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Albania and the Balkan Entente

The history of diplomacy of Albania, during the period between the two World Wars, could not be treated sufficiently by the Albanian historiography up to now. In the past, many important events were excluded from study or remained obscure for a number of reasons. One of these events was the foundation of the Balkan Alliance or Entente and Albania's efforts to adhere to it. This article is the first attempt to interpret this event as a whole, putting it in its historical framework.

Historiography as an intellectual and creative activity is developed within a certain social environment. Hence, in one way or another, it is under the pressure of the political reality of the time, and of the demands this reality puts on the society; demands that are in need of a solution. It is from this point of view that the outbreak of the Yugoslav crisis—especially the Bosnian one—and the Albanian crisis should be judged. More than ever, the issues of *Balkanology* should be studied and treated in this manner. Among them, the theme of Balkan security, understanding and cooperation occupies a central position in discussions at conferences, symposiums, and seminars organized by governments and NGOs, political parties, businessmen, and people of arts and culture.

Within this anxious Balkan environment, historians have their role. They study and present those facts, historical events and processes that echo and transmit messages to the current day. Such an attitude, when it is not abused, does not constitute a misuse of history, but it is a civic responsibility and a human contribution. The peoples of the Balkans have many common aspects in their history: joint efforts to win and protect their freedom and independence, to protect peace and to strengthen understanding and cooperation with each other. One of these efforts was the Balkan Entente, established in the early 1930's. This alliance played a positive role, although it did not include all the Balkan countries. Albania attempted at that time to be a part of the Balkan

Entente, but it did not become a member; the logic of exclusion, rather than inclusion, always dominated the Albanian question.

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The Balkan Entente was concluded on the basis of a union of common interests of the four signing states (Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania and Turkey), with the principle that their borders, determined by the post WWI treaties, would not be reconsidered. The essence and objectives of this agreement cannot be considered in general, apart from the respective historical development of these countries, especially after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913. As the object of this study is the efforts of Albania to join the Balkan Entente, for clarification and a better understanding of the reasons why this country did not become a part of the Pan-Balkan Agreement, a brief historical summary of events follows.

In 1912, half of the Albanian nation, in the half of the territories inhabited by them, succeeded in establishing their independent state. This was a major accomplishment, similar to the establishment of the Greek, Serbian, Romanian and Bulgarian national states in the 19th century. Unfortunately the long Ottoman rule, from which the Balkan peoples freed themselves one after the other, left some territorial issues unresolved. These remained the causes of conflicts in Pan-Balkan relations, a factor of destabilization in the region and one more reason for foreign powers to intervene in the Balkans. The Albanians were among the nationalities that lost the most; their territories were pledged more than once in order to maintain Balkan and European equilibrium.

From its establishment as a state through 1920, Albania was threatened several times with disappearance as an independent state from the political map of the Balkans. The international factor was contradictory in its attitude towards the Albanian problem and it was positioned against it according to the interests of the moment and its strategic goals. The London Conference of Ambassadors, as a result of contradictions among the Great European Powers, gave birth to a truncated Albania, while the London Secret Agreement of 1915 partitioned it in favor of its neighbours. At the end of WWI the Great Powers had not yet decided what was going to happen to Albania. When the Peace Conference in Paris opened in January 1919, they entered with a big file on Albania and reopened the old theme of cutting up the country. Once

again, they didn't agree. The Anglo-French clientelistic Balkan policy faced the Italian policy of possession of the whole Adriatic region. Albania was included as an integral part of the Adriatic issue and not as a Balkan one. Weak and unprotected, the Great Powers used Albania to reach equilibrium within the new political configuration in the Balkans and the Adriatic. In January 1920, the Anglo-French-Italian project of cutting up Albania was nearer realization than ever, but it never happened because of the firm opposition of the American president Woodrow Wilson. The project had been drawn up without the knowledge of the USA and fell outside the compromise formula of 9 December 1919 agreed to by the US delegation to the Peace Conference. The turn of events in favor of Albania in the spring of 1920 was also reinforced by the departure of Italian forces from Vlora, Greek forces from some of the villages along the southeastern frontier of Albania, and Yugoslav forces from Albania's northeastern region.

