakovos in his authorized biography: Stratigakis, 1956, p. 100.

²Albanians of Attica, Beoetia, Euboea, Peloponesus and the islands, who later would be called Arvanites.

According to Cretin, “there is no question that the masses would react by force to the entrance of the Greeks”, while the “Grecophiles, although too little in number, are still moving... with their main tool the opening of Greek schools, whose creation is allegedly for humanitarian purposes, but in reality for political ones.” (Çami & Pollo, 1969)

Kapshtica Protocol

The occupation was not eminent, as the vast majority of the Greek Army was in Thrace and Asia Minor. The VIII Army Division was located in Epirus. This was a medium unit that lacked equipment and soldiers. On March 7, 1920 the division reported that it would not be able to react in case of an Albanian rebellion, because of the movements towards Thrace. Therefore, it asked for soldiers and equipment and later on an order to occupy Korça. (Kondis, 1995)

Because of lack of personnel, the Greek Government ordered to replace the soldiers of the division with “Albanians¹ in order to create a positive reaction of the population”. But, a massive movement was impossible and the plan was abandoned. (Kondis, 1995)

Therefore, Greece was bluffing. On one hand, Greece was declaring that the Greek army would replace the French as international troops, discouraging Albanians. On the other hand, it was asking France to postpone its disengagement. After two delays on Greece’s request, at the end of May France decided to withdraw.

On May 21st, Iakovos was informed of this decision and declared to Cretin that Greece would respect the population, as well as Albanian schools. Cretin asked him to keep quiet, in order to avoid panic. On the contrary, the Metropolitan spread the word; a maneuver to discourage Albanians, while reinstating that the Greek troops would stay as international troops, until the Peace Conference decisions were made. Greece, through Iakovos was relying on those arguments in order to achieve occupation without rebellion. The elected representatives of the town: Mayor Koço Kotta and Council Chairman, Jorgji Raci, both Orthodox, asked Cretin to expel Iakovos. They also decided to unite Korça with the Albanian Government of Tirana and started to prepare for war. (Duka, 2007)

On 22 May, Venizelos ordered a division from Asia Minor to be sent to Korça, arguing that “we endanger to lose [it] forever”. But the army could not arrive in such a short notice. According to Iliakis, the Governor of Kozani, who acted as liaison to Iakovos, if France would have agreed on delaying its disengagement for a single day as asked, Greece would have been able to occupy Korça. (Kondis, 1995)

Venizelos justified that Greece did not intervene because “the English advised [so] fearing an Albanian reaction”. But, the real cause was that “no

¹See note 3

thought for occupation of Northern Epirus could be at this moment, because of our lack from the occupation of Eastern Thrace". (Kondis, 1995)

Strategically, Venizelos had to defeat the Turkish troops, before Turkey would rise from Ottoman Empire's ashes. Albania could be easily won in a future war. Consequently, he had to accept the will of Korça's population to unite with Albania. However, in order to achieve its goal, Greece needed to keep Iakovos' network of information, as well as the 'Greekness' of schools and churches. Furthermore, by not contacting the Albanians, Greek military absence in the region would become obvious, creating a bad momentum for Iakovos and his entourage.

Therefore, a day after Korça was reunited, Venizelos instructed Iakovos for an unexpected move: "to take over to Albanians to convince us not to continue with the occupation of Korça, waiting for the Conference, with the condition to respect our institutions and people in Korça". (Kondis, 1995)

The people were convinced that the Greek occupation was a matter of time. Therefore, they were preparing for war. Raci and Kotta had handed Korça over to Government representatives: Eshref Frashëri and Pandeli Cale. Nikollaq Zoi was appointed prefect. Iakovos met with them and reassured that the occupation was eminent. Nevertheless, since he did not want bloodshed, he offered to use his influence to the Greek troops so they would not advance. The Delegation, being certain that Korça would be occupied, agreed. (Stratigakis, 1956)

Iakovos told them to meet the Head of the Occupying Army, Trikoupis, who referred them to Governor Iliakis. Iliakis reaffirmed that the decision was definitive, but for Metropolitan's sake he would discuss it with Venizelos. The theatrical act resulted in Venizelos answer "to halt the occupation" and achieve an agreement, which took the Delegation by surprise. (Kondis, 1995)

The next day, the agreement, branded as Kapshtica Protocol, was signed based on the draft written by Metropolitan Iakovos. It sanctioned that the Greek Army would halt and Korça would be united with Albania, until the Conference's decision. Albania would respect the Greeks of Korça and schools and churches would continue to be in Greek. Some villages east of the town would remain under the Greek occupation.

