

The Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between Spain and Albania (1946–1986): From Non-Recognition to Diplomatic Normalization

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Abstract

On 12 September 1986, Spain and Albania established diplomatic relations through an exchange of notes at the Spanish embassy in Paris. The agreement ended more than four decades without formal ties between the two countries. This article reconstructs the process that led to that normalization, examines the motivations of both governments and places the episode within the broader foreign-policy contexts of late Cold War Europe.

The absence of diplomatic relations had deep historical roots. The Albanian communist government refused to recognize the Franco regime after the Second World War and instead recognized the Spanish Republican government in exile. Albanian volunteers had fought in the International Brigades during the Civil War, and that memory was woven into the founding legitimacy of the Hoxha regime. For several decades, those historical ties kept Madrid and Tirana apart even after Spain had normalized relations with almost all other communist states in Central and Eastern Europe during 1977.

The period between 1978 and 1985 altered the conditions on both sides. The González government treated the extension of diplomatic relations as part of a policy of diplomatic universality — and, according to Juan Antonio Yáñez-Barnuevo, who served in the Office of the Prime Minister during the period, the Albanian case also carried a compensatory political meaning in the year of the NATO referendum. On the Albanian side, the rupture with China in 1978 and the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985 opened space for selective openings towards Western Europe.

The article examines the negotiations of 1985–1986 in detail, drawing on published Albanian diplomatic documentation, Spanish press sources, secondary literature and an interview with Yáñez-Barnuevo conducted in March 2026. The choice of Paris as the venue, the preference for an exchange of notes over a joint communiqué, and the prior establishment of Spanish-Israeli relations in January 1986 were not incidental details: each reflected a specific political constraint that had to be resolved before the agreement could be signed.

The first diplomatic steps after September 1986 were deliberately modest. Spain covered Albania through its embassy in Belgrade; Albania covered Spain through its embassy in Paris. Credentials were exchanged in December 1986 and April 1987. No

resident embassies were opened. It was a thin relationship. It was also the first one they had ever had.

Keywords: Spanish foreign policy; Albanian diplomacy; Cold War Europe; diplomatic normalization; Felipe González; Ramiz Alia; bilateral relations

1. Introduction

On 12 September 1986, the Kingdom of Spain and the People's Socialist Republic of Albania established diplomatic relations through an exchange of notes in Paris. The agreement ended more than four decades without formal ties. At the time, it attracted limited international attention, as larger developments dominated European politics during the later years of the Cold War. Yet the normalization offers a useful perspective on two foreign-policy trajectories: Spain's search for diplomatic universality after democratic transition and Albania's gradual expansion of external contacts under Ramiz Alia.

The year 2026 marks the fortieth anniversary of this diplomatic relationship. This anniversary provides an appropriate moment to revisit a little-studied episode in European diplomatic history. Albania's relations with Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia have received more attention than its contacts with Spain. Studies of Spanish foreign policy under Felipe González have focused mainly on accession to the European Communities, the NATO debate and Spain's growing international role (Pardo Sanz, 2011). The Albanian case has remained marginal within that literature.

The absence of diplomatic relations was rooted in the political divisions that followed the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. The Albanian communist government recognized the Spanish Republican government in exile but did not recognize the Franco regime. For several decades, both countries remained diplomatically disconnected despite occasional exploratory contacts. This situation began to change after the late 1970s. Spain's democratic transition and its policy of diplomatic universality coincided with Albania's effort to diversify external contacts after the rupture with China and the political transition following the death of Enver Hoxha.

The year 1986 concentrated several decisions that affected Spain's external position. Spain entered the European Communities on 1 January, held the referendum on NATO membership in March and established diplomatic relations with Israel in January. The Israeli question also affected the Albanian file. According to Albanian documentation, some Spanish political actors considered that relations with Israel had to be concluded before opening relations with Albania, a state that did not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel at the time. This sequence helps explain why the Albanian case moved forward in 1986 and not earlier.

