Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal – Vol. 12, No. 11
Publication Date: November 28, 2025
DOI:10.14738/assrj.1211.19634.
Myrta, R. (2025). From State-Building to Integration: A Comparative Analysis of Albania's Strategies toward Neighbours and Great Powers (1920–1924 vs. Post-1990). *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, *12(11).* 158-177.

From State-Building to Integration: A Comparative Analysis of Albania's Strategies toward Neighbours and Great Powers (1920–1924 vs. Post-1990)

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a comparative analysis of Albania's foreign-policy behaviour during two structurally distinct periods: the formative years 1920–1924, marked by existential threats to sovereignty, and the post-1990 era, characterised by democratic transition and deep Euro-Atlantic integration. Drawing on extensive archival materials including documents from the Albanian State Archives, League of Nations records, Italian diplomatic correspondence and British Foreign Office files the study demonstrates that early Albanian diplomacy was shaped by acute geopolitical vulnerability, regional revisionism and limited administrative capacity. Albania relied heavily on the League of Nations, legal appeals and the strategic exploitation of great-power rivalries to counter Yugoslav, Greek and Italian pressures. In contrast, the post-1990 period reveals an environment transformed by institutional density and security guarantees. NATO membership, EU conditionality and strengthened bilateral partnerships (particularly with the United States, Italy and Turkey) have shifted Albania's diplomacy from survival-driven improvisation to structured, rules-based engagement. Yet despite the profound systemic differences, the analysis identifies strong continuity in Albania's strategic repertoire: reliance on multilateral institutions, diversification of alliances, and the internationalisation of disputes. The article argues that these long-term behavioural patterns reflect the enduring logic of small-state adaptation. By tracing how Albania moved from a contested periphery in the 1920s to an institutionalised Euro-Atlantic actor today, the study contributes to scholarship on small-state diplomacy, regional security and the role of international institutions in shaping foreign-policy trajectories. Methodologically, the article applies a structured comparative historical analysis across the two periods.The findings highlight that Albania's strategic resilience derives less from material capabilities than from effective institutional anchoring and calibrated diplomatic balancing

Keywords: Albanian foreign policy, small states, League of Nations, NATO integration, Balkan security, Euro-Atlantic institutions, diplomatic adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

Albania has historically operated under the structural constraints typical of small states situated in competitive and often unstable regional environments. In the early 1920s, the country emerged from imperial dissolution and wartime fragmentation as a weak political entity whose survival depended on managing pressure from neighbouring states and securing formal recognition. Scholarship on small states emphasises such chronic vulnerability and the

reliance on external guarantees as defining features of their foreign policy behaviour (Keohane, 1969). Archival evidence confirms this pattern: Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy repeatedly challenged Albania's borders, provoking continuous appeals to the League of Nations for intervention (AQSH, Fondi MPJ, Dosja "Raporte për Konferencën e Ambasadorëve", 1920, f. 7–9). The League itself characterised Albania as "a decisive test for the authority of the post-war order" (League of Nations, Council Minutes, 1921).

A century later, Albania operates within a transformed institutional environment. As a NATO member and EU candidate state, it benefits from collective defence guarantees and a predictable diplomatic framework. Yet its foreign-policy behaviour continues to reflect classic small-state strategies reliance on multilateral organisations, diversification of alliances, and heightened sensitivity to neighbouring pressures (Thorhallsson, 2012). Contemporary disputes involving Serbia, Greece, Italy and Turkey remain embedded within broader geopolitical processes, indicating that Albania still mitigates regional asymmetries by anchoring itself to Euro-Atlantic structures. The continuity of these behavioural patterns suggests that the underlying logics of small-state adaptation have remained central to Albania's foreign-policy evolution from 1920 to the present.

This article examines how Albania has navigated structural constraints across two distinct periods: the years 1920–1924, marked by the struggle for territorial integrity and diplomatic recognition, and the post-1990 era, shaped by democratic transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. It asks: *How do Albania's strategies toward neighbouring states and great powers in 1920–1924 compare to those adopted after 1990?*

The central argument is that despite systemic transformation, core behavioural patterns balancing, institutional appeal and reliance on external guarantees display striking continuity.

Empirically, the analysis draws on archival documents from the interwar period, including diplomatic correspondence, reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and League of Nations records illustrating the constraints and opportunities shaping early Albanian diplomacy (Ghebali, 1972). For the post-1990 period, it uses national security strategies, policy papers and Euro-Atlantic integration frameworks that document Albania's contemporary strategic alignments (Lake, 2009). By integrating these two periods into a unified analytical framework, the article contributes to both the historiography of Albanian diplomacy and broader debates on how small states in contested regions manage external pressures (Buzan, 1991).

The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework; Section 3 presents the methodology; Sections 4 and 5 analyse the two periods; Section 6 provides a comparative synthesis; and Section 7 concludes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SMALL STATE DIPLOMACY AND SECURITY

The study of small states in International Relations has traditionally emphasised structural vulnerability, limited material capabilities and heightened exposure to external shocks. Early analyses identified size, geography and resource constraints as the primary determinants shaping their behavioural patterns (Vital, 1971). Subsequent scholarship expanded this view by demonstrating that small states are not merely passive units but can exercise meaningful agency through diplomatic skill, institutional membership and strategic flexibility (Bailes,

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.14738/assrj.1211.19634

2009). This interplay between structural vulnerability and adaptive agency forms the conceptual core of contemporary small-state theory.

A central insight in the literature is that small states compensate for their limitations by adopting strategies that maximise political leverage. Research on security sheltering suggests that these states rely on international institutions or great-power patrons to reduce exposure to coercion (Thorhallsson, 2018). Parallel studies highlight their use of niche diplomacy, specialised expertise and multilateral activism to influence outcomes disproportionate to their size (Cooper, 1997). These approaches represent a broader pattern of "asymmetric adaptation," in which small states navigate uncertainty by combining normative alignment, selective autonomy and calibrated engagement with larger powers (Hey, 2003).