The process of the reconstruction of the post World War I independent Albanian state concludes with two other acts: the acceptance of Albania to the League of Nations, in December 1920, and the decisions of the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris, in November 1921. The latter recognized the Albanian government as the organ of the independent Albanian state and recommended its international recognition. Of special interest was the Declaration on Albania, approved by the Conference of Ambassadors on 9 November 1921. This Declaration reaffirmed the territorial integrity and independence of Albania; however, it offered Rome the right, in the case of a threat to the strategic security of Italy to intervene in order to re-establish the situation¹. The above mentioned decision created the legal basis for Italy to claim the role of protector of the Albanian state; this became reality some years later, with the signing of two treaties. The Yugoslav Government was dissatisfied with this decision, not only because it was forced to remove its military forces from the northeastern parts of Albania, but also because it offered Italy a privileged position within the country.

The traditional Italo-Yugoslav rivalry in Albania was one of the negative factors that served as an obstacle for the consolidation of the

1. Ministère des Affaires Etrangères de France, Archives Diplomatiques (AMAE), Europe 1918-1939, Albanie, Vol. 18, p. 180.

Albanian state in the interwar period. Through the pretense of a protectorship over the territorial integrity and independence of Albania, both sides aimed at establishing their protectorate over the country or at cutting it up. Yugoslavia feared the Italian presence in Albania. It was threatened with being completely surrounded by a rival who put pressure on both its southwestern and northwestern border, and aimed to turn the Adriatic sea into an Italian lake. After the Paris Peace Conference, Belgrade came out with the slogan "The Balkans for Balkan Peoples". In its outward appearance this slogan was attractive but in reality it aimed to keep Italy out of the region, where the Yugoslavs claimed to be the dominating power. Within Albania, both sides tried to cultivate clients in political, social, and regional circles. In the great political events of the twenties in Albania, Belgrade and Rome took opposite sides, even when they appeared to hold the same positions. The Albanian state was fragile in all directions. Although the foreign troops left Albania by the end of 1921, its northeastern and southeastern borders were not fixed geographically. They were discussed for about four years in the international organizations of the time and were finally set by the Protocol of Florence in 1926.

The Albanian political class was weak, inexperienced, and with many prejudices. The majority of them had an oriental, kinship-based outlook. In the years 1921-1924, two political streams could be distinguished: the conservative one which, in general, reflected the interests of the big landlords, and the liberal one that consisted of well-educated and cultured people with western tendencies. The fierce struggle for power between these two camps often surpassed normal, democratic political rivalry. The political elimination of rivals was even accompanied by attempts for their physical elimination. In some cases, power was sought and gained in unconstitutional ways and through armed gangs of regional and clan chieftains. Distinguished in this respect was Ahmet Zogu, a young ambitious politician with a strong will, who can be considered the Machiavelli of Albanian politics of the time. Zogu showed himself more skilful and more oriented in the intrigues of Balkan and European politics than his liberal opposition. After he defeated his rivals within the conservative group, he very soon took revenge for the defeat caused him by the liberal-democrats of Fan Noli, in 1924. In 1925, Ahmet Zog was proclaimed President of Albania, opening the period of his reign that

took his name and that lasted until 1939.

As soon as Ahmet Zog came to power he found himself facing a dilemma of orientation in his foreign policy. Belgrade had given him shelter for several months and assisted him with all means to return to Tirana. Zog had promised much to Yugoslav authorities, including the Monastery of Saint Naum. However, Belgrade knew his character quite well, and for this reason were sceptical and suspicious of him. On the other hand, they also knew quite well that Italy was never going to allow domination of Albania by Yugoslavia. Therefore, in the first trimester of 1925 the leaders of Belgrade proposed several times to the Italians the idea of a separation of spheres of influence in Albania². Rome did not accept the Yugoslav proposal because it sought to put the country under its control. Italy knew that the Albanian coffers were empty and that the Albanian state was in the worst days of its existence. But even there, the authorities were conscious of the craftiness and infidelity of the Albanian president. The Italian minister in Albania warned Mussolini at the beginning of January 1925 that Zog's promises could not be trusted³. In Rome there were suspicions that he had made promises to Belgrade. It was for this reason that Mussolini was so categorically determined not to recognize the new Albanian regime until Ahmet Zog gave secure proof that he was not dependent on Belgrade and that he would guarantee Italy's position and recognize her interests in Albania. Nevertheless, Mussolini didn't want to wait for a long time; he expressed his determination to take every action that guaranteed the Italian interests in Albania, as recognized by international acts⁴.

