

Italy's Policy of Albania in 1930s and Turkey di Mevlüt Çelebi*

After establishing the Republic of Turkey after the War of Independence, Atatürk followed a policy based on peace and friendship. During the period of Atatürk's RP. Party leadership, relations between Italy and Turkey were positive unlike Turkey's relations with other countries. After 1923, Turkey solved its problems with England and France, and built and maintained friendly relations with them. Relations between Turkey and Italy, who supported Turkey in its War of Independence, started to go worse after 1923. During this period, Italy had to take Turkey's international relations into consideration while; Turkey was arranging its foreign policies according to Italy.

In October 1922, fascists came into power with the leadership of Benito Mussolini, who pursued an aggressive and invasive policy. At that time, Turkey had to be careful about Italy as they announced that some parts of Turkey which were promised to be given to Italy belonged to the Roman Empire. They wanted to govern the Mediterranean region which was called "mare nostrum" by Romans.

Turkey took some precautions in order to protect itself in case of an attack. According to Atatürk, "If Mussolini decides to attack Turkey, his first step will be to land soldiers in Albania and hold-down the country"¹. Based on this guess, it was foreseen that Mussolini would go to Selanik moving through Greece. In case of such a movement, Istanbul and Aegean Sea would be under threat. So

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¹ Hasan Rıza Soyak, *Atatürk'ten Hatıralar II (Memories with Atatürk II)*, İstanbul, Yapı Kredi Bankası Yayını, 1973, p.526.

Turkey established a consulate building in Albania, Avlonya in 1925, as it was thought that Italy would start its attack from this city².

In this period, some events happened which proved the worries of Turkey. Italy strengthened its affect on Albania, with the help of Ahmet Zogu who took the power in Albania and one year later he announced that he established the republic. In protecting the regime of dictatorship, Zogu was supported by Italy who also gave financial support; and in 1926, a treaty of alliance and friendship was signed between these two countries. In 1927, with Tiran treaty of alliance lasting 25 years, Italy took the country under its wings; and after this event, Ahmet Zogu announced monarchy in 1928 with Italy's support.

As is known, Republic of Turkey and Albania are the two countries built on Ottoman Empire's lands. This fact contributed to the positive relations between these countries. In addition to this, as there were Albanian people living in Turkey, the two countries' bonds were very strong. This positive environment can also be seen in Atatürk's words: "We want Albania to develop, make progress and get stronger". This goodwill of Atatürk and Turkish people was answered by Albania, and in 1920s, during debates about the regime; the republican government in Turkey was seen as the best democratic example and appraised by Albanians. Albanian intellectuals were also strongly appraising the progress in Turkey in 1920s and seeing it as a unique and a versatile revolution. On the other hand, in the Balkans, Atatürk and Turkey was taken as an example of stability³.

The Treaty of Amity signed in December, 1923 between Turkey and Albania, was the first Amity Treaty in the history of new Albania. But as in 1928 the Monarchy was announced, relations between two countries worsened. Many countries, including Italy as the prime one, gave support to the Monarchy and to the King. Turkey was the only country who did not acknowledge or support the new regime. The basis of this attitude was Mustafa Kemal's devotion to the principles of the Republic and his objection to Monarchy. These cold relations continued for 3 years⁴. But although relations were not very warm, The King of Albania Ahmet Zogo did not hesitate to put his likeness of Atatürk into words many times. During Turkey's representatives' visit in 1931, he uttered these

² Aptülaha Akşin, *Atatürk'ün Dış Politika İlkeleri ve Diplomasisi (Atatürk's Principles and Diplomacy in Foreign Policy)*, Ankara, TTK Yayını, 1991, p.218.

³ Nezir Bata, "Atatürk ve Arnavutlar" (Atatürk and Albanians), Beşinci Uluslararası Atatürk Kongresi, (8-12 Aralık 2003, Ankara) (the 5th International Atatürk Congress, 8-12 December 2003, Ankara) *Bildiriler (Announcements)*, Vol. I, Ankara, Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Yayını, 2005, pp. 109-110.