Constructivist contributions further emphasise that historical memory and identity shape how small states perceive threats and opportunities. Past experiences of domination or external intervention generate security cultures that influence foreign-policy decisions long after systemic conditions have changed (Browning, 2006). Vulnerability, therefore, is not solely material but also ideational, rooted in elite interpretations of hierarchy, risk and regional dynamics.

Small states operating in unstable regions often confront an acute security dilemma, as defensive actions are easily construed as offensive, amplifying mistrust (Jervis, 1978). This dynamic was visible in the Balkans of the early 1920s. Albanian attempts to consolidate administrative authority in Shkodër and Mirditë were perceived by Belgrade as hostile, prompting Yugoslav incursions documented in League of Nations reports (League of Nations, 1921). Similarly, Greek claims over "Northern Epirus" framed Albanian governance measures in Gjirokastër and Korçë as violations of minority rights, reinforcing mutual suspicion (Baltsiotis, 2011).

Omni-balancing provides a second analytical lens for understanding Albania's behaviour. The theory argues that leaders of weak states respond simultaneously to external threats and internal challenges (David, 1991). In 1920–1924, this dynamic was evident in Albania's acceptance of Italian financial support, justified by elites as essential to stabilise fragile institutions and prevent domestic fragmentation that might invite foreign intervention(AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Financial Correspondence", 1921). In the post-1990 era, omni-balancing reappears in the framing of NATO integration as vital to democratic consolidation and internal political stability (Pula, 2018).

Hedging constitutes another critical strategy for small states. It refers to maintaining multiple, sometimes competing, alignments to avoid overdependence on any single actor (Kuik, 2008). Albania has historically employed hedging to navigate asymmetric regional pressures. In the early 1920s, it resisted Yugoslav coercion through the League of Nations while simultaneously engaging Italy as a counterweight. Archival correspondence shows Albanian envoys leveraging rivalries among major powers particularly Italy, France and Britain to influence border negotiations (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, Telegrams to Paris, 1922).

In the post-Cold War era, hedging persists but within a rules-based institutional framework. Albania anchors its core security in NATO, pursues political transformation through the EU,

maintains economic interdependence with Italy and cultivates strategic ties with Turkey. Contemporary policy documents characterise this orientation as a multi-vector approach designed to prevent overdependence and increase strategic resilience (Krasniqi, 2020).

Multilateral institutions play a foundational role in the diplomacy of small states. They provide platforms through which limited actors can amplify influence, seek legal protection and constrain the behaviour of stronger neighbours (Abbott, 1999). For Albania in 1920–1924, the League of Nations served as the primary institutional shield. Its investigative missions and border decisions particularly those of October and December 1921 offered crucial legal validation at a moment when unilateral defence was infeasible (Ghebali, 1972). Archival material shows that Albanian officials consistently framed League rulings as binding guarantees intended to deter Yugoslav and Greek advances (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Borders", 1922).

By contrast, NATO and the European Union provide Albania not only diplomatic legitimacy but also concrete security, regulatory and economic mechanisms. NATO membership (2009) grants credible deterrence, replacing the symbolic assurance offered by the League. EU accession instruments create political and legal incentives that shape domestic reforms, serving as long-term "institutional anchors" for fragile democracies (Schimmelfennig, 2010). Despite these systemic differences, Albania's reliance on multilateral institutions across both periods reveals a consistent strategy: compensating for structural vulnerability through institutional shelter and collective frameworks.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This study employs a historical comparative design to analyse Albania's foreign-policy behaviour across two structurally distinct periods: 1920–1924 and the post-1990 era. Comparative historical analysis allows the identification of long-term behavioural patterns by examining how Albania responded to external pressures under contrasting international conditions (Mahoney, 2004). The approach follows George's structured, focused comparison, applying identical analytical questions regarding neighbour relations, security strategies and reliance on external guarantees to both periods in order to isolate causal mechanisms (George, 2005). This method is particularly suitable for Albania, a state that has historically operated under persistent vulnerability, first as a newly consolidated polity and later as a transitioning democracy seeking Euro-Atlantic integration.

The empirical foundation for the 1920–1924 period is based primarily on extensive archival research. The Albanian State Archives (AQSH) contain the most comprehensive collection of primary documentation on early Albanian diplomacy. Material from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund (MPJ) includes diplomatic reports submitted to the Conference of Ambassadors (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Reports for the Conference of Ambassadors", 1920) , telegrams exchanged with the Albanian delegation in Geneva during League of Nations deliberations (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, Telegrams "Geneva", 1921), and memoranda detailing Yugoslav incursions in the Shkodër and Mirditë regions(AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Shkodra – Border Incidents", 1920–1922). Italian influence on Albanian finances is documented in files concerning loan negotiations and bilateral agreements (AQSH, Fondi MPJ, Dosja "Korrespondenca financiare", 1921).

These Albanian materials are complemented by international archival sources, which provide external assessments of Albania's diplomatic position. The League of Nations Archives include Council Minutes discussing Yugoslav military movements (League of Nations, 1921) and the Commission of Inquiry's Report on the Frontier between Albania and the Kingdom of SCS, which evaluated contested territorial claims (League of Nations, 1922). Assembly documents record Albania's petitions protesting border violations and requesting formal recognition of sovereignty.

Further depth is provided by British diplomatic correspondence preserved in the Foreign Office (FO 371) series. Reports from the British legation in Belgrade outline Yugoslav strategies toward Albania (British National Archives, FO 371/6384, 1921), while dispatches from Rome assess Italy's attempts to expand political influence in Tirana (British National Archives, FO 371/7831, 1922). Italian governmental archives held in the Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (ASMAECI) particularly Serie Politica P: Albania contain evaluations of Albanian leaders, instructions to Italian envoys and documentation surrounding the 1921 financial loan (ASMAECI, Serie P, "Prestito e assistenza financiare", 1921). Complementary American perspectives are available in the U.S. National Archives (NARA), which include State Department memoranda on Albania's recognition and its position within post-war Balkan diplomacy (NARA, RG59, "Albania Political Affairs", 1921).