In early 1925, Zog attempted to follow a policy of equilibrium between Italy and Yugoslavia and to profit from both sides as much as possible, especially financially. Yugoslav sources tell that Zog demanded from Belgrade assistance of 30-50 million dinars and light armament for the Albanian army⁵. At the same time, he promised the Italians to treat

2. P. Pastorelli, *Italia e Albania 1924-1927. Origini diplomatiche del Trattato di Tirana del 22 novembre 1927*, Firenze, 1967, pp. 137, 139.

3. I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani (DDI), Settima Serie 1922-1935, Vol. III, Roma 1959, No. 664.

4. DDI, Settima Serie 1922-1935, Vol. III, No. 660.

5. Zh. Avramovski, *Italijanska ekonomska penetracija u Albaniju (1925-1939) Istorija XX Veka, Zbornik radova V*, Beograd 1963, p. 150.

their interests with priority, especially those in the economic field⁶. The Yugoslav Government gave no reply to Zog's demands, not only because it had no guarantee but also because, from an economic point of view, Yugoslavia could not afford such a burden. Italy, however, didn't hesitate for long. In March 1925, it signed three important agreements with the Albanian government: the first on the concession of the oil fields, the second on the establishment of the National Bank of Albania and the third on the award of a loan of 50 million gold francs with a 40 year term⁷. With the signing of these three agreements, Italy paved the way for control of Albania. This was further broadened in May and July 1925, when Zog received two other Italian loans in order to cover urgent expenses. All this finally culminated in the signing in August of a confidential Italo-Albanian military agreement⁸. Disappointed, Belgrade reacted in despair. It tried to reach a new agreement with Rome in the form of an arbitrage treaty that would guarantee the neutrality of Albania. At the same time, the Yugoslavs engaged in a broad diversionary policy in order to undermine Zog's position and keep him in a permanent state of tension. Belgrade mobilized its people in Albania, especially Zog's brother in law, Ceno Bej Kryeziu, who at the same time was also Albania's minister of internal affairs⁹. In order to show that he was still following a policy of equilibrium, Zog took several actions in favour of Yugoslavia. In July 1925 the Albanian government signed an agreement handing over the Monastery of Saint Naum and a part of Vermoshi to the Yugoslav state. At the same time, Albania sought the Yugoslav government's help to join the "Little Entente"¹⁰. This request was refused on the pretext that the "Little Entente" was an alliance between the countries of Central Europe. In fact the reasons were different. Among them was the fear that Albania's acceptance would be poorly received in Rome and would further aggravate the fragile Italo-Yugoslav relations. Zog allowed a modest presence of Yugoslav capital in Albania and in June 1926 he signed the Commerce and Sailing Treaty between

6. DDI, Settima Serie 1922-1935, Vol. III, No. 654.

7. *Historia e Shqipërisë III*, Tiranë 1984, pp. 320-321.

8. P. Pastorelli, *Italia e Albania 1924-1927*, p. 180.

9. Zh. Avramovski, "Akcija jugoslovenske vlade protiv Zoguovog rezima u Albaniju preko Cena Beg Kryeziu (1926-1927)", *Gjurmime Albanologjike*, 2 (1965), p. 231.

10. AMAE, Europe 1918-1939, Albania, Vol. 6.

the two countries¹¹.

In autumn 1926, Zog's room for manoeuvres decreased dramatically. He needed money to pay the administration and the gendarmerie, as well as to repay the first instalment of the loan he had received from Italy in March 1925. His eyes were directed again towards Rome, which was waiting. This time Mussolini was merciless. He had tolerated Zog's political acrobatics long enough and could not forgive him for denouncing his proposal in June 1926 for a political pact with the Great European Powers. It was time for Zog to pay a high political price for Italian financial assistance. Before taking the decisive step, Mussolini also got the approval of the British government. In November 1926, Zog was finally brought to his knees before Mussolini by an uprising in the Dukagjini region of northern Albania; both Rome and Belgrade had contributed to it independently. That same month in Tirana, Italy and Albania signed the Friendship and Security Pact, or as it was otherwise known, the First Pact of Tirana¹². It consisted of five articles, and their content is considered as the legalization of the Italian protectorate over Albania. The Pact gave a fatal blow to Yugoslav aims in Albania, and seriously aggravated Albanian-Yugoslav and Italian-Yugoslav relations. A year later, in November 1927, it was followed by the Defence Alliance Treaty, which was to last for a 20 year period¹³. This treaty signified another step toward the political and military submission of Albania to Italy.