⁴ Gazmend Shpuza, "1936 Yılı'nın Başlangıcında Arnavutluk-Türkiye İlişkileri" (*Albania-Turkey relationships at the beginning of 1936*), İvi, p. 379.

words: "Turkey is a natural friend of Albania. I will always remain true to Atatürk"⁵. On the other hand, Atatürk also showed the importance he was giving to that country by meeting⁶ the Albanian Committee on the 1st of June, 1932.

During the process of developing warm and friendly relations, Atatürk was very careful in sending experienced and professional diplomats to Albania. It is possible to see the common history's traces in these diplomat's memoirs. Yakup Kadri, Turkish Ambassador in Tiran, in 1934-1935, says that he met some old friends in Albania and describes with these words how Albanian people like Turkey:

Every morning, we used to go for a drive. We were visiting villages and talking to peasants. All of them were very warm to us and were acting courteously. One day, around Elbasan, an old peasant came slowly besides our car and kissed the Turkish flag saying: 'Osmanlı, Osmanlı'.⁷

The King Zogu's sister Sultan Saniye's marriage with Abid, son of Abdulhamit the second, in 1934, affected Turkey-Albania relations negatively. Turkey saw this event as a "hostile act" and called its Ambassador back to Turkey, upon which Albania closed the Turkish Embassy⁸. Despite this tension between two countries, the King Zogu mentioned his wish to visit Turkey and said these:

Albania needs Turkey. Turkey's development in Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's era could never be possible if he wouldn't be the leader. There is not a least bit of hesitation in us about taking Turkey's development and experience as an example. Because relations between two countries are of long standing and very strong.⁹

In this unsteady era in terms of relations between two countries, Tiran Embassy was watching Italy-Albania relations closely. Ministry of Foreign Affairs sent a Tiran Embassy's report to the Prime Ministry the 16th July 1933. The report was sent in order to inform the Prime Ministry in order to inform the country about the changes in Italy-Albania relations. In this report, these issues were mentioned about relations who were retrogressing day by day:

Italians started searching for some other allies as not only the King Zogu started to gain power but also he didn't have any successors. For this aim, Italy started to build close relations with the richest and the most powerful Albanian lords. These acts shook King Zago's confidence who trusted in Italians before. He thought that they can stir up troubles in the country by using

⁵ Nezir Bata, *Op cit.*, pp. 111-112.

⁶ *Atatürk'ün Nöbet Defteri (1931-1938) (Atatürk's Guard Duty Book)*, Toplayan (Researcher): Şahin Özgiray, Ankara, TTK Yayını, 1955, p. 31.

⁷ Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Zoraki Diplomat, (Forced Diplomat)*, (ikinci baskı), Ankara, Bilgi Yayınevi, 1967, pp. 56-83.

⁸ Gazmend Shpuza, *Op. cit.*, pp. 380-381.

⁹ *Vakit*, 6 Temmuz 1934. (*Vakit* newspaper, 06.July.1934).

powerful lords and interfere in Albania's affairs with the help of Tiran Treaty. So he did not agree on prolonging the treaty. After this, relationships between two countries started to go from bad to worse as Mussolini was not content with Zogu's disapproval.¹⁰

At the same time, some news about the changes in two countries' relationships appeared on newspapers. The Turkish press, following the happenings closely, wrote a headline as: "Italy is blaming Albania with ingratitude". Besides mentioning that, the rebellions against Zogu were supported by Italians, the press published a declaration of a half-official Italian Agency called 'Oriente'. The declaration was full of threats and Albania was likened to a child fed up with its parents' dominance and trying to escape from it. The Oriente Agency also wrote that: "Albania owes both spiritually and materially everything to Italy. Italy will not forget about the disloyalty of Albania while continuing its historical duty at that country"¹¹.

Italy, not accepting Albania's wish about getting out of its patronage, sent its navy to Draç Port in 1934. But in Albania nationalistic views were getting stronger day by day which also affected King Zogu. As a result of this, 80 Italian soldiers who were working for reforming Albanian army were cashiered. In fact, at that time there were many disputes between Albanians and Italian soldiers and 5 Italian soldiers were killed in 1933 during these fights. Government of Albania was not afraid of Italy's last act and decided to cashier Italian teachers¹².