For the post-1990 period, the analysis draws on contemporary policy documents that reflect the institutionalisation of Albanian foreign policy within a Euro-Atlantic framework. The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Albania outlines the state's core security priorities, identifying NATO membership, regional stability and Euro-Atlantic integration as the pillars of national security (Republic of Albania, 2014). The Foreign Policy Concept issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs details Albania's strategic orientation toward multilateralism, good-neighbourly relations and alignment with EU and NATO norms (MPJ, 2019). Furthermore, NATO accession documentation including the Membership Action Plan and the annual progress assessments offers insight into how Albania adapted its defence structures and political institutions to meet alliance standards (NATO, 2008). The European Commission's annual progress reports provide additional evaluations of Albania's institutional reforms, rule of law efforts and regional diplomacy in the context of EU conditionality (European Commission, 2022). Academic literature reinforces these observations, emphasising how post-communist states use Euro-Atlantic frameworks to consolidate democratic governance and mitigate regional vulnerabilities (Schimmelfennig, 2010).

By integrating diverse archival records with contemporary policy materials, this study constructs a robust empirical base that allows cross-verification of events and interpretations. This multi-source methodological approach enables a clearer understanding of how Albania has sought recognition, protection and strategic alignment across a century of shifting geopolitical circumstances. Contemporary scholarship highlights that small states leverage institutional commitments to compensate for limited capabilities (Rothstein, 1977), while strategic-culture studies show how post-communist foreign policies remain shaped by historical insecurity and regional dynamics (Bozo, 2013). Through this combined evidentiary framework, the article identifies both enduring continuities and significant transformations in Albania's foreign-policy behaviour.

ALBANIA UNDER PRESSURE, 1920–1924: A SYNOPTIC RECONSTRUCTION

The immediate post–World War I environment placed Albania among the most vulnerable political units in Europe. Yugoslavia represented the clearest and most persistent threat. Belgrade maintained troops beyond the 1913 demarcation line and supported separatist structures such as the so-called Republic of Mirdita in 1921. Albanian reports treated Mirdita not as a spontaneous revolt but as a Yugoslav-engineered instrument designed to undermine Tirana's authority in the north and legitimise future territorial claims (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Shkodra Border Incidents", 1921). Administrative correspondence from Shkodër described Yugoslav officers supplying arms, facilitating incursions and coordinating irregular bands across the frontier (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, Telegrams "Shkodër", 1921).

Albania initially relied on bilateral protests. Diplomatic notes accused Yugoslav units of repeated violations near Vermosh and Peshkopi, detailing advances justified under the pretext of pursuing irregulars (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Diplomatic Protests", 1921).These démarches had limited impact given Albania's weak material capacity and Belgrade's confidence in great-power divisions. British memoranda similarly observed attempts to depict Albania as "unstable and ungovernable" to justify redrawing the northern frontier (British National Archives, FO 371/6384, 1921).

Confronted with continued violations, Tirana shifted the dispute to the League of Nations—a hallmark strategy of small-state diplomacy seeking institutional shelter. Petitions submitted to Geneva documented incursions, village burnings and intimidation of local authorities, framing these acts as threats to Europe's post-war order (League of Nations, "Albanian Petition on Northern Incursions", 1921). A League verification mission confirmed multiple Yugoslav breaches in Kelmend and Gjakova (League of Nations, Council Minutes, 2 October 1921).

The League's ruling of December 1921 marked a decisive turning point. Rejecting Yugoslav claims, the Commission of Inquiry affirmed Albania's borders as previously defined by the 1913 London Conference (League of Nations, "Report on the Frontier…", 1922). Telegrams from the Albanian delegation in Geneva celebrated this as the first multilateral guarantee of territorial integrity (AQSH, Fondi MPJ, Telegramet "Gjenevë", 1921). British observers later confirmed the withdrawal of Yugoslav units from contested areas (British National Archives, FO 371/6390, 1922).

Nevertheless, pressure persisted. Belgrade continued exploiting local divisions in Shkodër and Mirditë, prompting Albania to seek further monitoring. Internal correspondence warned that instability could "invite renewed intervention under the guise of restoring security" (AQSH, Fondi MPJ, Dosja "Situata politike në veri", 1922). Italian diplomatic reports likewise noted that Yugoslavia portrayed Albania as administratively weak to justify "neighbouring oversight" (ASMAECI, Serie P, "Rapporti politici", 1922).

This pattern illustrates a textbook case of small-state adaptation exposing revisionist behaviour through multilateral forums and replacing military weakness with legal-institutional leverage.
Italy: Italy played an ambivalent yet decisive role. After its withdrawal from Vlora in 1920, Rome abandoned open occupation and adopted a subtler model of political and economic penetration. Albanian correspondence reveals how Italian diplomats quickly shifted rhetoric

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.14738/assrj.1211.19634

toward "friendship" and "defence of Albania's territorial integrity" while seeking influence in administrative and financial domains (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Correspondence with the Italian Legation", 1920).

The Tirana Protocols of 1920–1921 became the backbone of Italy's strategy. Italian archival sources describe them as instruments designed to "preserve Rome's influence despite the loss of Vlora" (ASMAECI, Serie P, "Protocolli di Tirana", 1921). British diplomatic assessments interpreted them similarly as attempts to achieve through political means what Italy had failed to secure militarily (British National Archives, FO 371/6392, 1921).

Italy's financial leverage proved even more potent. Facing fiscal collapse, Albania negotiated an Italian loan. Internal correspondence characterised it as "necessary but dangerous," noting that refusal could deepen instability and invite Yugoslav aggression (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "The Italian Loan…", 1921). Italian documents openly acknowledged the aim of "binding Albania economically to Italy" (ASMAECI, Serie P, "Prestito e assistenza finanziaria", 1921).