Zog considered himself safe enough from foreign threats, especially from the Yugoslav one, after signing these treaties. He used his relations with Italy for gaining more power within the country and for guaranteeing his perpetual rule. In September 1928, through a legislative mechanism controlled by him, was proclaimed King of the Albanians. This act had the prior support of Rome, while it was badly received in Belgrade. With this title Zog claimed to stretch his authority to Albanians living outside the borders of the Albanian state, even to those

11. Paskal Milo, "Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927", *Shtëpia Botuese Enciklopedike*, Tiranë 1992, p. 390.

12. Arkivi Qendror i Republikës së Shqipërisë (AQ i RSH), Fondi 263, Viti 1926, Dosja 35, F. 1; A. Giannini, *L'Albania dall'indipendenza all'unione con l'Italia (1913-1939)*, Milano 1940, pp. 301-302.

13. P. Pastorelli, *Italia e Albania 1924-1927*, p. 482.

living in Yugoslavia.

The proclamation of Monarchy passed without any wide international echo. It was recognized by the United States and the European governments, with the exception of Turkey. The Albanian king tried to introduce a profile much broader than that of Ahmet Zog as president. He tried to present himself as a reformer having European visions, and independent foreign policy. But he soon failed, not only because his origin and education as an Oriental conservative were significant obstacles to the emancipation of his way of governing, but also because the space for his movements was so limited and controlled by Italy. Zog became a king when the world economic crisis broke out, with negative effects spreading dramatically over Albania. The Albanians, the poorest people in Europe, accustomed to a difficult life, reached the critical limit of existence. Famine threatened, grain production fell drastically, the budget deficit rose even higher, and the strategic reserves in currency failed significantly. Under such circumstances, the “life boat” could again be Italy. But Zog knew he would have to pay another big political price and would be a detriment and an intrusion to the country’s already damaged sovereignty. Mussolini was not in a hurry. With calculated steps, he was gradually gaining ground in Albania and narrowing the circle around Zog. The Albanian king was feeling more and more suffocated by Italian policy and in danger of losing his power. He started to think of freeing himself a little from Italian tutelage, and of getting a new and more balanced course in his foreign policy. At this point the idea for the establishment of a Balkan Federation and of the Balkan Entente appeared in the political environment.

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At the end of the 1920’s, a decrease of tension in international relations as well as a spirit of dialogue for the solution of disagreements through peaceful means became evident especially in Europe. The Locarno Agreements of October 1925 partly contributed to settling peace in Europe. They were followed with the signing in 1928 of the Briand - Kellogg Pact. Apart from its utopian character, this pact put Europe in a new epoch, in the epoch of “collective security” and arbitration¹⁴. Alba-

14. *Historie de l’Europe*, Editions du Seuil, Octobre 1990, p. 428.

nia was one of the first countries to adhere to this Pact¹⁵. The improvement of relations at the international level had an immediate effect on the Balkans. In political and non-governmental circles there was a desire to open a new page in the relations between the countries of the peninsula. For the first time, the possibility existed for the governments of the Balkan countries to gather and arrange relations between themselves and create a front for the protection of their regional interests¹⁶. This message was articulated and proposed first by the republican politician, former Greek prime minister A. Papanastasiou. The 27th Universal Congress of Peace, held in Athens in October 1929, turned his proposal into a resolution. It called for the organization of annual Balkan Conferences to study issues of mutual interest for the peoples of the peninsula, aiming at the greatest goal, the establishment of the Balkan Federation¹⁷. For Papanastasiou, there were three main problems which, according to the Greek point of view, constituted the essence of the realization of a Balkan unity: political rapprochement by signing a multilateral Balkan Pact of arbitration and friendship; economic cooperation and the creation of a partial customs union; and the signing of an agreement on free admission, free circulation and free economic activity¹⁸. The Greek initiative was not opposed by the other Balkan countries. They responded positively to the invitation of the organizers to participate in the First Balkan Conference, which was scheduled to open in Athens, in October 1930.

Albania accepted the invitation without any hesitation, Zog said to the US minister in Tirana, Bernstein. It was ready to send official and non-official representatives, as the organizers of the Conference wished¹⁹. In fact, it was decided that the Balkan countries should be represented in this Conference by non-governmental delegations, which would be permanent and would also participate in the other conferences.

15. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1928, Dosja 144.

16. Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans, Twentieth Century*, Volume 2, Cambridge University Press 1983, p. 212.

17. Robert J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, Greenwood Press Publishers, Westport, Connecticut 1970, p. 25.