Besides Government's protests, there were many organizations protesting Italy's dominance. For instance Albania National Youth Organization protested the Italian navy almost everyday and in one of these protests, an Italian teacher was attacked in Avlonya¹³.

Balkan agreement was another factor that affected relationships between Turkey, Italy and Albania. It was a nonaggression and friendship agreement signed by Turkey, Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania on the 9th of July 1934 in Athens. Italy who gave the sharpest reaction to that treaty, avoided Albania's signing this agreement¹⁴. But in the following year, Turkish press wrote that Albania attempted to take part in the agreement and which was supported by the Turkish media¹⁵. One of the most important Turkish writers; Falih Rıfkı Atay supported Turkey's thesis by writing: "Balkans own the Balkans". But after all

¹⁰ Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi, 030 10 233 571 14. (*Republic Archive, Prime Ministry*).

¹¹ *Milliyet*, 7 Temmuz 1934; (*Milliyet* newspaper, 7 July 1934); *Haber*, 7 Temmuz 1934; (*Haber* newspaper 7 July 1934); *Vakit*, 7 Temmuz 1934; (*Vakit* newspaper, 7 July 1934); *Anadolu*, 8 Temmuz 1934. (*Anadolu* newspaper, 8 July 1934).

¹² *Akşam*, 23 Temmuz 1934. (*Akşam* newspaper, 24 July 1934).

¹³ *Zaman*, 4 Ağustos 1934. (*Zaman* newspaper, 04 August 1934).

¹⁴ Aptülahat Akşin, *Op. cit.*, p. 268.

¹⁵ *Cumhuriyet*, 20 Ağustos 1935. (*Cumhuriyet* newspaper, 20 August 1935).

these, in 1936, with the treaty between Italy and Albania, Albania absolutely quit the policy of coming together with Balkan countries and announced its attachment to Italy¹⁶.

Another event attracted Turkey's attention was Albania's being invaded by Italy. According to a piece of news, published by Turkish press on April 1939, Italy had already given signals about its plans on Albania. Mussolini, in his speech on 26th of March 1939 said that: "Italy sees the Mediterranean Sea as its own field and has a big interest in the Adriatic Sea"¹⁷. Italy's invasion which started on 7th of April 1939 was followed closely by Turkish media. Some newspapers announced this new event with these words:

Cumhuriyet newspaper: "Albania is vanishing. The invasion happened with lightning speed"¹⁸.

Ulus newspaper: "Italy landed soldiers on Albania. There is a brutal war"¹⁹.

Tan newspaper: "Italy started invading Albania"²⁰.

Of course there were many different comments about invasion. Ahmet Şükrü Esmer wrote that there were many gossips about Italy's invasion before the invasion happened. He also mentioned that Italy's interest in that country started in Ottoman Empire's era and with the treaty in 1926, an important step was taken on this way. According to Esmer, after that treaty, Albania was already taken under the control by Italy in several ways including the country's financial situation and army. Esmer also mentioned these in his article: "The fact that soldiers of big and strong countries enter Balkan Peninsula will surely create a negative environment which will ruin the peace in Balkans by time"²¹.

According to another writer Zekeriya Sertel; "Italy sees the Adriatic Sea as its property and has no tolerance to another country situated near that sea." He also said that the Balkans were shared by Italy and Germany who was already planning to reach the Adriatic Sea by invading Yugoslavia. In the following part of his article it is mentioned that:

Mussolini would never pass this over. In the 26th of the last month, he emphasized that Adriatic is Italian and he will never let anybody own there. This 'anybody' was Germany. The reason why Italy took this step was because they wanted to take guarantee from Germany.²²

¹⁶ *Hâkimiyet-i Milliye*, 5 Birinciteşrin 1934 (*Hakimiyet-i Milliye* newspaper, 05 October 1934).

¹⁷ *Tan*, 24 Mart 1936. (*Tan* newspaper, 24 March 1936).

¹⁸ "İtalya, Arnavutluk'u işgale Hazırlanıyor", *Cumhuriyet*, 5 Nisan 1939. ("Italy is preparing to engross Albania", *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, 5 April 1939).