This article examines the process that led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Spain and Albania in September 1986. It does not offer a general overview of four decades of bilateral relations. It focuses on the origins of normalization, the motivations of both governments, the negotiations that preceded the agreement and the first steps taken after the exchange of notes. The article draws upon Albanian official documentation, Spanish and Albanian press sources, secondary literature on the foreign policies of both countries and an interview with Juan Antonio Yáñez-Barnuevo, who served in the Office of the Prime Minister during the period under study.

The article first reviews the reasons for the absence of diplomatic relations. It then examines the changes in Spanish and Albanian foreign policy between 1978 and 1985, reconstructs the negotiations of 1986 and analyses the exchange of notes and the first diplomatic steps that followed.

2. Methodology and Sources

This article adopts a qualitative historical approach combining diplomatic history and foreign policy analysis. It examines the process that led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Spain and Albania in September 1986.

The research is based on four categories of sources. The first consists of archival material and historical documentation preserved and published by Albanian diplomatic institutions, particularly regarding the negotiations that preceded the normalization of relations. The second includes Spanish and Albanian press sources published during the period under study. The third consists of secondary literature on Spanish foreign policy during the governments of Felipe González and on Albania's international relations during the 1980s. Finally, the article incorporates information obtained through an interview conducted with Juan Antonio Yáñez-Barnuevo on 20 March 2026. During the period examined, Yáñez-Barnuevo served in the Office of the Prime Minister and participated in the formulation of Spanish foreign policy.

The combination of these sources makes it possible to reconstruct the chronology of the negotiations, identify the motivations of both governments and place the establishment of diplomatic relations within the broader political context of the later years of the Cold War.

3. Analysis and Results

3.1. The Absence of Diplomatic Relations, 1946–1978

The absence of diplomatic relations between Spain and Albania until 1986 was unusual in the European context. In 1977, democratic Spain normalized relations with

almost all Central and Eastern European communist states: Romania on 21 January, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria on 27 January, Poland on 31 January, the Soviet Union, Hungary and Czechoslovakia on 9 February, and the German Democratic Republic on 4 April. Albania was the only communist state in Europe left outside that first opening to the East (Mizerska-Wrotkowska, 2024). The exception is relevant. It shows that the absence of relations with Albania was not simply a consequence of ideological distance between Spain and communist regimes. Other factors were at work. Yet more than four decades after the end of the Second World War, Madrid and Tirana still lacked official diplomatic ties.

The origins of this situation can be traced to the political divisions created by the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. During the conflict, volunteers from several European countries, including Albania, joined the International Brigades in support of the Spanish Republic. Following the victory of Francisco Franco in 1939, the new Spanish regime established close relations with Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. After the Second World War, the communist government that came to power in Albania refused to recognize the Franco regime and instead recognized the Spanish Republican government in exile, based in Paris. On 10 August 1946, the Republican government in exile formally requested recognition from the Albanian legation in Paris. The Albanian government granted such recognition on 30 October 1946. However, it did not proceed to establish diplomatic relations with the government in exile. Tirana also refused to recognize any diplomatic representation of Francoist Spain (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021).

The Albanian connection to Republican Spain was not confined to ideological solidarity. During the Civil War, a small group of Albanian nationals joined the International Brigades and fought alongside the Republican Army. Their number was limited — Albania in the mid-1930s had no established communist party infrastructure comparable to those of France, Italy or Germany, and organized political emigration was minimal, but their presence left documentary traces that outlasted the conflict. Personal files of Albanian volunteers are preserved in Case 86 of Fund 545 of the Comintern archive in Moscow, now partially accessible through digitized sources (Comintern Archive, 1937). The most documented among them is Petro Marko, who fought on the Republican side and later drew on the experience in his novel *Hasta la vista* (the title in Spanish in the Albanian original) published decades after the war's end. In 1937, Albanian members of the Brigades produced in Madrid a single issue of a publication they titled *El voluntario de la libertad*, preserved in Case 361 of the same Comintern fund. The title was not incidental: it placed Albanian participation within the shared antifascist vocabulary of the International Brigades while signalling a direct engagement with Spanish language and culture (Acciai, 2020; Montobbio, 2009).