League documentation confirmed Italy's dual posture defending Albania in Geneva while consolidating influence on the ground (League of Nations, Council Minutes, 17 December 1921). Albanian envoys responded with deliberate pragmatism: resisting intrusive Italian proposals while exploiting Rome's rivalry with Belgrade. British observers reported that Tirana "skilfully exploited antagonism between Italy and the Kingdom of SCS" (British National Archives, FO 371/6821, 1922). Italian dispatches themselves noted that Albanians "resist when we overreach, but rely on us to contain Belgrade" (ASMAECI, Serie P, "Rapporti politici", 1922).By 1924, Italy had amassed significant influence, but Albania avoided protectorate status. Through calibrated balancing, Tirana extracted support while resisting hegemonic overreach.

Greece: Relations with Greece revolved around minority rights, territorial claims and the unstable post-war environment. Greek diplomacy revived the "Northern Epirus" narrative, claiming historical and ethnic ties to Gjirokastër and Korçë. Albanian correspondence repeatedly protested Greek efforts to reinterpret administrative reforms as minority violations (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Correspondence with Athens", 1921). Prefectural reports documented Greek-backed agitation aimed at undermining Albania's authority (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Southern District Circulars", 1922).

During post-war boundary debates, Athens attempted to justify border revisions on the basis of Orthodox communities claims dismissed by British and Italian observers as attempts to reopen territorial questions (British National Archives, FO 371/7814, 1922). Albania countered with evidence of inclusive governance and submitted its position to the League (League of Nations, "Albanian Memorandum…", 1922). The Lausanne Conference (1923–1924) indirectly shaped the dispute. Greece sought to fit Orthodox Albanians into Lausanne's minority regime (Hionidis, 1924), while Albania argued that Lausanne reinforced border stability (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Lausanne", 1923).

The League mediated repeatedly. Complaints filed in 1923 described Greek patrols and interference in Devoll and Pogon (League of Nations, "Complaint…", 1923). The League concluded that disputes over schools, churches and administration fell within Albania's

domestic jurisdiction (League of Nations, Council Documents, 1923). British diplomats noted that Greece attempted to use minority protection as indirect leverage (British National Archives, FO 371/8990, 1923). By framing the dispute within institutional structures, Albania neutralised unilateral Greek narratives. Italian reports confirmed that multilateralisation "emptied Greek revisionism of diplomatic force" (ASMAECI, Serie P, "Situazione nel sud", 1924).

Coalition-Building Beyond the Region: To counter isolation, Albania cultivated ties with Turkey, Hungary, Bulgaria, Britain and France states without territorial claims (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Interstate Relations", 1921). League records show Albanian diplomacy courting states inclined to uphold territorial integrity (League of Nations, Assembly Records, 1922). Turkey remained a natural partner due to cultural links and shared concerns regarding Greek claims. Turkish notes supported Albania's borders as essential for Adriatic stability (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, HR.İD, 1923).

Hungary and Bulgaria also supported Albania in League debates, partly due to their dissatisfaction with the Versailles order (Hungarian National Archives, 1921; AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, Telegrams "Geneva – Bulgarian Support", 1922). Britain and France held decisive influence: British memoranda warned that failure to protect Albania would undermine the League itself (British National Archives, FO 371/7832, 1922), while French reports stressed Albania's importance for Adriatic balance (Archives du MAE, CPCOM, 1922). Albania framed its appeals as a test of the League's credibility a strategy that proved effective and compelled rulings in its favour (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, Telegrams "Geneva", 1921).

Legacy of the 1920–1924 Diplomatic Repertoire: Albania's actions during 1920–1924 shaped a distinctive diplomatic identity. When bilateral negotiations were structurally unfavourable, Tirana elevated disputes to international forums (League of Nations, Council Minutes, 1921). It balanced pressures by leveraging rivalries among larger powers (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Diplomatic Balances", 1922). These strategies legalism, multilateralism and strategic flexibility re-emerged after 1990, when Albania again turned to NATO, the EU and multilateral organisations for security and legitimacy (Republic of Albania, 2014; MPJ, 2019).

Scholars note that small states often revive earlier repertoires under conditions of vulnerability (Browning, 2006). Albania's post-1990 partnerships with the United States, Italy, Turkey and the EU mirror earlier coalitions with Turkey, Hungary, Bulgaria, Britain and France (Krasniqi, 2020). The strategic logic is remarkably consistent: external anchoring as the central mechanism for mitigating insecurity (Schimmelfennig, 2010).

Thus, Albania's diplomacy in 1920–1924 was not merely reactive but foundational. The repertoire forged in these years balancing, institutional appeal, coalition-building became the enduring template through which Albania navigated both interwar fragility and post-communist transformation.

ALBANIA AFTER 1990: FOREIGN POLICY IN A NEW SYSTEMIC ENVIRONMENT

Following the collapse of communism in 1990–1991, Albania re-entered international society under conditions totally different from those of the interwar period. The country emerged from decades of isolation with weak institutions, a fragile economy and limited diplomatic capacity,

requiring a fundamental redefinition of strategic orientation. International reports from the early 1990s describe Albania as a "nearly collapsed state" whose reintegration depended on external assistance and rapid institutional reconstruction (World Bank, 1992). This vulnerability shaped Albania's early diplomatic priorities, much as structural insecurity had done in 1920–1924.

Albania adopted a clear West-oriented foreign policy doctrine, positioning integration into Euro-Atlantic structures as the backbone of its external identity. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' early post-communist documents emphasised NATO membership and EU association as the only viable guarantees for long-term stability and sovereignty (MPJ, 1992). This shift reflected both the external incentives created by the post-Cold War order security guarantees under NATO, economic aid from the EU and internal regime-survival considerations typical of omni-balancing strategies during democratic transitions (David, 1991). Academic literature on post-communist small states argues that aligning with Western institutions offers legitimacy, political stabilisation and protection against regional threats (Vachudova, 2005).

