

Eqrem bej Vlora: Building Albanian International Relations Identity

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Abstract

One argument asserts that international relations (IR) were constructed to serve the identity of a particular state and remain so today. In Albania, IR was initially considered an "alien species," but later became an important instrument for shaping national identity on the eve of and in the aftermath of the formation of an independent Albanian state in 1912. This paper aims to answer the question of what the initial Albanian conception of IR was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. To this end, the paper relies on the views of Eqrem bej Vlora (1885–1964), a prominent historical figure in Albania, to examine how he framed the initial Albanian understanding of IR by emphasizing the identities assigned to Albania. Albania's identity is composed of three layers, as described in Eqrem bej Vlora's writings. The first layer comprises a firmly embedded identity based on Albanian national historical references. The second layer includes the conceptualization of Albania's role as a European country. The third layer relates to the relevance of Ottomanism to Albanian identity. Together, these layers attempt to show how Eqrem bej Vlora viewed Albania's identities and place in the world.

Keywords

International Relations, Albania, Eqrem bej Vlora, identity

1. Introduction

The social and political setting in which the discipline of international relations (IR) took root in Albania is older than the Albanian state, which came into existence in 1912. Prior to 1912, a process occurred that established the beliefs and foundations that would provide an identity for the new state and shape its foreign policy and involvement in world politics as an independent European country emerging in the early 20th century.

Albania's encounter with IR occurred within the anarchic system of the 19th century (Kissinger 1995), preceding the quest for Albanian national independence. Starting from the late 19th century, IR arrived in the country

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as a means of mitigating the implications of anarchy and followed a trajectory from world metropolises to Albanian lands. The first attempt to establish this trajectory occurred with the *Rilindja* (renaissance) thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This period corresponds with the nation- and state-building processes in Albania (Brisku 2019; Ypi 2007). The renaissance is the most fitting period to define the initial phase of Albanian intellectual IR history, spanning from the late 19th century to the 1912 Declaration of Independence. The *Rilindja* is the term used to describe the spiritual renaissance of the Albanian nation between 1836 and 1912. This period marks the first attempt to define the Albanian national identity and the fundamentals of Albanian IR thinking. Unsurprisingly, then, the earliest renaissance thinkers had a particular understanding of world politics. This thinking revolved around the idea of describing the international system and how it could facilitate the emergence of Albania as a new member of the international system. Initially, this pedigree limited the intellectual scope of IR understanding to the production of Albania within the rapidly developing Ottoman imperial context. However, the gradual decline and withdrawal of the Ottoman Empire from its Balkan territories during the 19th and early 20th centuries provided an array of alternative perspectives through which to view the concept of the "international" in initial Albanian thought.

Where does Albania belong? Does it aspire to be part of the West, the Orient, or itself? How did Albania's founding elite define its IR identity? During Albania's struggle to be recognized as separate from the other Balkan states and the Ottoman Empire, Albanian renaissance authors embraced a national identity that contrasted sharply with those of the surrounding states. They emphasized the national, ethnic roots and European vocation of the nation. While they emphasized the differences, they did not completely deny the similarities and the Ottoman legacy in Albanian identity.

This paper describes how initial Albanian scholarship in IR emerged. By examining the early Albanian school of IR, this paper aims to explore the historical Albanian discourse on IR and how these discourses influenced early Albanian thinking on the subject. To this end, the paper examines the life and work of Eqrem bej Vlora (1885–1964), who was first an imperial Ottoman bureaucrat, diplomat, large landowner, and warrior; then a national Albanian politician, minister, and author.

This article reconstructs discourses concerning Albanian IR identity in 19th- and early 20th-century Albanian history, as reflected in the thoughts of Eqrem bej Vlora. Vlora was a prominent thinker, activist, and statesman who belonged to the late period of the Albanian renaissance movement. By focusing on his thoughts, the article offers a new perspective on him and, more importantly, on the meaning of IR for the people who guided Albania's

historical development. Certainly, no other historical Albanian thinker was as systematic an IR thinker as Eqrem bej Vlora, nor did any other leave behind an IR treatise on Albanian foreign policy issues. Renaissance thinkers' intellectual activities generally focused on the humanities, such as poetry, literature, and history. Their work was imbued with a growing ethos of Albanian romantic and cultural nationalism (Elsie 2005). Later, they increasingly became involved in political activism and national politics, generating a trail of reflections, positions, ideas, and political deeds (Brisku 2019; Ypi 2007). This article addresses the question of what meaning the national intellectual elite gave to foreign policy and how they envisioned an IR vision for Albania. One topic of debate in this paper is whether an Albanian IR school emerged from the efforts of the Albanian romanticists.