The subsequent trajectories of these volunteers matter for understanding the symbolic weight that Spain carried in Albanian political memory. Those who survived the Civil War returned to a country undergoing rapid and violent political transformation. Several participated in the partisan resistance during the Second World War and were subsequently integrated into the structures of the communist regime that consolidated power under Enver Hoxha after 1944 (Acciai, 2020). Within the official discourse of the Party of Labour of Albania, the Spanish experience functioned as evidence of antifascist credentials predating the national partisan struggle: the brigadists embodied a continuity between international antifascism in the 1930s and Albanian resistance in the 1940s. The recognition of the Republican government in exile in October 1946 was grounded, at least in part, in that constructed memory.

That same memory created a constraint rather than a resource when Albanian foreign policy began to shift in the 1970s. Normalizing relations with democratic Spain meant acknowledging, implicitly, that the political order emerging from Francoism — transformed as it was — constituted a legitimate interlocutor. For a regime that had maintained its anti-Francoist position for thirty years as a marker of ideological consistency, that acknowledgement required a quiet but real revision of established posture. The Spanish democratic transition did not simplify the Albanian calculation: it complicated it, because it separated the rejection of Francoism — still politically serviceable — from recognition of the new democracy, which was diplomatically necessary but carried an implicit cost.

This position remained unchanged for several decades. Albania became one of the most isolated states in Europe. Initially aligned with Yugoslavia, then the Soviet Union and later the People's Republic of China, it successively broke with all three partners. Following the rupture with China in 1978, Albania entered a period of profound international isolation. Relations with Western European countries remained limited and were approached with considerable caution (Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994).

Political changes in Spain after the death of Franco in November 1975 opened a new phase. King Juan Carlos I and the successive democratic governments sought to consolidate Spain's international position and progressively adopted a policy of diplomatic universality (Pardo Sanz, 2011). During this period, Spanish diplomats began to explore the possibility of establishing contacts with Albania. Initial approaches were made through Albanian diplomatic representatives in Rome. These efforts did not produce immediate results, as the Albanian government maintained its traditional position and showed little interest in formal diplomatic normalization.

The creation of a Spain–Albania Friendship Association in 1978 must be placed within the fragile political context of the Spanish transition. The transition was led from within the structures of the previous regime by reformist actors headed by Prime Minister

Adolfo Suárez. One of the most difficult decisions of this period was the legalization of the Spanish Communist Party on 9 April 1977, only weeks before the first democratic elections of 15 June 1977. The decision allowed the Communist Party to participate in the electoral process, but it also provoked strong resistance in conservative sectors and within the Armed Forces. The resignation of the Minister of the Navy, Gabriel Pita da Veiga, after the legalization of the party, illustrated the political sensitivity of the issue (Muñoz Bolaños, 2013; Powell, 2016).

In this context, the association created in 1978 did not facilitate official diplomatic normalization. It showed that political and ideological contacts with Albania existed, largely through members of the Spanish Communist Party. Those same links also generated reservations within Spanish governmental structures, including parts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that remained conservative and marked by the institutional culture of the previous regime. For Tirana, the Communist Party and the association offered an accessible channel of contact. For Madrid, they made the Albanian file more politically sensitive at a moment when the incorporation of the Communist Party into democratic legality had only recently been achieved.

3.2. Changing Foreign Policy Priorities in Spain and Albania, 1978–1985

The period between 1978 and 1985 brought significant changes to the international position of both Spain and Albania. These developments did not immediately lead to diplomatic normalization, but they altered the circumstances in which relations between the two countries had remained frozen for decades.

For Spain, the democratic transition was accompanied by a gradual redefinition of foreign policy priorities. The governments that followed the adoption of the 1978 Constitution sought to strengthen Spain's international presence and complete its integration into Western political and economic structures. Spain had joined NATO in May 1982 under the government of Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo, against the opposition of the PSOE and other left-wing forces. Once in government, Felipe González reversed the earlier socialist position summarized in the slogan "OTAN, de entrada no" and submitted Spain's continued membership to a referendum held on 12 March 1986. The victory of the "yes" vote confirmed Spain's permanence in the Alliance, although without participation in NATO's integrated military structure (Martínez Sánchez, 2011; Pardo Sanz, 2011). Alongside accession to the European Communities in January 1986, the referendum marked a decisive moment in Spain's external consolidation.