Western governments and institutions also played a decisive role in Albania's reintegration. The U.S. State Department's annual reports framed Albania's transition as dependent on democratic reform, market liberalisation and regional cooperation (U.S. Department of State, 1993). NATO assessments highlighted the need for deep security-sector reforms, civilian control of the military and regional confidence-building measures as preconditions for membership (NATO, 1999). The OSCE, which opened one of its largest missions in Albania, described the early 1990s as a phase of "state reconstruction under international supervision" (OSCE, 1997). Meanwhile, the EU's Stabilisation and Association process provided a structured roadmap for political and economic transformation (European Commission, 2001).

Strategically, the post-1990 realignment echoed some of the mechanisms Albania had used in the interwar period. Just as Albania had relied on the League of Nations to escape bilateral asymmetry, after 1990 it viewed NATO and the EU as institutional anchors capable of compensating for material weakness and regional vulnerabilities. Scholars of Albanian diplomacy note that Euro-Atlantic integration became both a foreign-policy doctrine and a state-building strategy, linking external alignment with the consolidation of internal political order (Krasniqi, 2020). The National Security Strategy similarly identifies NATO membership as the foundation of Albania's defence architecture and the primary shield against regional instability (Republic of Albania, 2014).

Thus, Albania's post-communist return to international society was shaped by a combination of structural constraints, historical patterns and strategic calculation. By seeking recognition, security and legitimacy through Western institutions, Albania reproduced in a transformed context the same logic of internationalisation and diplomatic diversification that had underpinned its survival between 1920 and 1924.

Albania's relations with neighbouring states changed fundamentally after 1990. Whereas in 1920–1924 its diplomacy focused on resisting territorial encroachment, the post-Cold War environment replaced existential threats with complex political, economic and identity-related disputes. Scholars of Balkan geopolitics note that the region transitioned from "border revisionism to competitive interdependence," reshaping the behaviour of small states such as

Albania (Bieber, 2018). This shift required Tirana to adopt strategies rooted in dialogue, institutional mediation and economic connectivity rather than physical deterrence.

*Serbia and Kosovo***.** After the 1999 Kosovo conflict, Albania's foreign policy became closely tied to Kosovo's state-building process. Tirana coordinated its diplomacy with NATO and the United States, framing Kosovo's independence as a regional stability issue rather than an ethnic-national question (U.S. State Department, 2008). Academic analyses describe Albania's behaviour as a hedging strategy supporting Kosovo's self-determination while avoiding direct confrontation with Serbia (Weller, 2009). OSCE reports highlight that Albania promoted dialogue within the EU-led Brussels Process and systematically opposed unilateral escalation (OSCE, 2013). By anchoring the Kosovo question within NATO, EU and UN structures, Albania shifted from defensive survival diplomacy (1920s) to structured regional engagement.

*Greece***.** Relations with Greece also moved from the hard-security tensions of the 1920s to legal and political negotiation. Issues such as maritime delimitation, property rights and the Greek minority became embedded in institutional frameworks. The 2009 maritime agreement—later annulled by Albania's Constitutional Court triggered a renewed process grounded in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982). European Commission reports emphasise that bilateral disputes increasingly unfold within EU conditionality mechanisms, which encourage rule-based settlement and discourage unilateral pressure (European Commission, 2019). Studies on Greek–Albanian relations argue that the shift from territorial rivalry to rights-based and legalistic diplomacy mirrors broader EU-driven norm diffusion in the region (Aarbakke, 2016).

Italy. The transformation of Albania–Italy relations represents one of the clearest shifts from asymmetry to structured interdependence. In the early 1990s, Italy became Albania's main economic partner, humanitarian supporter and political sponsor, particularly during the 1997 state collapse (Carbone, 2010). Italian governmental documents describe Albania as a "priority strategic partner" in the Adriatic (MAECI, 2014). Trade flows, migration networks and security cooperation (including joint maritime patrols under the 1997 bilateral agreement) created a dense web of interdependence that replaced Italy's quasi-hegemonic posture of the 1920s. Scholars argue that this transformation illustrates how small states can convert former asymmetries into mutually beneficial partnerships through institution-building and economic integration (Elbasani, 2013). Overall, Albania's contemporary neighbourhood policy reflects a fundamental reconfiguration of the regional landscape. Instead of contesting borders, Tirana operates within multilateral frameworks, balances between competing interests, and uses diplomacy to transform historical vulnerabilities into structured cooperation.

NATO and the Security Regime: From Vulnerability to Guaranteed Protection

Albania's entry into NATO in April 2009 marked a structural transformation in its security posture one impossible to imagine in the 1920–1924 period. Instead of appealing for moral support from the League of Nations, Albania now operates under the Article 5 collective-defence umbrella, which scholars identify as "the strongest security guarantee available to small states in the contemporary international system" (Ringsmose, 2010). This shift represents a transition from internationalising vulnerability to institutionalising security, a hallmark of successful small-state adaptation.

NATO membership also redefined Albania's relations with its neighbours. The alliance's framework of military transparency, joint exercises and dispute-management practices reduces the likelihood of coercive pressure a constant threat during the interwar era (Wallander, 2000). For example, NATO's cooperative security mechanisms have facilitated structured channels between Albania and Greece, while simultaneously constraining Serbian strategic calculations through Kosovo Force (KFOR) operations (NATO, 2019). Scholars argue that such frameworks "lock states into predictable patterns of behaviour," limiting the type of unilateral intervention that Albania faced in 1920–1924 (Kupchan, 2012).

Furthermore, NATO integration has enabled Albania to develop credible defence capabilities aligned with alliance standards. Defence reform reports emphasise the professionalisation, interoperability and modernization of the Albanian Armed Forces developments that fundamentally contrast with the near-absence of military capacity in the 1920s (Ministry of Defence of Albania, 2014). By participating in international missions such as ISAF in Afghanistan, Albania has shifted from a security consumer to a contributor, reinforcing its legitimacy as an ally (Deni, 2017).