To explain Albania's sense of identity, this paper relies on the writings of Eqrem bej Vlora. It attempts to establish a model for the formation of Albanian identities composed of three overlapping layers. This framework for studying state identities is based on the work of Guimarães (2020). The first layer comprises a profound and firmly embedded identity referring to Albanian national, ethnic, and historical references. The second layer includes the conceptualization of Albania as a European country. The third layer relates to the relevance of Ottomanism to Albanian identity. This complex identity set illustrates Eqrem bej Vlora's perspective on Albania's place in the world.

This paper is structured in three parts. First, to characterize Albania's search for identity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the paper explores the life and works of Eqrem bej Vlora. Second, it develops the formation of Albania's identity in three sub-sections: Albanian, European, and Ottoman. Finally, the paper concludes.

2. On Eqrem bej Vlora

Eqrem bej Vlora (1885-1964) was an accomplished Albanian aristocrat, politician, diplomat, scholar, and writer. Often referred to as "the Last of the Beys," he embodied the final era of Ottoman-influenced Albanian nobility. Born into the powerful Vlora and Toptani families on his father's and mother's side, respectively, his father, Syrja Bey Vlora, and his mother, Mihri Toptani, belonged to the elite landowning class in southwestern and central Albania. They were also members of the Ottoman ruling elite. He was first educated by private tutors in Vlora, then attended the prestigious Theresianum in Vienna from 1899 to 1903. He then studied law and religious studies in Istanbul from 1904. He worked in the Ottoman Foreign Ministry and at the Ottoman embassy in St. Petersburg in 1907. He later joined his cousin Ismail Qemali Bey Vlora's independence movement. During the Balkan Wars (1912), he was appointed reserve major and

commanded a volunteer Albanian battalion that defended Vlorë under Ottoman auspices. During the independence movement, he served as a delegate and deputy president of the Senate at the Assembly in Vlorë, which proclaimed the independence of Albania on November 28, 1912. He was one of the signatories of the Albanian Declaration of Independence in 1912 and served as Albania's first Minister of Foreign Affairs. He also held various other positions in the Albanian government and parliament. He held early government roles as a diplomat and deputy secretary of foreign affairs. He also served as Albania's ambassador to Europe. He was later elected to the Albanian parliament in 1924 and became a senator in 1925. Eqrem bej Vlorë was an Ottoman-Albanian bureaucrat and Albanian statesman (Jusufi 2024).

Eqrem bej Vlorë's love of languages, literature, and learning was fostered during his wealthy and cosmopolitan childhood, which was curious given the national politics of his lifetime. His father, Syrja Bekteshi, was also prolific, though not quite to the same extent. Like Ismail Qemali bej Vlorë, the leading figure of Albanian statehood and the first president of the republic who also belonged to the same Vlorë family, Eqrem bej Vlorë shared a desire to reinforce the links between Albania and the European center. In pursuing this objective, Eqrem bej Vlorë and other members of the Vlorë family were drawn to the quest for Albanian statehood and internationalization.

Recognizing the challenges the country was facing and the necessity of compromising with the European powers, Eqrem bej Vlorë played a pivotal role in offering the crown to Prince Wilhelm of Wied in 1914. When World War II began, he welcomed the Italian invasion in 1939 and held government offices under Italian occupation, including Minister of Kosovo in 1942 and Foreign and Justice Minister briefly in 1944. Following the communist takeover, he fled to Italy and later lived in Austria, where he died in Vienna. In 2014, his remains were reburied in Vlorë.

He has been viewed as a patriot, an aristocrat, and a collaborator with the Italian occupiers. During the Communist era, he was labeled a "war criminal." His family endured hardships under the communist regime, yet his cultural contributions persisted despite exile and political shifts (Baze 2024).

While in exile from Albania's dictatorial communist regime after World War II, Eqrem bej Vlorë set out to write a groundbreaking book on Albanian international relations scholarship, titled "Lebenserinnerungen" (Memories) or *Kujtime* (2010; 1973; 1968). A prolific intellectual, he also wrote several other books, including *Aus Berat und vom Tomor: Tagebuchblätter* (From Berat and Mount Tomorr: Diary Notes) (bej Vlorë 1911), as well as an