According to Juan Antonio Yáñez-Barnuevo, Director of the International Department of the Office of the Prime Minister between 1982 and 1991 under Felipe González, the Spanish government considered the extension of diplomatic relations an

integral part of Spain's democratic normalization and international projection. The objective was to maintain relations with the widest possible range of countries while reinforcing Spain's position in European and Atlantic institutions. In his recollection, the establishment of relations with Albania in the same year as the NATO referendum also had a compensatory political meaning. It balanced, especially towards sectors of the Spanish left and parts of the PSOE that had been reluctant or opposed to NATO membership, the image of a Spain exclusively aligned with Western strategic structures (J. A. Yáñez-Barnuevo, personal communication, March 20, 2026).

Developments in Albania followed a different trajectory. The rupture with China in 1978 deprived Tirana of its last major international ally and reinforced the country's political and economic isolation. During the following years, the Albanian leadership sought to preserve ideological continuity while cautiously expanding external contacts. The objective was not a fundamental reorientation of foreign policy but a selective diversification of diplomatic and economic relations (Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994).

The death of Enver Hoxha in April 1985 and the succession of Ramiz Alia introduced additional elements of change. Although Albania remained a communist one-party state, the new leadership displayed greater flexibility in its international contacts. Western European countries increasingly appeared as potential partners for trade, diplomatic dialogue and technical cooperation. Spain formed part of this broader process of gradual diplomatic opening.

During the early 1980s, Albanian authorities moved beyond the passive acceptance of possible contacts with Spain. According to documentation preserved by the Albanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, diplomatic missions were instructed to establish contacts with Spanish diplomats and representatives of commercial enterprises. Trade was considered a practical avenue for improving bilateral contacts and testing the willingness of the Spanish government to move towards diplomatic normalization (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021).

The Spanish Communist Party also played a visible role in maintaining channels of communication. Albanian authorities viewed the party as a potential interlocutor at a time when Spain had become a consolidated democracy and an increasingly relevant actor in Western Europe. The creation of the Spain–Albania Friendship Association in 1978 reflected this interest and provided a framework for limited exchanges outside official diplomatic structures (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021).

By the mid-1980s, contacts were no longer confined to commercial initiatives or informal political exchanges. The Albanian government had begun to assess the practical conditions under which diplomatic relations could be established. At the same time, Spain was completing its own process of pending diplomatic normalizations. The establishment of relations with Israel in January 1986 formed

part of the same policy of diplomatic universality that would later frame the Albanian case. Albanian sources add a more specific element: Spanish political considerations linked to the Israeli question delayed movement on the Albanian file until relations with Israel had been formalized. This linkage is not widely reflected in Spanish secondary literature, but it is relevant because it shows how Tirana interpreted the sequence of Spanish recognitions and the political obstacles surrounding its own case (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021; Setton, 2017).

3.3. Negotiating Diplomatic Normalization, 1985–1986

The negotiations that culminated in the establishment of diplomatic relations between Spain and Albania in September 1986 were preceded by several years of exploratory contacts, commercial initiatives and diplomatic testing. During the 1970s, Spanish attempts to establish relations generally received negative responses from Tirana. The Albanian position began to evolve only after the rupture with China in 1978.

Several studies have noted that, despite maintaining an official discourse centred on self-reliance and ideological autonomy, Albania gradually sought to diversify its commercial and diplomatic relations during the 1980s, particularly with Western European countries (Biberaj, 1986; Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994). Contemporary Western assessments reached similar conclusions. A United States government analysis produced in the mid-1980s observed that Tirana was expanding contacts with Western countries, including members of NATO, in order to increase exports, obtain hard currency and reduce some of the economic consequences of isolation (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1985).

Within this context, Spain ceased to be viewed only through the legacy of the Civil War and the Franco regime. The consolidation of democratic institutions, the legalization of the Communist Party and the growing international role of Spain modified Albanian perceptions. Documentation preserved by the Albanian Ministry for Foreign Affairs shows that diplomatic missions received instructions to establish contacts with Spanish representatives and to evaluate the possibilities for future diplomatic normalization. Trade was regarded as a practical instrument for testing political willingness on both sides (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021).