Turkey's role inside NATO has also influenced Albania's strategic flexibility. Ankara has consistently supported Albania's defence modernization, providing training programmes, equipment transfers and institutional assistance (Gürdeniz, 2015). This creates a multi-layered security network that further reduces Albania's exposure to regional asymmetries.

From a theoretical standpoint, Albania's trajectory illustrates what small-state scholars term institutional sheltering the use of binding alliances to offset material vulnerability (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017). Unlike the League of Nations, which could only issue recommendations, NATO provides enforceable guarantees and credible deterrence, fundamentally altering Albania's risk environment.

Overall, NATO membership transformed Albania from a diplomatically exposed state dependent on great-power goodwill into a protected member of a security community. The contrast with 1920–1924 could not be sharper: whereas the early Albanian state fought for recognition and border guarantees, contemporary Albania operates within a regime where its sovereignty is institutionally defended and strategically reinforced.

The European Union has become Albania's primary strategic horizon, shaping both domestic reforms and external behaviour. EU conditionality through chapters on rule of law, governance and market regulation functions as the dominant framework guiding Albania's political trajectory. Scholars describe this mechanism as "transformative power Europe," in which compliance with EU norms becomes the main instrument of state-building for post-communist small states (Vachudova, 2005). Unlike the early 1920s, when Albania struggled for territorial recognition, the contemporary challenge concerns institutional credibility, democratic consolidation and regulatory alignment.

This shift illustrates a transition from diplomacy of survival to diplomacy of transformation. In 1920–1924, Albania appealed to the League of Nations to protect borders; today it voluntarily accepts external constraints to gain stability, investment and long-term legitimacy. EU reports repeatedly emphasise that Albania's progress depends on judicial reforms, anti-corruption

measures and regional cooperation areas where small states often rely on external anchors to overcome domestic vulnerabilities (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2017). Annual Progress Reports highlight the centrality of these reforms for accession negotiations (European Commission, 2022).

This dynamic creates asymmetric interdependence: while the EU shapes Albania's reform agenda through conditionality and financial incentives, Albania uses integration as a strategic tool to enhance security and economic development. Scholars argue that such asymmetry is typical of Western Balkan states, which "trade sovereignty for stability" within a normative framework that rewards compliance (Elbasani, 2013). For Albania, EU enlargement policy provides not only economic benefits but also a predictable diplomatic environment that reduces uncertainty in relations with neighbours and strengthens alignment with international norms (Bechev, 2018).

In this way, the EU serves as a structural anchor similar in function but not in form to the League of Nations in the 1920s. While the League offered symbolic protection, the EU provides deep institutional integration. Albania's pursuit of accession thus reflects an evolution in small-state strategy: reliance on multilateral structures not merely to survive regional pressures but to transform state capacity, reshape political behaviour and embed the country within a stable European order.

FROM VULNERABILITY TO STRATEGIC ADAPTATION: A COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS

The comparative trajectory of Albanian foreign policy between 1920–1924 and the post-1990 era reveals a remarkable continuity in strategic logic despite profound transformations in Albania's geopolitical environment, institutional capacities and international embeddedness. At its core, Albania has consistently behaved as a vulnerable small state that compensates for structural weakness through external guarantees, multilateral anchoring and diversified partnerships. Yet the purpose and mechanisms of these strategies have shifted dramatically: whereas the interwar period was characterised by existential imperatives of survival, contemporary Albanian diplomacy operates within a dense Euro-Atlantic architecture that privileges institutional transformation, regional influence and strategic optimisation.

During 1920–1924, Albania functioned in one of the most unstable post-imperial environments in Europe. Its borders were contested simultaneously by Yugoslavia, Greece and Italy, and its domestic administrative capacity remained embryonic. The British Foreign Office described Albania in early 1921 as *"a political organism whose future depends almost entirely on external will"* (British National Archives, FO 371/6384, 1921). Archival telegrams sent by the Albanian delegation in Geneva repeatedly warned that without international enforcement of decisions taken in London and Paris, *"the state risks dissolution under armed encroachments"* (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, Telegrams "Geneva", 1921). The League of Nations thus became Albania's principal diplomatic instrument. Council Minutes from 2 October 1921 record the debate in which the British representative, Herbert Fisher, admonished Yugoslavia for advancing troops beyond the demarcation line, calling it *"a violation of the international settlement"* (League of Nations, Council Minutes, 1921). These multilateral interventions eventually led to the border confirmations of December 1921, which scholars identify as a decisive moment preventing the partition of Albania (Fischer, 1999).

Yet the League's protection remained largely moral rather than coercive. British diplomats noted that the League *"possesses authority but lacks instruments of enforcement"* (FO 371/6384, 1921). Italy continued to exert hegemony through financial leverage. Italian archival documents show that the 1921 loan negotiated under conditions of fiscal collapse placed Albania under de facto Italian economic supervision (ASMAECI, Serie P, "Prestito e assistenza finanziaria", 1921). Simultaneously, Yugoslav interference in northern districts persisted, as documented in Albanian files on border incidents in Shkodër, Has and Tropojë (AQSH, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Fund, File "Northern Border Incidents", 1920–1922). Greek diplomacy pursued a parallel effort in the south, submitting memoranda to the Conference of Ambassadors claiming historical and ethnic ties to the regions of Gjirokastër and Korçë (Paris Peace Conference Papers, 1921). In this environment, Albania's diplomacy was improvisational but purposeful: it internationalised disputes, balanced Yugoslav aggression through Italian counter-pressure, and sought support from Turkey, Hungary, Bulgaria, Britain and France to avoid isolation. As Fischer (1999) argues, interwar Albania was a state recognised but not yet secured.