unpublished manuscript on Ottoman rule in Albania. He also published various articles in Albanian, German, and Turkish periodicals and newspapers addressing Albanian independence, nation-building, regional autonomy movements in the Balkans, religious and intercommunal relations, and foreign perceptions of Albania. Nevertheless, his memoirs, *Lebenserinnerungen*, are his leading legacy. Originally written in German and later translated into several languages, including Albanian, it offers a nobleman's unique view of early 20th-century Albanian life, politics, and international relations (Jaupaj 2018). Vlora wrote his memoirs in two volumes, covering the period from 1885 to 1925. The first volume (1885–1912) was published in German in 1968 by the Südost-Institut in Munich and edited by Dr. Bernath. The second volume (1912–1925) was published posthumously in German in 1973 by the same institute and edited by Dr. Schwanke. The memoirs are a valuable source of information about the history and culture of Albania and the Balkans, as well as Eqrem bej Vlora's personal life and experiences. His German writings reflect the influence of Austrian historiography and literary style. Historians use his works as essential primary sources on the Albanian independence period (1912–1920s) and the worldview, cultural, and social structures of the Ottoman provincial aristocracy in early modern Albania.

In summary, Eqrem bej Vlora was one of the most prominent Albanian intellectuals of early 20th-century Albania. He was both a supporter of and a critic of Albanian national romanticism. A multifaceted figure, he was an aristocrat who bridged Ottoman and Albanian identities; a statesman who was crucial to Albania's early independence; and a reflective scholar whose writings enrich our understanding of his era. Most importantly, he laid the foundation for Albania's understanding of foreign policy and IR at the time. His writings are particularly valued for their vivid, personal, and often ironic portrayal of Albanian society, politics, and culture during the final decades of Ottoman rule and the early years of Albanian independence. More than any other Albanian renaissance thinker, Eqrem bej Vlora is considered the most significant by Albanian IR scholars due to his critique of post-independence politics.

3. While awaiting new roles, search for new identities

As Albania struggled to have its statehood recognized by the European powers of the early 20th century, its founding fathers and elite, also known as *Rilindasit* (Renaissance intellectuals), engaged in an intensive effort to promulgate an Albanian identity that would distinguish it from others and gain recognition from the world powers of the time. Both Europeans and Ottomans fiercely contested Albania's credentials as a viable new European independent state. Initially, Albania was not fully accepted as a separate

entity from other Ottoman enclaves in the region, and rivalries took on cultural or identity-related meanings. This was certainly the case in the early 20th century when many considered historical rivalries to be the origin of mistrust toward Albania's emerging identity as the Ottoman Empire broke up and withdrew from the Balkan region. The search for a Western or European identity resonated among Albanian intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There was also no disjunction among the elite concerning the new role of Albania in relation to its Albanian, European, and Ottoman legacies. In fact, the elites demonstrated similar levels of support for Albania's national identity narratives, showing a consistent pattern of views. More importantly, as will be shown in the next section, this Albanian intellectual elite managed to establish an identity repertoire in which multiple identities coexisted, particularly with regard to Albania's role with respect to the Albanians, the West, and the Orient. Thus, Albania produced a mosaic of identities.

In this section, the paper presents a three-layer model to characterize the formation of Albanian identities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This model relies on the writings of Eqrem bej Vlora. The model begins with the most deeply rooted identity conceptualizations. The first layer comprises a profound and firmly established identity based on Albanian national, ethnic, and historical references. The second layer includes the role of Albania as a European country. The third layer relates to the relevance of Ottomanism to Albanian identity. Together, these identities reveal Eqrem bej Vlora's perception of Albania's place in the world.

3.1. The first layer – Albanian historical national identity

As noted elsewhere (Brisku 2019; Ypi 2007), elements of the Enlightenment and Reformation were initially brought to Albania in the spirit of 19th-century romanticism. In fact, the first elements of the Albanian IR school can be found in the works of renaissance intellectuals. Albanian literature emerged during the renaissance period, and the most notable intellectuals of this time were Naim Frashëri, Sami Frashëri, Pashko Vasa, Jeronim de Rada, Faik Konica, Ismail Qemali, Luigj Gurakuqi, and Fan Noli. These intellectuals were central figures in the 19th- and early 20th-century Albanian political, cultural, and literary movements that aimed to foster a unified Albanian identity and advocate for autonomy or independence from the Ottoman Empire. Using literature, education, and political advocacy, they promoted the Albanian language, preserved and celebrated Albanian cultural identity, and advocated for national unification and independence. The Congress of Manastir (1908) marked a key victory for the renaissance movement by unifying the Albanian alphabet. These intellectuals helped forge a secular, civic form of nationalism that included Albanians of different religions, including Muslims, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians. Their

poems, essays, newspapers, and political tracts became foundational texts of Albanian literature and nationalism. The renaissance movement was part of a broader 19th-century European trend in which emerging nations used culture to promote political emancipation (Elsie 2005; Austin 2002; Vickers 1999; Skendi 1967).