Spanish interest in establishing diplomatic relations with Albania combined the general policy of diplomatic universality with practical considerations. According to Yáñez-Barnuevo, Albania remained one of the least known countries in Europe from the perspective of Spanish diplomacy. Formal relations would improve access to political and economic information, facilitate regular contact with Albanian authorities and reduce the risks created by the absence of institutional channels between the two governments. One such risk had already materialized a few years earlier, in a form that was difficult to ignore.

Leka Zogu, who claimed the Albanian throne as Leka I following his father's death in 1961, arrived in Spain in 1962 and settled in Pozuelo de Alarcón, on the outskirts of Madrid. His presence during the Franco years raised no objection from Spanish authorities: an exiled pretender to a communist-held throne was not an inconvenient guest for a regime that shared his hostility to Hoxha's Albania. Leka built what contemporary accounts describe as a fortified compound, stocked with a substantial personal arsenal. The weapons were not a secret. As Leka himself acknowledged in a telephone interview given to *The New York Times* shortly after his expulsion, the Spanish government "had known about the weapons for years" (*The New York Times*, 1979).

What changed was not the arsenal but the political context. In 1977, Leka had already been detained in Thailand on charges related to arms trafficking — the first in a series of incidents that made him an increasingly awkward presence for governments navigating post-Franco international transition. By early 1979, the government of Adolfo Suárez, committed to democratic normalization and sensitive to its external image, concluded that tolerating a private weapons stockpile on Spanish soil was no longer compatible with that objective. Leka was asked to leave. He departed with his weapons, his Australian wife Susan Cullen-Ward, and his entourage of Albanian émigré supporters, flying first to Rhodesia and subsequently settling near Johannesburg, where the South African government granted him diplomatic status (Fenyvesi, 1979; *Daily Telegraph*, 2011). The obituaries published in the British press in 2011 recalled the Spanish episode as one of the most publicly visible moments of a life spent in increasingly uncomfortable exile (*The Guardian*, 2011; *The Times*, 2011).

The episode carried a double significance for Spanish-Albanian diplomatic relations. From Madrid's perspective, the expulsion resolved an immediate political liability, but it also removed a presence that had served as an informal obstacle to any approach to Tirana: as long as Spain was openly hosting the royalist opposition to the Albanian regime, normalization carried an implicit contradiction. The departure of Leka in 1979 did not immediately unblock the diplomatic file, but it eliminated one of its most visible complications. From Tirana's perspective, the case had never been a minor irritant. The Hoxha regime treated the activities of the royal family in exile as a standing security concern, and the existence of an armed monarchist network operating from Spanish territory — however limited its actual operational capacity — was registered as evidence of Spanish indifference, at minimum, towards Albanian regime security (Fenyvesi, 1979). Yáñez-Barnuevo recalls that Spanish officials were aware of Albanian sensitivities on this point and that the resolution of the situation after 1979 was seen internally as a precondition for any credible diplomatic approach to Tirana. In his view, the episode had exposed something more structural: with no embassy in Tirana and no regular channel to the Albanian government, Madrid had operated without reliable means of signalling its intentions or addressing Albanian concerns

through official routes. The expulsion had been a unilateral act, communicated to Tirana only indirectly and managed without any institutional framework for follow-up. Attention to activities associated with the Albanian royal family in exile and to radical political groups operating across different European countries formed part of the practical reasoning behind the push for regular diplomatic channels — a reasoning that ran alongside, and reinforced, the formal doctrine of diplomatic universality (J. A. Yáñez-Barnuevo, personal communication, March 20, 2026).

The establishment of diplomatic relations seven years after Leka's expulsion closed that gap — but the path to closing it required resolving a procedural question that proved more contentious than expected.

Albanian reluctance to see the Spanish file handled through Belgrade was not a bureaucratic preference. It reflected a structural antagonism between Tirana and Belgrade that had deepened sharply in the years immediately preceding the negotiations. The protests that swept Kosovo in March and April 1981, begun by students at the University of Pristina and rapidly suppressed by Yugoslav federal forces under a state of emergency, brought Albanian-Yugoslav relations to what a United States diplomatic assessment at the time described as “near the breaking point” (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981). Tirana had publicly expressed support for the demonstrators and their demands, which included republican status for Kosovo within Yugoslavia. Belgrade, in turn, accused Tirana of instigating the unrest and of using cultural exchange programmes with Kosovo to foment nationalist sentiment. Exchange agreements were suspended. Yugoslavia insisted that bilateral matters be conducted through Belgrade rather than through Pristina, a demand that Tirana read as an attempt to sever Albanian contacts with the Kosovo Albanian population and to subordinate the national question to Yugoslav administrative convenience (Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981; Pichler, 2023).