18. P. Papastratis, *From the "Great Idea" to Balkan Union Background to Contemporary Greece*, The Merlin Press 1990, Edited by Marion Sarafis, Martin Eve, p. 159.

19. National Archives, Washington DC (NA), Record Group (RG) 59, Department of State, Decimal File 1910-1939, M. 1211, Roll. 8.

This status was decided on in order to liberate the Balkan Movement and its conferences from the tutelage of the governments and to create for them the greatest space possible for compromises and agreements. The decisions of the conferences were going to be no more than recommendations for the Balkan governments. This, however, was only the facade. Each Balkan government had its own country's delegation under complete control. They, to a greater or lesser degree, financed them and in reality made them spokesmen of official views and attitudes. The governments turned the Balkan Conferences into places to test the waters for a range of issues they were interested in, but without being personally involved²⁰. The head of the permanent Albanian delegation in the Balkan Conferences was Mehmet Konica, a former minister of foreign affairs and one of the most capable Albanian diplomats, who was also King Zog's counsellor at that time. The Albanian delegation, which was formally non-official, participated in the four Balkan Conferences (Athens 1930, Istanbul 1931, Bucharest 1932, and Thessaloniki 1933) and had the same attitudes as official Tirana toward the problems discussed there. The themes of the Conferences were nearly the same, and it would be boring and non-productive to give a chronological description of the activity or attitudes of the Albanian delegation there. We will concentrate on two main issues: the goals of Albania and more concretely what Zog wished to achieve through participation in the Balkan Conferences, and the reasons why Albania was not accepted in the Balkan Entente.

It is understandable that Albania, as a Balkan country, would respond to the initiative of encouraging Balkan cooperation and good will. It formally joined in this initiative at a time when all the other Balkan countries had also given their approval for this. In politics, normally not a single act is implemented and not a single step is taken without preliminary calculations of the effects and benefits. Even Zog cannot be underestimated in this respect. He had clearly shown in previous cases that he knew quite well when to act. In the early 1930's, the Albanian king had many reasons to change the relationship between Albania and Italy and to give his foreign policy a more independent and more Balkan profile. Within the country, as a result of the large scale interference and

20. P. Papastratis, *From the "Great Idea" to Balkan Union*, p. 156.

increasing control of Italy, anti-Italian feelings were widespread throughout the population. This was evident even within the state's administration. After his proclamation as the King of the Albanians, Zog had strengthened his position and was not threatened by any political rival. The Albanian state was in the process of consolidation, and King Zog thought it was beneath his and his Kingdom's dignity for Albania to be subordinate to Italy. Zog considered participation in the first Balkan Conference and Albania's adherence to the Balkan Pact as a chance to demonstrate his independence in the field of foreign policy and as a way to decrease or eliminate Italian influence²¹. By the same logic, he refused to renew the Italian-Albanian Treaty of 1926 that expired in November 1931. Besides the anti-Italian function, Tirana's approaching other Balkan countries was also aimed at obtaining their financial support or assistance in obtaining aid from the other Great European Powers or the League of Nations. Zog knew that without foreign financial aid, he couldn't claim independence from Italy and that soon would be at Mussolini's mercy.

In order to judge the role played by the anti-Italian function in the Zog's Balkan policy, the relations between Albania and the other Balkan countries in the first half of the 1930's should be briefly described, especially relations with Yugoslavia and Greece.

The traditional mutual distrust between Belgrade and Tirana continued at the beginning of the 1930's. Nevertheless, the increase of tension in Italian-Albanian relations, especially after Zog's refusal to renew the Tirana Pact in November 1931, gave rise to new expectations within the Yugoslav government. The Albanian king had sent anti-Italian messages to the Yugoslav king two years before, when he wrote that "I can't interrupt the links with Italy immediately, I can only replace the Italians gradually"²². Accustomed to Zog's zig zags, Belgrade did not pay much attention to him at that time. He had not yet made any concrete believable step in this direction. Moreover, the Albanian king often played the card of nationalism. Even the Albanian delegation

21. Bernd J. Fischer, *King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania*, Columbia University Press 1984, p. 222.