The main characteristics of this initial Albanian thinking focused on the Albanian understanding of the world order and the perception of Albania's position in the global community. Debated concepts included "self-determination," "sovereignty," "independence," and "Europe," among others. These and similar ideas bear a strong resemblance to realist and idealist thoughts on IR. The Albanians did not simply understand these concepts as the endpoint of historical national development; rather, they understood them as a set of interrelated international processes that encompassed social, economic, political, and cultural developments in order to secure the renaissance or revival of the Albanian nation. Albanian romanticists provided idealistic and historically grounded realist accounts of 19th- and early 20th-century IR dynamics. They attempted to offer historical narratives, labeling them as "Enlightened Albania," which placed the emergence of an independent Albania at the center. Independence was not just about freedom; it was also about completely restructuring the interstate order in Southeastern Europe. These Albanian thinkers developed an approach to "independence" in which state formation and an enhanced capacity of the Albanian state to represent Albanians internationally were central features.

From an active political perspective, the representatives of the renaissance movement took the first important step toward establishing an organized framework for an independent Albania. They recognized that a state is necessary for a nation, rather than the other way around. This version of Albanian nationalism initially appeared to result from the French and American Revolutions, which emphasized territorial integrity as a principle for exercising collective sovereignty. Thus, supporting active resistance through an intellectual and literary movement that argued for national sovereignty, freedom, and self-determination became extremely important (Ypi 2007).

Thus, the first layer of Albanian identity comprised long-standing and deeply rooted national identity formation related to significant historical events in Albanian history from the 15th to the early 20th century. One of the most important founding myths of Albanian identity on the eve of independence in 1912 and in the aftermath was the discourse of a pre-existing "Albanian" territory dominated and expanded by Skanderbeg and the Albanian Arbereshe community that had fled to Italy and Greece. The Albanian elite characterized Albania's national identity as an extension of

Skanderbeg's legacy. In his analysis of Albania's national reformation, Eqrem bej Vlora reinforces this view, arguing that despite foreign incursions and internal and external disputes, the Albanians managed to keep themselves united within a vast territory.

According to Eqrem bej Vlora, Albania's national identity begins and is symbolized by Skanderbeg, a 15th-century nobleman who led the resistance against the Ottoman Empire. Bej Vlora states, "For the Albanians, true history begins with Skanderbeg. He was the first to unite our principalities and give us the idea that we were our own people who could govern ourselves" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968). He saw Skanderbeg not merely as a historical figure but also as the foundational symbol of Albanian unity, resistance, and identity in the face of foreign domination. In his writings, Vlora emphasizes Skanderbeg's ability to unify the Albanian principalities under a common cause, which he considered a precursor to national unity. For Eqrem bej Vlora and many of his contemporaries, Skanderbeg's legacy was revived and repurposed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a unifying national myth to justify independence from the Ottoman Empire and promote national cohesion. This myth emphasized the pre-existence of a common origin based on the notion of a single historical territory continuously inhabited by Albanians, as well as natural and anthropological characteristics prior to Ottomanization itself.

The social and political upheavals of the 19th century that took place in Europe revealed a quasi-medieval Albanian society characterized by clan divisions and weak administrative structures (Ypi 2007). Until then, Albanians were fragmented among different Ottoman vilayets and regions. Throughout most of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, renaissance authors emphasized the ethnic, sociological, and linguistic uniqueness that has historically characterized Albania in the Balkan Peninsula and Europe on a national scale. Eqrem bej Vlora supported the idea, first proposed by Albanian renaissance leaders, of a shared Albanian consciousness and identity stronger than local and regional differences. They believed that independence would be sufficient to hold together a divergent population, despite their myriad loyalties. Albanian feudal barons recognized the need for one "sovereign" lord. In practice, however, the feudal lords, including Eqrem bej Vlora himself, retained too much economic, political, and military power by maintaining armed followers. This resulted in continually contested sovereignty and endemic conflict.

3.2. The second layer - conceptualization of Albania as a European country and embrace of European rule over Albania

Many Albanian intellectuals celebrated ethnic nationalism when they intervened to defend the national cause of "recognition" for independence or post-independence. However, matters looked different when their initiatives

were directed towards Albania's relations with the world. The ethnic and cultural features of "Albanianism" that renaissance intellectual celebrated proved the existence of a distinct and unique entity worthy of international "recognition." However, supporting Albania's place in the international community required emphasizing identification with more abstract notions of IR, which could motivate Albania to contribute to regional and global politics. This would entail overcoming nation-based divisions in favor of a broader, inherently political form of attachment at the continental level (Ypi 2012).