By 1986, this confrontation had not resolved. It had stabilized into sustained mutual wariness, with each government tracking the other's moves regarding the Albanian population on both sides of the border. Around eighty percent of political prisoners in Yugoslavia during the 1980s were ethnic Albanians, a figure that registered in Tirana as evidence of systematic repression rather than routine law enforcement (Pichler, 2023). The rise of Slobodan Milošević within Serbian politics after 1987 would subsequently accelerate that dynamic, but its structural conditions were already in place during the period of the Spanish-Albanian negotiations. For the Albanian government, accepting that its diplomatic normalization with Spain be managed through the Yugoslav embassy was not a minor concession: it would have meant routing a sensitive foreign policy initiative through a capital with which Tirana was engaged in an active and unresolved dispute over the national question. The symbolism was as significant as the practical objection. Stamova (2017) has noted that the Albanian factor in Yugoslav

politics constituted one of the most structurally destabilizing elements of the region throughout the decade, a characterization that applies with particular force to the period in which the Spanish-Albanian negotiations were taking place.

The preference for Paris resolved the problem cleanly. France maintained normal diplomatic relations with both countries, carried no bilateral baggage in the Albanian-Yugoslav dispute, and offered a neutral setting in which the exchange of notes could be completed without either government having to acknowledge the other's frame. Paris also had a practical advantage: both Spain and Albania already maintained active embassies there, which meant the procedural shift required no new diplomatic infrastructure on either side. For Spain, the move from Belgrade to Paris required flexibility but no political cost. For Albania, it was the condition under which the process could move forward at all.

The choice of channel was not incidental. Each capital available to Spain carried its own political problem: Belgrade was structurally compromised by Kosovo, Prague and Budapest were usable but peripheral, Paris was neutral and already operational for both sides. Spain ended up routing a single diplomatic proposal through three separate capitals before a venue could be agreed — Belgrade in March 1986, then Prague and Budapest. That sequence was not a procedural inconvenience. It was the direct consequence of four decades without a bilateral framework of any kind (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021).

The diplomatic channel had in fact become part of the negotiation itself well before Paris was agreed as the venue. The Spanish embassy in Belgrade had been initially entrusted with following the Albanian file, an arrangement that was administratively understandable: Yugoslavia shared a border with Albania, Spain already had a functioning diplomatic structure in Belgrade, and Madrid had no direct representation in Tirana. The Spanish proposal to establish diplomatic relations was formally transmitted through the ambassador in Belgrade in March 1986 and subsequently reinforced through Spanish representatives in Prague and Budapest, reflecting the absence of a direct line and the need to test multiple channels simultaneously (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021). The fact that Spain had to rely on three separate indirect channels to transmit a single diplomatic proposal was itself a measure of how thin the bilateral relationship remained at the moment normalization was finally being pursued.

The Spanish proposal acquired formal shape in March 1986, after the recognition of Israel had removed one of the political obstacles identified in Albanian documentation. From that moment, the negotiations moved from exploratory contacts to the definition of procedure, channel and public formula. The Spanish side presented the establishment of relations as part of its policy of diplomatic universality. The Albanian

side accepted the principle of normalization but sought to shape the terms of the announcement and the diplomatic setting in which the process would be completed.

Tirana initially proposed a joint *communiqué* to announce the establishment of diplomatic relations. Such a formula would have given the act greater political visibility. Spain preferred an exchange of diplomatic notes, a simpler and more discreet procedure. This preference can be read in the political context of 1986: Spain had just confirmed its permanence in NATO, had entered the European Communities, and was opening relations with a still communist Albania during the later years of the Cold War. Some bilateral sensitivities also remained unresolved, including the legacy of the Albanian royal family in exile and the limited information available to Spanish diplomacy on internal Albanian politics. Yáñez-Barnuevo recalls that the Spanish government wished to normalize relations, but without turning the Albanian case into a major political gesture. The exchange of notes allowed Madrid to present the agreement as part of diplomatic universality while avoiding an excessive public staging of the decision (J. A. Yáñez-Barnuevo, personal communication, March 20, 2026; Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021).