¹⁹ *Cumhuriyet*, 9 Nisan 1939. (*Cumhuriyet* newspaper, 9 April 1939).

²⁰ *Ulus*, 8 Nisan 1939. (*Ulus* newspaper, 8 April 1939).

²¹ *Tan*, 8 Nisan 1939. (*Tan* newspaper, 8 April 1939).

²² A.Ş. Esmer, "İtalya ve Arnavutluk", *Ulus*, 7 Nisan 1939. ("Italy and Albania" *Ulus* newspaper, 7 April 1939).

One of the most important journalists of that time Yunus Nadi Abaloğlu wrote that Italy decided to annex Albania which was already invaded. And he added that the invasion of Albania “is not a regional issue, it concerns other nations”²³.

Yunus Nadi Abaloğlu mentioned these in another article in which he made some connections between the Balkan Treaty and Albania:

Albania did not take part in the Balkan Treaty. As the country did not enter this Treaty, there was nobody to support or protect it. This treaty was very well structured and had a protective plan for outer dangers. This is the most important and crucial step which should be taken by the Balkans. The Balkans will create an alliance and shape it as a big and united country made up of 160 million people. Only with such a strong alliance can Balkans prove the words “The Balkans is the only owners of Balkans”. Establishing the Balkan Blocks is not a threat directed towards any other country, the only aim is to protect the Balkans.²⁴

Peyami Safa, a very famous Turkish man of letters and journalists summarized the events in a very professional way: “People who slept last night as Albanians woke up to a new day as Italians”²⁵.

The last example from press will be the thoughts of Albanian diplomats working in Turkey. Journalist Selahaddin Güngör told his interview with these diplomats with these sentences:

I am in front of the Albanian Embassy. I walked through the dark entrance with the dark atmosphere. The bell rang gloomily. A little later, from the half opened door, there appeared somebody asking: Who do you want to see?

-I want to see the consulate.

Footsteps coming from the room suddenly stopped and behind the half opened door a tall young man appeared.

-Yes sir.

He was talking Turkish quite well; I asked:

- Who am I talking to?

He preferred not to tell who he is.

- As you are a journalist, I am regular Albanian. Isn't it enough?

-Is there any news from Tiran?

- We left Tiran. It was impossible to prevent the enemy and keep them at the seaside. It was necessary to keep them busy as much as possible and while Albanian army was moving in. There are almost no people left in towns, they all moved to mountains.

- Do you believe that the Albanians can show a strong resistance?

²³ M. Zekeriya Sertel, “İtalya Niçin Arnavutluk’u İşgal Ediyor?”, *Tan*, 8 Nisan 1939. (“Why is Italy invading Albania?” *Tan* newspaper 8 April 1939).

²⁴ Yunus Nadi, “Balkanlılar Bloku”, *Cumhuriyet*, 10 Nisan 1939. (“The Balkanians Block”, *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, 10 April 1939).

²⁵ Peyami Safa, “Arnavutluk Misali”, *Cumhuriyet*, 9 Nisan 1939. (“The Example of Albania”, *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, 9 April 1939).

- Just now, it is impossible to make a definite judgment. But we have hope and belief. Albanian people know how to die.
- Tiran Radio is closed, isn't it?
- Yes, it is closed. But this is temporary. It will start broadcasting soon.
- Do you know where King Zogo is?
- I do not know where he is. But I am sure he is at the head of the army. ²⁶

Turkey took some precautions against any possible attack coming from Italy. Atatürk set good relationships with the Balkans. And although Albania did not take part in the Balkan treaty because of Italy, Atatürk, gave importance to Turkey's relations with that country.

Turkish press, obeying the Government's policy, followed events in Albania very closely. Readers were informed about Italy's policy on Albania; Italy's invasion was seen as footsteps of a danger rather than a friendly step. One other issue pointed out by the Turkish press was that the invasion was a result of the fact that Albania did not take place in the Balkan Treaty.

²⁶ Selahaddin Güngör, "Hiçkırın Arnavutluk", *Cumhuriyet*, 9 Nisan 1939. ("Crying out Albania", *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, 9 April 1939).