The struggle for independence brought together a generation of intellectuals who aimed to reimagine Albania's position in Europe and the world, providing the intellectual basis for their vision. They designed a new, groundbreaking foreign policy to reposition Albania in Europe. For Eqrem bej Vlora, this required the adoption of new political and economic ideas and the full inclusion of Albania in Europe. Specifically, he identified Albania with European powers, especially Italy and Austria-Hungary. Albanian intellectuals developed a Europeanist doctrine for foreign policy, aiming to expand Albania's capacity to project unity internally. Thus, embracing the country's European identity became imperative for survival and political stability. In this way, Albanian intellectuals incorporated European discourse into their rhetoric.

For Eqrem bej Vlora, Europe and the West provided Albania with a renewed international identity. Like other renaissance intellectuals, Eqrem bej Vlora believed that the Albanian national identity project of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was based on the idea that Albania was closely related to Europe. This new narrative aimed to demonstrate that Albania was a "normal" country on the European continent. Vlora's writings express a sense of belonging to Europe: "Albania's destiny is intertwined with Europe's. Our national awakening and fight for independence were inspired by and supported through European ideals of nationhood, sovereignty, and self-determination. The recognition of Albania among European states was both a diplomatic struggle and a cultural affirmation of our European identity." While some deep-rooted stereotypes about Ottoman Albania persisted, important aspects of political life in Albania came to be considered European. Albania emphasized its close relations with Europe, particularly with Italy and Austria-Hungary, as well as with France, Great Britain, and the United States.

Eqrem bej Vlora sought to transform Albania into a European country by partially adopting the monarchical traditions of Europe. The transition from a national ruler to Prince Wied, who led the country starting in 1914, was related to the idea of establishing a European state, considering the internal strife and divisions within the country. For Eqrem bej Vlora, the

logic behind installing Prince Wied as ruler of the newly independent Albania contributed significantly to preserving the country's territorial unity. The Prince of Wied was linked to European monarchies and royal families. Vlora was aware of the fragility of the law in the newly independent Albania, as well as the fact that transplanting European political institutions would be inadequate for the local Albanian reality. His goal was to improve Albania's relationship with European powers and gain their recognition and acceptance, as well as embrace the virtues of European and Western civilization. Like other figures, such as Ismail Qemali, Fan Noli, and Luigj Gurakuqi, Eqrem bej Vlora maintained that Albania could survive and perhaps even thrive as an independent, small nation-state if its wealth and national economic development remained anchored within a larger political and economic space (Brisku 2019). Thus, Eqrem bej Vlora and others welcomed Wied's arrival in 1914 as Europe's confirmation of Albania's existence. According to Vlora, the answer to the difficult challenge of building a politically operational identity that united disparate regional Albanian realities while preserving the main features of a conservative, patriarchal society was the European monarch as a symbol of belonging to a specific civilization project.

In his famous book, Eqrem bej Vlora argues that the main goal of the newly independent nation was to secure recognition from the European powers regarding the maintenance of Albania's territorial integrity amid the expansion occurring in the Balkans on the eve of World War I, thus embracing a "realistic" approach. He advocated for European-inspired internal reforms and acknowledged the continent's balance-of-power dynamics. He advocated for an active rather than isolationist role with the European powers, militarily and economically. Thus, conceptualizing Albania's interests as active engagement and cooperation in Europe, Eqrem bej Vlora's IR view meant that Albania should recognize Italy's and Austria's interests in Albania.

However, he was not without criticism of this approach. He stated that "Albania's foreign policy was never the result of well-conceived state reasoning, but rather a plaything of shifting personalities, whims, and foreign powers" (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). One day, one kissed the hand of Vienna; the next day, one sent telegrams to Rome; and the day after that, one offered oneself to Athens. In the end, none of them wanted us" (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). He criticized Albanian leaders for lacking a long-term vision and for making foreign alliances based on short-term survival rather than national interest. In his view, Albania did not yet have a class of professional diplomats or statesmen capable of designing a coherent strategy. Bej Vlora argues that Albania was overly dependent on the goodwill of the Great Powers, especially Austria-Hungary, Italy, and, at times, Greece

and the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. This led to an unstable and reactive foreign policy. He describes how personal rivalries among Albanian leaders (e.g., Ismail Qemali, Esat Pasha Toptani, and Ahmet Zogu) shaped foreign alignments more than national interests: "Each leader sought support not for Albania, but against his rivals" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968). Bej Vlora often reflects regretfully that Albania's isolation was partly self-inflicted: "The world knew little about us, and what it knew, it feared or despised" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968). As a diplomat, Eqrem bej Vlora worked to strengthen ties with Austria-Hungary and Italy, believing that Albania's survival depended on balancing between the two powers. In his writings, he acknowledges that some foreign alliances, particularly during World War II, were missteps, yet he maintains that Albania had limited maneuvering room, caught between larger powers.