The Albanian side accepted the proposed formula on 18 August 1986. The remaining questions concerned the date, place and public communication of the exchange. Spain again favoured a simple procedure. The agreement was fixed for 12 September 1986 at 12:00, at the Spanish embassy in Paris. According to Albanian documentation, the texts prepared for the diplomatic notes would also serve as the basis for public statements released to the respective state news agencies: Spain's Agencia EFE and Albania's Agjencia Telegrafike Shqiptare (ATSH), as well as to foreign media. The original agency releases have not been located, but the report published by *El País* the following day reproduced the essential elements of the arrangement: the exchange of notes in Paris, the presence of the two ambassadors, Juan Durán-Lóriga and Maxhun Peka, and the Spanish framing of the act within the policy of "universality of relations" (El País, 1986; Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, 2021).

The press account published in Madrid the following day confirmed the central elements of the arrangement. It described Albania as the only European nation with which Spain still lacked diplomatic relations and presented the exchange of notes as part of the "universality of relations" of Spanish foreign policy. It also indicated that the negotiations had been conducted in Paris over the previous year and identified the two ambassadors present at the exchange, Juan Durán-Lóriga and Maxhun Peka (El País, 1986).

By September 1986, the diplomatic conditions that had blocked relations for decades had changed substantially. Albania remained a communist state, but its foreign policy had become more pragmatic after the rupture with China. During

the 1980s, Tirana expanded commercial contacts with several Western European countries and gradually sought new diplomatic openings beyond its traditional alliances. Italy occupied a particularly important place in this limited opening, due to geographic proximity, economic interest and long-standing historical links. Contacts with the Federal Republic of Germany also gained relevance as Albania looked for access to technology, markets and hard currency. New diplomatic relations with Western states were increasingly considered as instruments for reducing economic isolation without abandoning the official discourse of ideological autonomy (Biberaj, 1986; Foreign Relations of the United States, 1985; Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994).

For Spain, the Albanian case fitted into the broader normalization of its external relations after the democratic transition. Spain had already opened relations with most communist states in Central and Eastern Europe in 1977, leaving Albania as an exceptional pending case (Mizerska-Wrotkowska, 2024). Under Felipe González, the policy of diplomatic universality provided the framework for closing that remaining gap (Pardo Sanz, 2011). The exchange of notes agreed in Paris gave both governments a controlled and practical formula for doing so.

3.4. The First Diplomatic Steps, 1986–1987

The establishment of diplomatic relations did not immediately lead to the opening of resident embassies in Madrid and Tirana. Spain covered Albania through its embassy in Belgrade. Albania covered Spain through its embassy in Paris. This was the formula agreed after the exchange of notes and it allowed both governments to activate the new relationship without creating resident diplomatic missions.

On 2 December 1986, the Spanish ambassador in Belgrade, Luis Cuervo, presented his credentials in Tirana as ambassador of Spain to the People's Socialist Republic of Albania. On 9 April 1987, the Albanian ambassador in Paris, Maxhun Peka, presented his credentials in Madrid. These two acts completed the first institutional phase of the relationship after the agreement reached in Paris.

The first stage of the relationship was therefore modest in institutional terms. There were diplomatic channels, but no resident embassies. There was political recognition, but no dense bilateral agenda. The arrangement corresponded to the limited level of previous contacts and to the caution with which both governments approached a relationship that had been absent for more than four decades.

The restoration of diplomatic relations did not immediately transform the position of either country. Albania remained one of the most isolated states in Europe and continued to reject the political and economic reforms that were beginning to emerge elsewhere in the communist world. Enver Hoxha had died in 1985, but the new leadership under Ramiz Alia was still proceeding cautiously. The objective was not

political liberalization in the sense later associated with the transformations of 1989–1991, but rather a limited reduction of Albania's international isolation and a selective expansion of external contacts (Biberaj, 1990; Zickel & Iwaskiw, 1994).