The Protocol was important for Greece. For the first and only time, Albania recognized that a Greek population existed in the entirely Albanian-speaking Korça. Greece used this agreement as a "strong diplomatic title" that Orthodox Albanians of Korça were actually Greek. This was an enormous success, especially, as it was an outcome of a bluff.

On the other hand, it also gave Albania a political momentum. It ended a problem in the Southeast, allowing the government to focus on the Italian-occupied Southwest Vlora region.

There were two developments that made the Protocol void. First, within a year, Greece faced the biggest modern history military disaster by Turkey. Second, Italy denounced the Venizelos-Titoni Treaty. The fact that the Protocol

allowed Albanians to win the war in Vlora was a major cause for the denunciation.¹

Iakovos' Role in Korca

Iakovos' role was limited only on those matters sanctioned by Kapshtica Protocol; along with the power acquired from his network of information. This network was composed of Greek schools' teachers and a minority of priests. The information gathered was sent to Athens, in a diplomatic narrative. Every document was made in two copies; one copy was sent to the receiver, and the other to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²

If persons of interest for Greece were in Korça, Iakovos' network would follow and monitor them, as he reported during a visit of a Turkish colonel in the town. Moreover, he acted as a Greek official in front of Albanian high authorities. (Kondis, 1995)

In November 1920, Venizelos lost during the General Elections, and left Greece. A new government was created, promising a disengagement from Asia Minor and restitution of Monarchy. As a result the majority of the pre-1913 Greece, including Albanians, as well as the majority of the minority votes in the New Lands was casted for the Demetrios Gounaris' led "United Opposition". Iakovos did not lose just his political mentor, but Gounaris' winning created a patriotic movement on countries, under Greek threat. (Stratigakis, 1956)

On March 1921, Albania was set to organize its first elections. Iakovos asked the new government, whether he should act. "If the participation of our men ... will harm the international opinion on the issue of Korça and Northern Epirus, then a boycott should be organized" – he proposed. (Kondis, 1995) The Greek Government asked Albania to halt the elections, implying that Korça and Gjirokastër were not recognized as part of its territory. Albania did not accept this proposal, based on the Protocol of Florence. Greece instructed a boycott, while rumors that elections would be a *casus belli* and that the Greek Armed Forces were on the border were spreading throughout Albania. (S.M.T., 1921)

It resulted in unexpected win for the Greek policy. On 13 February 1920, a group of Korça Orthodox Albanian nationalist elite signed a memorandum asking the Albanian Government for a separate administration of the South, with a Christian Governor, a Parliament and a Gendarmerie made of 2/3 Christians, fiscal autonomy and military neutrality. (Zoi, 13/2/1921)

The fact that this memorandum was organized by an Orthodox Albanian nationalist group came as a surprise to the Government of Tirana and Athens. Their argument was that the Greek claim that "a Muslim government" was discriminating a Christian population would be void. Being an Albanian

¹The denunciation was firstly reported on June 1920. Kondis, 1995, p. 255.

²Those documents are in folder B/35, year 1925 in the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs and are partly published in: Glavinis, 1986

nationalist memorandum, signed by Orthodox Albanians, it would make those who professed obedience to Iakovos act as Albanians in opposition and not as Greek agents. Finally, when the Peace Conference would reinstate the Protocol of Florence, these arrangements could easily be overturned. The Metropolis instructed its followers to sign the memorandum. (Zoi, 16/2/1921) Unable to a military intervention, its implementation would be a good scenario for Greece; a fact that Albanian nationalist were unaware of.