A sense of backwardness was also prevalent among the Albanian renaissance intellectuals and the elite. Their perception of a superior Europe led to uneasiness about backwardness. This inferiority complex led to the adoption of various political and social models originating in Europe in an attempt to correct Albania's underdevelopment. In order to become a true Western country, they believed that Albania had to accept its historical inferiority. Thus, they saw an opportunity to join the European world as a reckoning with the past and a way of overcoming Albania's backwardness.

Given Albania's close geographic proximity to Europe, it's no surprise that Eqrem bej Vlora and his contemporaries sought to align closely with Europe. The adoption of "Europeanism" was nearly unanimous among the Albanian renaissance elite. They all agreed on the idea of establishing a national identity based on Europe. There was a consensus on Albania's European identity on the eve of and in the wake of the new republic. Thus, from the late 19th to early 20th century, Albanian intellectuals and the elite displayed unmitigated reverence for Europe. This consensus concerning Albania's role in Europe and the West led to a sense of belonging. It shows that the Albanians willingly embraced their Western and European credentials.

As the years passed since Albania's independence, it became evident that the Albanian elite and public had fully embraced their European identity as an integral part of their national identity. Albania sought political and economic revival through active participation in European international institutions. The Albanian discourse fully and uncritically accepted the perception that Albania is a Western, European country. Eqrem bej Vlora's discourse repositioned Albania as a Western and European country. Initially, Eqrem bej Vlora and other Albanian intellectuals viewed Albania as a "bridge" between Europe and Asia. However, given the emerging anarchy, they committed themselves to Europe as the only option.

This new approach had an adamant defender and leading curator in Eqrem bej Vlora, a former Ottoman technocrat, new Albanian politician, and diplomat. Vlora was an emphatic Europeanist. He reinforced the narrative that Albania's destiny was to embrace Europe and negotiate recognition with European powers. Despite emerging regional rivalries, Albania's success in achieving recognition from European powers became a landmark in its foreign policy. For Eqrem bej Vlora, the idea of Albania as a pacifist country that preferred to solve its internal and regional issues through diplomacy rather than war was essential to the country's identity.

Eqrem bej Vlora's background includes an extensive European education and diplomatic experience in Vienna, Graz, Paris, and beyond. His memoirs reflect a European worldview (Ivezaj 2025). He lobbied major European capitals, including Rome, Paris, and Vienna, to defend Albania's borders at the 1920 London Conference, demonstrating his involvement in European political circles. European thought also influenced his literary style. His memoirs emphasize his cultured, multilingual, Europe-educated nature and his historiographical contributions (Shehu 2017).

3.3. The third layer - imperial continuity and Ottoman legacy

Renaissance intellectuals were generally inspired by the 19th-century Ottoman reforms known as the Tanzimat. These reforms established new, centralized institutions and introduced legal norms based on equality before the law. They also liberalized the economy and, consequently, placed the imperial order within a constitutional framework (Brisku, 2019). Initially, this did not necessarily mean seeking a separate Albanian state or independence from the empire.

As Albanian-speaking leaders formed a dominant group within the Ottoman bureaucracy, the initial understanding of IR among the Albanian Ottoman elite was designed to perpetuate their own and Ottoman supremacy. The Albanian aristocracy and bourgeoisie representatives often mediated between the Albanian population and imperial functionaries, obtaining administrative posts in other countries. Their descendants, who studied in Ottoman faculties, were among the initiators of the Albanian renaissance movement (Ypi 2007). The Ottoman army and administration offered opportunities for social and professional advancement, and Albanians gained high feudal and military positions under the sultans.

While Albanian revival thinkers were hardly unanimous in their support of the Ottoman Empire, they offered historically informed reasons for why the Ottoman Empire was helpful in Albania's transition. Eqrem bej Vlora stated, "Now, that time of the Turks has shaped — for better or worse — the Albania that is proud today..." (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). Eqrem bej Vlora was clearly making an important point: Albania initially had to

align its interests with the existing imperial morality. Early Albanian IR thinking positioned the country within the Ottoman Empire's continuity. For renaissance intellectuals, including Eqrem bej Vlora, these national rights were to be renegotiated within some federal or intergovernmental order.