For Spain, the establishment of relations with Albania completed a process that had begun during the democratic transition. By the mid-1980s, diplomatic relations had already been established with the Soviet Union, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and Israel. Albania represented one of the few remaining exceptions. The agreement reached in Paris therefore closed a diplomatic gap that had persisted throughout the Franco period and the first decade of democratic Spain (Mizerska-Wrotkowska, 2024; Pardo Sanz, 2011). Albania was the last European state with which Spain lacked diplomatic relations. Outside Europe, North Korea remained a pending case: the Spanish Council of Ministers approved the establishment of diplomatic relations on 15 December 2000, and formal diplomatic relations between Spain and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea were established on 7 February 2001.

The first years of the relationship were consequently characterized by normalization rather than by intensive cooperation. Diplomatic contacts became possible through regular channels. Information could circulate through official diplomatic reporting. Political questions could be addressed directly between governments. These developments may appear modest, but they represented a significant change when compared with the previous four decades, during which no formal diplomatic framework had existed between Madrid and Tirana.

4. Conclusion

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Spain and Albania in September 1986 was the result of a long and uneven process. The absence of relations had not been caused by a single dispute. It was rooted in the legacy of the Spanish Civil War, the Albanian refusal to recognize the Franco regime, the recognition of the Spanish Republican government in exile, and the wider ideological divisions that shaped European politics after the Second World War. For decades, these factors kept Madrid and Tirana apart even when Spain began to normalize relations with other communist states in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Spanish case shows that diplomatic universality was not only a general principle of foreign policy. It had practical consequences. After the democratic transition, Spain gradually sought to close the remaining gaps in its network of diplomatic relations. Albania was one of the last such gaps in Europe. The fact that Spain had already opened relations with most communist states in 1977 makes the Albanian exception

more significant. The delay cannot be explained only by ideological difference. It also reflected the specific historical memory of the Spanish Civil War, the political sensitivity of communist contacts during the Spanish transition, the unresolved question of Israel, and the practical difficulty of dealing with Albania in the absence of regular diplomatic channels.

The Albanian side also evolved. After the rupture with China in 1978, Albania remained formally committed to ideological autonomy and self-reliance, but its external behaviour became more pragmatic. Contacts with Western Europe, commercial exchanges, and the search for technology, markets and hard currency became more relevant during the 1980s. The death of Enver Hoxha in 1985 and the leadership of Ramiz Alia did not immediately transform the regime. They did, however, create a more favourable context for selective diplomatic openings. Spain entered that process as a Western European country with growing international weight and with a political system no longer associated with the Franco regime.

The negotiations of 1985–1986 show that diplomatic normalization depended on details that were political as well as procedural. The choice of Paris rather than Belgrade, the preference for an exchange of notes rather than a joint communiqué, and the timing before the United Nations General Assembly all mattered. They allowed both governments to formalize relations without giving the act excessive ideological visibility. Spain could present the decision as part of its policy of diplomatic universality. Albania could open a new Western European channel without framing it as a political realignment.

The first steps after September 1986 were modest. No resident embassies were opened. Spain covered Albania from Belgrade, and Albania covered Spain from Paris. Luis Cuervo presented credentials in Tirana in December 1986, and Maxhun Peka did so in Madrid in April 1987. These acts completed the first institutional phase of the relationship. The result was not intense cooperation, but regular diplomatic communication after more than four decades of absence.

The most consequential gap in this reconstruction concerns the Israel-Albania sequence. Albanian diplomatic sources place the resolution of the Israeli objection before the formal Spanish request was filed, suggesting that Tirana had already navigated that constraint independently. If files from the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirm this chronology, it would indicate that Spain entered negotiations with a pre-cleared path rather than brokering the arrangement itself — a distinction that matters for how we assess Spanish diplomatic agency in the process. If, on the contrary, Spanish records show active mediation between Jerusalem and Tirana, the case becomes a stronger example of triangular diplomacy in post-Cold War normalization. That question cannot be resolved with the sources currently available, but it is the one worth pursuing.

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