After the collapse of communism, Albania re-entered an international system fundamentally transformed by institutionalisation, norms and multilateral governance. Instead of a volatile balance-of-power landscape, contemporary Albania operates inside NATO, the OSCE, the UN system and most importantly within the gravitational field of the European Union. Whereas the League of Nations offered symbolic reassurance, NATO provides credible deterrence and operational capabilities. Scholars refer to this shift as the transition from *"moral guarantees to institutionalised hard security"* (Rynning, 2011). NATO accession in 2009 thus represents a structural watershed: Albania is no longer dependent on ad hoc great-power interventions but protected under Article 5 collective defence (NATO, 2009).

The European Union constitutes the second major institutional pillar. EU conditionality, acquis alignment and economic assistance under IPA funds shape Albania's governance architecture and foreign-policy orientation (European Commission, 2022). Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier (2005) describe this process as *"transformation through norms,"* whereby candidate states internalise EU rules as a pathway to political and economic modernisation. Unlike the 1920s, where Albania sought recognition to avoid disappearance, post-1990 Albania seeks integration to secure development, legitimacy and regional influence. As Bieber (2020) notes, the Western Balkans today are embedded in a rule-based environment in which sovereignty is exercised through coordination rather than isolation.

Continuities nonetheless remain striking. Albania still relies heavily on external guarantees, mirroring its dependence on the League of Nations during 1920–1924, but now under far more effective institutional umbrellas. The search for powerful patrons also persists: in the 1920s this meant Italy, Turkey, Britain and France; today the United States, EU, Italy and Turkey fulfil this role. U.S. Albanian relations, in particular, represent a strategic patronage structure underpinned by defence cooperation, intelligence reforms and diplomatic alignment on the Kosovo issue (Phillips, 2012). Italy once a quasi-hegemon is now Albania's largest economic partner and a key supporter of EU accession, reflecting a shift from asymmetric coercion to mutual interdependence (Caruso, 2020). Turkey's growing presence in trade, defence and reconstruction after the 2019 earthquake illustrates a pattern scholars characterise as Ankara's "strategic soft-power outreach" in the Western Balkans (Öktem & Akkoyunlu, 2016).

Moreover, contemporary Albania practices a sophisticated form of multi-vector diplomacy, maintaining strong ties simultaneously with Washington, Brussels, Rome and Ankara without compromising its Euro-Atlantic alignment (Cornell, 2017; Thorhallsson, 2018). This model mirrors the diplomatic diversification of 1920–1924, but under fundamentally safer conditions. Regional cooperation formats such as the Berlin Process, the Energy Community Treaty, NATO's South-East Europe initiatives and selective engagement with Open Balkan further illustrate Albania's attempt to maximise strategic space within a competitive region (Bechev, 2019; RCC, 2020).

The transformation in Albania's international positioning is equally pronounced. In the early 1920s, Albania was diplomatically marginal, with minimal legations and limited professional expertise. British documents referred to it as *"a state of uncertain durability"* (FO 371/6379, 1920). Decisions affecting Albania's borders were often taken without Albanian participation (League of Nations Archives, R 1765/5/24012). Today, Albania not only participates in but shapes regional and international processes. As a NATO member, OSCE Chair-in-Office in 2020, contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, and EU candidate with over 70% acquis alignment, Albania has transitioned from a passive object of great-power arbitration to an embedded and functional actor within the Euro-Atlantic community (Petersen, 2020; UN Peacekeeping, 2021). This evolution from a *diplomacy of survival* to a *diplomacy of strategic optimisation*—illustrates how small states can use institutions, great-power partnerships and foreign-policy diversification to reduce structural vulnerability (Thorhallsson, 2018; Cooper & Shaw, 2009). Although Albania's tools have changed, its behavioural logic remains consistent. As in the 1920s, Albania still mitigates insecurity by anchoring itself in multilateral organisations, cultivating powerful allies and balancing asymmetric pressures from its neighbourhood (Walt, 1987; David, 1991). The difference lies in context and capability. The interwar period was marked by existential uncertainty, weak institutions and dependence on the fluctuating goodwill of great powers (Fischer, 1999; British National Archives, FO 371/6384, 1921). Post-1990 Albania operates in a dense Euro-Atlantic environment NATO, the EU, the OSCE where rules, norms and collective-security guarantees provide stability absent in the League of Nations era (Rynning, 2011; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

Ultimately, the century-long comparison reveals a coherent strategic identity rooted in Albania's structural position as a small state, but also an impressive ability to adapt to systemic change. Through external anchoring, institutional engagement and strategic diversification, Albania has shifted from a contested periphery to an integrated contributor to regional stability (Petersen, 2020; Elbasani & Šabić, 2021). Its evolution confirms broader small-state theory: even fragile states can strengthen their international role when embedded in strong institutional frameworks and supported by credible allies (Keohane, 2012; Kuik, 2008).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The comparative trajectory of Albanian foreign policy from the existential diplomacy of the early 1920s to the institutionalised strategies of the post-1990 era reveals a number of structural lessons that remain directly relevant for contemporary statecraft. Although Albania today benefits from a far more stable geopolitical environment, the vulnerabilities characteristic of small states persist, requiring a coherent, proactive and historically informed diplomatic strategy. The following recommendations derive from the patterns identified

throughout the analysis and reflect the broader theoretical consensus on how small states can strengthen their international posture.

A central priority for Albania remains the deepening of its anchoring within Euro-Atlantic institutions. NATO continues to constitute the core of Albania's security architecture, providing a degree of deterrence unimaginable during the interwar period. Increasing participation in alliance structures whether through joint exercises, intelligence cooperation or contributions to mission planning would reinforce Albania's credibility as a reliable partner. Equally important is the advancement of reforms required for EU accession. Experience across Eastern Europe demonstrates that sustained progress in the rule of law, public administration and judicial independence strengthens state resilience and reduces vulnerability to external pressure. For Albania, accelerating alignment with Chapters 23 and 24 is not only an institutional obligation but a strategic necessity.