Initially, this view subscribed to the national cause of self-rule and language rights for Albanians within a constitutional Ottoman Empire. Uprisings occurred in Albanian lands in response to the Ottoman administration's failure to fulfill expectations for self-rule and language rights. They demanded a political nation under the supervision of a general inspector representing the Sultan. Despite existential geopolitical pressures from the Great Powers—Italy attacked in 1911—and the Balkan states in late 1912, these figures were realistic in believing that the empire still exerted power over Ottoman-Albanian provinces. Thus, they were invested in a continued imperial future for the nation provided that the empire reformed along federal and national lines. These figures doubted the political and economic viability and independence of small nation-states within the late 19th- and early 20th-century European interstate order (Brisku 2019). As with other romanticists, Eqrem bej Vlora first conceived of the Albanian national interest as a necessity to defend a fragmented national territorial space threatened by the nationalist projects of surrounding Balkan states. Additionally, a significant portion of the Albanian local elite — specifically, politically conservative factions from northern Albania and Kosovo — maintained enthusiasm for cooperating with the Ottomans. They distrusted the Great Powers and opposed independence, instead calling for more autonomy within the empire (Brisku 2009).

But facing no response from Sublime Porte for more rights for Albanians and considering threats of Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, and Serbia to Albanian territories, with limited help coming from Ottoman Empire, led the renaissance intellectuals to logically move from cultural to political nationalism. Thus, these romanticists, shifted from cultural and romantic to political nationalism (Schwandner-Sievers and Fischer 2002; Brisku 2019; 2013). While seeking a national common past and unified political and economic space would become a rather “universal” political demand by the early 1910s, the path to leaving the empire only became available when a transformed imperial centre not only dismissed such demands (Logoreci 1978) but, crucially, no longer provided protection to the Albanian-inhabited lands, especially after the first Balkan League (Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bulgaria) in late 1912, from these states. Hence, Albania's independence, on 28 November 1912, which renaissance intellectuals saw as a reaction to the existential threat to the nation and hence a call to action, came about also because of political and diplomatic mobilization of Albanians within and without the empire and the backing of

larger states of Italy and Austro-Hungary (Brisku 2019). In this line, as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing, Eqrem bej Vlora and his peers would call for a separate statehood for Albania.

The immediate political backdrop of the quest for independence was the emerging Albanian belief that the Ottomans had failed to establish a new form of governance in Albania as the empire was coming to an end. These discussions and events brought together a series of overlapping views — indigenous, religious, republican, and imperial — under the impact of rapidly changing contexts and circumstances. The dilemma was how to break free from the Ottoman Empire's dependence mentality and reposition Albania in relation to the Ottoman Empire and its withdrawal from Balkan territories. In this realm, Albanian intellectuals developed a self-awareness that enabled them to sever their intellectual ties to the Ottoman intellectual infrastructure and connections. The result was Albania's birth as a sovereign and independent state. According to Eqrem bej Vlora, this was the most significant outcome of the struggle. This was only possible because a territorial space had emerged that would be called "Albania." Thus, the assembly in Vlora's declaration of independence in 1912 confirmed Albania's resolve. For Eqrem bej Vlora and other members of the Albanian elite, sovereignty became the most important organizing principle for all forms of Albanian social life.

In his analysis of the achievement of domestic revival, Eqrem bej Vlora interwove an account of how the restructuring of empires fueled the emergence of Albanian state sovereignty. According to Eqrem bej Vlora, these developments were closely linked to the formation of a new international order of sovereign states in Europe. Thus, the history of Albanian revival thinkers culminated in the establishment of an independent, sovereign Albania. Regarding the proclamation of Albanian independence in 1912, he stated: "The moment was great, but the country was small, and our experience was even smaller. In Vlorë, we were a handful of idealists and notables who believed we were making history" (bej Vlora 2010, 1973, 1968).

However, like some other renaissance thinkers, Eqrem bej Vlora recognized that self-determination had its perils. He was concerned that an inevitable consequence of self-governance would be the loss of traditional friendships with other nations of the Ottoman Empire. Thus, an ambiguous position toward the Ottoman Empire and the wider Balkans region emerged, and Albania's belonging to the Balkans was neglected in the narrative. Being a Balkan country was no longer pivotal to the new narrative. The renaissance movement automatically repositioned Albania in the West. The desire to affiliate with the West resulted in a sense of inferiority, and now, being a post-Ottoman country had become a liability. In other words,

Albanian intellectuals were reluctant to express support for Albania's position on the new Balkan map. Intellectuals and rulers alike showed little interest in the Ottomans or the Ottoman Balkans. A role in the Balkans was denied both by the Albanians themselves and by the other Balkan states. The most important Albanian political, cultural, and economic centers were on the Adriatic and Ionian coasts, facing Europe and separated from their Balkan and Ottoman neighbors. This allowed for the construction of an identity in which former Ottoman territories were the "other." Although he was not in favor of isolationism, Eqrem bej Vlora believed that Albania had to build its internal and international credentials through coherence between its domestic limitations and international aspirations. According to Eqrem bej Vlora, the small nation-states of the Balkans, including Albania, were militarily and economically nonviable because they depended on military and economic backing from European powers, even though they were independent.