Albanian Government refused the memorandum, arguing that it should be discussed in the Parliament, (Ministry of Interior, 17/2/1921) while every town in the South organized protests against it.¹ In Korça influential Orthodox Albanians opposed the memorandum. (Ministry of Interior, 5/3/1921) Prefect Zoi tried to divide the organizers, through the influence of their fellow Albanian nationalist Bishop Noli. (Zoi, 25/3/1921)

Elections were held on March 5th. Many Orthodox in the town boycotted, while the memorandum had no impact in the villages, where everyone voted. (Turtulli, 1921) As a result, Orthodox Albanian nationalists managed to get elected in the parliament. (Dervishi, 2006)

The situation triggered an investigation. Korça Police Director, Nik Dishnica reported on April that Iakovos was acting against the Albanian interests and that he had advised his followers for a boycott, enforcing the memorandum. Furthermore, Greece was informed on every development because of Iakovos “network of spies”. Finally, he proposed the expulsion of the Metropolitan from Albania. (Dishnica, 1921)

Although he had a second-hand role in the memorandum issue, Iakovos “managed to create a division in the Albanian movement, creating a shadow between Christian and Muslim Albanians”; divide and conquer. (Stratigakis, 1956)

Fall and Expulsion

Korça, which had been the frontrunner of Albanian-language Church, had become one of the last Albanian regions where liturgy was held in Greek. Those who unwillingly helped Iakovos through the memorandum, along with the rest of Orthodox elite on April 24th did the opposite. They asked the Government to allow Albanian in liturgy, threatening that “either peacefully and prudently or unwillingly and in a blur, the desire of Albanian Christians, to mass those saint days of Easter” in Albanian would be fulfilled.

The Government decided to maintain the status quo: the Prefect ordered the population to keep calm, but the military structure upraised. Under the lead of the Third Company Commander, Spiro Kosova, Orthodox Albanian soldiers forcibly took the keys of Saint George Church and invited Bishop Noli’s aides,

¹The protests are archived on folder 45 of the Collection “Ministry of Interior” in Albanian Central Archives.

Fathers Vasil Marku and Vangjel Çamçe to hold the Great Thursday Liturgy in Albanian. (Verli, 2008)

Prefect Zoi sent police officers to stop the people from entering the church and called the Interior Ministry. As Zoi was on the phone, Nik Dishnica forces could not stop the population; while a clash with the Army, was out of the question. (Zoi, 28/4/1921) Consequently, thousands of Christian Albanians took part in the liturgy, a year after Albanian was banned from the Church. Metropolitan Iakovos massed in another Church, with a few of his followers.

The Government ordered the army to halt its actions and turn the Church to the Metropolis. On April, 30th, Zoi expressed Iakovos “his regret for non-preventing the coup d’état”, ensuring that after Easter the Church would be turned over. (Kondis, 1995)

This situation was presented exaggerated in Athens. False reports of casualties and uncertainty of Iakovos fate alarmed the Greek Government, which immediately closed the borders with Albania. On May, 6th Governor Iliakis gave an ultimatum to Zoi. If the Church would not turn to the Metropolis, Greece was “ready with every force, to do what the [Albanian] government could not do in order to protect [Greek] national dignity.” Greece was outraged by the fact that orthodox officers initiated the uprising. Therefore, it requested Orthodox Albanian’s exclusion from the army, as long as there was no decision by the Peace Conference. Iliakis told Zoi (an Orthodox Albanian) that Churches kept the Greek nation alive and religious concessions to Albania were not possible. (Kondis, 1995)

Saint George Church was becoming *casus belli* for Greece, based on Kapshtica Protocol, as Tirana feared. Immediately, Albania replied that the religious status quo would be maintained “until relations of Albanian Orthodox and the Patriarchate would be set”, while the call of Orthodox Albanians in the army was an internal issue. (Ministry of Interior, 6/5/1921)

Moreover, officers and local personalities gathered the next day to prepare for war. “Albanians are pitiful; divided they are insulting each-other” – reported Iakovos to Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, regarding some requests to turn the Church back, in order to avoid war. (Kondis, 1995)

A Governmental appeal was displayed in Korça on May 14th. It declared that Albania “has no intention to strike any of its neighbors, on the contrary it desires total friendship. Besides hope, in case that any of our neighbor passes our borders, in order to defend our Fatherland, together with the People, we will fulfill our duty. We request calm and cold blood.” (Ministry of Interior, 14/5/1921)

Local authorities were stuck between two fires: if they turned the Church back, they would provoke a popular uprising, as it would be treated as treason. If they let the Church to mass in Albanian, it could provoke war. Therefore, Zoi kept the keys and the Church was closed. Meanwhile, the vast majority of

Orthodox Korça inhabitants, more than 7000 people signed a protest asking for “the right of preaching of Orthodox faith in our Churches in our language.”¹

However, the Greek threat became insignificant in a few weeks. Gounaris’ Government had reinstated pro-Central Powers King, creating a friction with the Allies. Furthermore, Greece started its biggest offensive in Turkey on August 1921, shifting its army and attention far away. This time, Greek absence in the Albanian borders was obvious. Therefore, the Church’s keys were handed to the people on August 22nd. (Zoi, 22/8/1921)

Greek inactivity made obvious that military action was out of question, because of its involvement in Asia Minor. Iakovos felt threatened in Korça. The last months he was isolated in the Metropolis and was constantly guarded, as his action had provoked irritation among the population.