At the same time, Albania should refine and consolidate its multi-vector diplomacy. The post-1990 era has shown that maintaining strong relations with the United States, Italy and Turkey while integrating these partnerships into a unified foreign-policy framework.offers Albania critical strategic depth. The United States remains the principal security guarantor; Italy continues to function as Albania's nearest economic anchor; and Turkey provides diversification in defence cooperation and investment. Ensuring that these relationships reinforce, rather than dilute, Albania's Euro-Atlantic orientation requires greater inter-institutional coordination and long-term strategic planning.

The regional dimension likewise demands sustained attention. The interwar experience demonstrated that Albania's security is directly affected by the stability of its neighbourhood. Today, disputes with Serbia, Greece or other regional actors unfold within institutional settings that mitigate escalation, yet they continue to shape Albania's strategic environment. Embedding all major regional questions from the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue to maritime delimitation with Greece within rule-based mechanisms of the EU and NATO remains essential. Albania's active participation in the Berlin Process, the Energy Community, and selective engagement in initiatives such as Open Balkan can increase its diplomatic leverage, provided these formats reinforce and do not circumvent EU conditionality.

Strengthening the internal capacities of Albanian diplomacy is equally critical. The interwar years illustrated how rapid, well-documented and legally grounded diplomatic action could alter the behaviour of stronger neighbours. Today, such effectiveness requires expanding analytic and forecasting capabilities within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; enhancing professional training for diplomats in negotiation, crisis management and digital diplomacy; and increasing Albania's presence in international organisations through competitive posts and secondments. Establishing a dedicated Diplomatic Training Academy could help institutionalise these functions and ensure continuity across political cycles.

Economic resilience forms another key component of Albania's modern foreign-policy strategy. Just as dependence on Italian credit constrained Albania's diplomatic autonomy in the 1920s, contemporary economic vulnerabilities whether in energy, infrastructure or foreign investment continue to shape room for manoeuvre. Diversifying investment partners, strengthening regulatory oversight of strategic sectors, and developing a national framework

for economic security would reduce the risk of asymmetric dependence and increase Albania's long-term strategic flexibility.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of integrating historical memory into foreign-policy planning. Albania's behaviour during 1920–1924 established enduring repertoires legalism, multilateralism and strategic balancing that continue to shape its diplomacy today. Recognising these continuities allows policymakers to better anticipate vulnerabilities and maintain coherence in strategic decision-making. Embedding historical case analysis into national security planning and diplomatic training would help transform Albania's interwar experience from a defensive reflex into a strategic resource.

Taken together, these recommendations reflect a broader principle: small-state resilience is achieved not through material power but through institutional anchoring, diversified partnerships and the effective use of multilateral frameworks. By strengthening these pillars, Albania can consolidate its role as a stable and constructive actor within the Euro-Atlantic community while mitigating the structural vulnerabilities that have historically shaped its foreign-policy behaviour.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis of Albania's foreign-policy behaviour in 1920–1924 and the post-1990 era demonstrates that, despite radically different international environments, Albanian diplomacy has been shaped by a persistent logic of small-state survival, institutional anchoring and strategic diversification. While Albania's capabilities, partners and security context have changed substantially, the underlying behavioural repertoire balancing, internationalisation of disputes and reliance on external guarantees has remained remarkably stable (Thorhallsson & Steinsson, 2017).

During 1920–1924, Albania operated under existential threat. Archival evidence from the Albanian State Archives and the League of Nations reveals a state confronted simultaneously with Yugoslav military incursions (League of Nations, Council Minutes, 2 October 1921), Greek territorial narratives over the southern districts (British National Archives, FO 371/7881, 1922), and Italy's post-Vlora attempts to re-establish influence through loans and political agreements (ASMAECI, Serie P, *Rapporti politici*, 1920). Albania's diplomatic behaviour in this period corresponds to what the literature terms "survival-driven diplomacy" a strategy centred on raising disputes to multilateral forums, appealing to legal norms, and seeking international recognition as a substitute for military capability (Pedersen, 2015; Ingebritsen, 2006). The League of Nations provided juridical reassurance but limited operational support, exposing the structural constraints small states faced in an institutionally weak interwar order.

After 1990, Albania's position changed fundamentally. NATO membership eliminated the threat of territorial extinction, replacing symbolic guarantees with enforceable collective defence (NATO, Membership Documents, 2009). EU conditionality mechanisms reshaped Albania's political and administrative development (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020). Instead of improvising for survival, Albania now engages in "strategic adaptation" and "hedging for advantage" (Kuik, 2008; Wivel & Powers, 2020): anchoring itself firmly in Euro-Atlantic structures, deepening partnerships with the United States, Italy and Turkey, and participating

in regional initiatives such as the Berlin Process. Foreign policy has thus evolved from crisis management to institutional consolidation and proactive engagement.

Yet continuity remains striking. Geography continues to be a structural determinant, with Serbia, Greece and regional dynamics surrounding Kosovo still central to strategic planning (Bieber, 2018). Albania maintains reliance on powerful allies above all the United States for security credibility (Zimmermann, 2014). And like other small states, Albania employs multilateral institutions both as shields and as platforms for influence (Keohane, 2005). The difference lies in institutional capacity: whereas the League offered moral authority, NATO and the EU provide enforceable rules, monitoring mechanisms and tangible security benefits.

These findings reinforce broader theoretical arguments that institutional environments shape the behaviour, autonomy and agency of small states (Abbott & Snidal, 1998; Börzel & Risse, 2018). Albania's trajectory exemplifies how small states transform not solely through internal reforms but through sustained participation in robust international regimes. External engagement becomes not only a mechanism for survival, but also a catalyst for state-building, democratisation and economic alignment with broader European structures.

Ultimately, the comparison shows that the essential grammar of Albania's foreign-policy identity was formed during 1920–1924: leveraging institutions, appealing to legal norms, diversifying partners and balancing regional pressures. What has changed is the purpose and context of these strategies. Albania has moved from "survival under anarchy" to "integration within a security regime." This shift marks its transformation from a fragile polity struggling for recognition into a stable, institutionalised and increasingly assertive small state capable of shaping its regional environment while anchored in a dense network of Euro-Atlantic partnerships.

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