Nevertheless, Eqrem bej Vlora acknowledges the long period of Ottoman domination over Albanian lands. While he acknowledges the Ottoman Empire's role in shaping the social and political realities of Albanians, he also views this period as one of foreign control and national subjugation. He suggests that the Ottoman era was formative for Albanian identity and governance structures, leaving Albanians with both burdens and opportunities. Bej Vlora highlights how Albanian leaders and communities sought to maintain local autonomy during the Ottoman Empire's decline. They took advantage of the weakening imperial control to foster Albanian national consciousness and eventual independence. He situates the Albanian national awakening within the context of the Ottoman Empire's decline, emphasizing that during this period, Albanians began to perceive themselves as a distinct people with the capacity for self-rule (bej Vlora 2010; 1973; 1968). Thus, Eqrem bej Vlora reflects on the Ottoman period as a crucial yet ambivalent chapter in Albanian history. He acknowledges the constraints imposed by Ottoman rule as well as the formative influences that shaped Albanian identity and political aspirations toward self-governance.

Conclusions

A few systematic studies have focused on how early Albanian thought influenced the development of national Albanian IR theory. This paper addresses this gap. With his experience in the Ottoman Empire and Albanian institutions, Eqrem bej Vlora became a prominent intellectual and a critical voice in Albania. Given the questions he raised in his actions and writings, it is not surprising that he established the foundation of the Albanian school of IR. He was a leading figure in the independence

movement that sought to intensely internationalize Albania. His life was an early example of a romantic Albanian trying to influence the cause and course of national transformation in the context of a new and emerging Europe. His memoirs offer a candid and critical portrayal of Albania's foreign policy in the early 20th century.

The paper argued that Eqrem bej Vlora's discourse portrays Albania's placement within national, Western, and Ottoman orientations. His narrative reveals an aspiration to belong to the West without denying Albania's Ottoman heritage. Eqrem bej Vlora perceives Albania as a European country of Albanians, acknowledging its unique legacy of Ottoman rule. The three-layered model of identities expressed in Eqrem bej Vlora's writings shows that Albania exhibited concern for its IR identity. First, he emphasized the unification of the Albanian language and population. Second, the Albanian elite recognized Albania as a Western and European country. An unambiguous attachment and aspiration to the West emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, eventually being fully embraced in the early years of independence. Third, the model emphasized Albania's uniqueness in relation to its former ruler, the Ottoman Empire. Despite the strong desire to be part of the West, Albania never rejected this category altogether. Thus, the three-layered model shows that Albania produced a mosaic of IR identities.

As IR began to emerge in Albanian thought in the late 19th century, it was initially framed within a national context. Later, the discipline was relied on to help establish Albania as a state with a European vocation and friendly relations with the Ottoman Empire and its legacy. This paper argues that Albania's initial discourse took a middle ground in locating the country between the West and the Orient. In other words, rather than a hard separation between the three, Albania's founders showed the aspiration and struggle to place Albania within itself, the West, and the Orient. They recognized Albania as an Albanian, Western, and Ottoman country and did not espouse a narrative that completely differentiated Albania from its various identity nuances. They were also not entirely comfortable with clear-cut definitions of Albania's national identities. This ambivalence toward Albania's emerging identity is represented by a permanent identification with the dynamics occurring in Albania, the West, and the Ottoman Empire. Their ease with both Europeans and Ottomans is demonstrated by their embrace of Albania's dual historical roots in European history and its cohabitation with Ottoman administration.

Thus, examining the country's pursuit of external recognition sheds light on the emergence of the concepts of IR in late 19th- and early 20th-century Albanian political thought. In short, these Albanian ideas were similar to the perspectives of Thucydides, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Kant on

the world and human society. The renaissance and romantic paradigms of this period laid the foundation for the initial Albanian IR scholarship. Thus, the initial construction of Albania's core foreign policy values started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the writings of Renaissance intellectuals. In less than half a century, the Albanian Renaissance elite established many new IR identities for Albania. These new concepts were incorporated into the discourse of Albanian intellectuals, which had major implications for Albania's statehood.

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