Albanian authorities sequestered a number of letters that proved that he acted as a Consul, resulting in the termination of his secret communication with Greece. (Zoi, 21/8/1921) The schools, his last stronghold, gathered an insignificant number of registrations, since Albanian State schools were opened and the fear of occupation was missing. (Stratigakis, 1956)

The three newspapers in Korça had voiced requests for Iakovos expulsion. Since September Orthodox Communities of the town and villages officially requested his expulsion. (Zoi, 10/9/1921) The local authorities, proposed this action to take effect as soon as possible. On November 9th 1921, the Peace Conference had decided to reinstate the Protocol of Florence, acknowledging Korça as Albanian territory. This triggered the final governmental decision ten days later. It underlined that under Ottoman law, still in force in Albania, the metropolitan should be a local citizen, a capacity which Iakovos lacked. Furthermore, his action against the national interest and the internal peace forced the Government to expel him. (Ministry of Interior, 19/11/1921) He was driven through Vlora and Corfu to Greece. (Council of Ministers, 19/11/1921)

For his contribution, Iakovos was awarded the Greek Military Cross of the First Order, becoming one of the few prelates to have military decorations. (Stratigakis, 1956)

The priests in Korça elected a new council, made of well-known patriotic figures. Its first decision was to sanction Albanian as the sole language in the Metropolis. (Posta e Korçës, 1921) A few months later, a Cleric-Laic Assembly decided to declare the Church of Albania Autocephalous, under the leadership of Albanian clerics and with Albanian as the language of worship.

As an irony to the idea that Iakovos was fighting a “Muslim” state, the borders’ decision that triggered his expulsion resulted from the diplomatic surge of Bishop Theophan Noli. His expulsion was decided by Prime Minister Pandeli Evangjeli, on proposal of Prefect Zoi and implemented by Police Director Dishnica, all of them Orthodox from Korça.

¹ The original protest, including the signatues, is located in the Albanian Archives: Ministry of Interior, 16/5/1921.

Conclusion

Greece used its influence to the Ecumenical Patriarchate to send Metropolitan Iakovos in Korça, in order to act as its political representative. Iakovos managed to reinstate Greek in Church and schools, as well as to create a network of information, acting as an intelligence agency and consulate of Greece. Moreover, through preaching, he tried to prepare the terrain for Greek occupation. Greece could not occupy Korça due to the large military presence in Thrace and Asia Minor, an unknown fact to Albanians. Therefore, Venizelos, through Iakovos, managed to achieve the signing of Kapshtica Protocol, which recognized the existence of Greeks in the entirely Albanian-speaking Korça area, as well as the exclusive use of Greek in liturgy and schools until the final border decision. Through his role as the presumable spiritual head of the majority of Korça's population, Iakovos managed to create a climate of distrust; a role that was manifested in the Orthodox Albanians' Memorandum. The distrust resulted in an ecclesiastical uprising, where the population and Orthodox soldiers managed to hold an Albanian liturgy. Greece treated this act as *casus belli*. As its enormous military presence in Asia Minor became obvious, another military front was improbable for Greece. Consequently, the church was allowed to preach in Albanian and Iakovos was isolated. As the Albanian borders were set, Iakovos was expelled and local ecclesiastical authorities reintroduced Albanian. Albania was the only nation in the Balkans with no national religion or religious institutions. The *political structure* of those institutions (Metropolitan Iakovos and his entourage) were used as a political tool by a foreign country, while through its *moral authority* the Church hierarchy tried to create a climate that upheld the Greek demands. This resulted in a diplomatic battle, creating confrontations and agreements, as well as a religious battle between the Greek hierarchy and Albanian population and priests, as an indirect consequence of the Ottoman Empire's *Millet System*.

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