22. O. N. Reshetnikova, "Albanija v mezballkanskoj politike v prvoj polovine 30-h godov XX vjeka", *Materiallej k VI mezhnarodnomu kongresu po izuceniju stran jugovostocnoj Evropej* (Sofija avgust 1989 g.), (istorija, etnografija), Moskva 1989, p. 122.

in the First and Second Balkan Conferences followed this policy strongly, declaring that neither rapprochement between the Balkan peoples nor a Balkan Federation could be spoken about without a solution of the problem of the minorities²³. After the summer of 1931, however, the pro-Balkan tone of Albanian policy became stronger. Zog liked to stress that the Albanian issue was a Balkan issue and not an Adriatic one; this was an open challenge to Rome, which taught and propagated the contrary. "Albania", said the Italian foreign minister, Grandi, to his Yugoslav homologue, Marinkovic, at the beginning of January 1931, "is our Belgium —and it represents our security in the Adriatic"²⁴. Marinkovic responded that "if you are interested in Albania as a state in the Adriatic shores, we are interested in it as a Balkan state"²⁵. In September, the Albanian minister of foreign affairs, Hysein Vrioni, expressed once again Albania's wish to participate in the Second Balkan Conference in Istanbul, as well as the attraction Albania had towards the proposal for a Balkan Federation²⁶. At the same time, in a meeting with Hysein Vrioni in Geneva, Marinkovic credited the patriotism and farsightedness of Zog and highlighted the danger for Albania and Yugoslavia if Italy was going to be settled in the Balkans²⁷.

Belgrade attempted to encourage and exploit Tirana's rebellion against Rome, in order to have a stronger position in the negotiations for an Italian-Yugoslav agreement on Albania; these discussions were suggested by London and started in May 1931²⁸. At the beginning of 1932, through Gali, the Italian Ambassador in Belgrade, King Alexander passed a proposal to Mussolini for an agreement between Yugoslavia

23. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1930, Dos. 103, f. 103; AQ I RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1931, Dos. 52, f. 196. M. Konica declared at the Second Balkan Conference that "when one wishes to build a house, he does not begin with the doors and windows, but with the foundation, and the foundation of the common house which we wish to build is the equitable settlement of the rights of minorities" (R. J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 51).

24. Bogdan Krizman, *Vanjska politika jugoslavenske drzave 1918-1941, diplomatsko-historijski pregled*, Zagreb 1975, p. 53.

25. Idem.

26. N.A. R.G. 59, Department of State, Decimal File 1910-1939, M. 1211, Roll. 8.

27. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1932, Dosja 118, p. 15.

28. Vuk Vinaver, "Anglia dhe pozita ndërkombëtare e Shqipërisë midis dy Luftave Botërore", *Gjurmime Albanologjike* 1 (1968), p. 222.

and Italy with the presence of a third power, Britain. The formula for Belgium was suggested for the agreement; it was thought to be ideal for Albania's case, too²⁹. Mussolini did not reject the idea of the Italian-Yugoslav agreement, but he did ask King Alexander to ensure that this agreement clearly state that Italian interests, as recognized even by the Conference of Ambassadors predominate in Albania. As to the third power that was going to play the role of guarantor, he answered that "only the two of us are in the Adriatic, and the best thing is to avoid every possibility that could allow the third side, the great power to poke its nose there"³⁰. The Yugoslav king didn't accept Mussolini's proposal for special recognition of Italian interests in Albania. This preliminary exchange of views terminated the bilateral efforts to reach agreement.

By spring 1932, Albanian-Yugoslav relations were much improved. Belgrade sent two experts on Albanian affairs in the Yugoslav Legation in Tirana: the new minister Gjonovic and the counsellor Vukotic, the former consul in Shkodra for many years. On his side, Zog sent Rauf Fico to head the Albanian Legation in Belgrade. At the end of 1930, after resigning as foreign minister, Fico had made some anti-Italian statements and raised a grave diplomatic incident³¹. In June 1932, Fico was received in an audience by King Alexander, and on behalf of King Zog he proposed a cooperation against Italian policy in Albania³². In response to the Albanian minister's request for financial assistance, the Yugoslav King replied that he was not in possession of the financial means for this assistance, but that he was ready to assist Albania with any other means. Concurrently, the Yugoslav foreign minister Jevtic was in London, where he discussed the possibility that the League of Nations offer a loan to Albania³³.

The good general climate in Albanian-Yugoslav relations could be seen in the proceedings of the Third Balkan Conference, held in Bucharest in October 1932. In debates concerning the Balkan Pact, the Albanian delegation agreed with the other delegations for its approval

29. Bogdan Krizman, *Vanjska politika jugoslavenske drzave 1918-1941*, p. 58.

30. Idem.

31. Bernd J. Fischer, *King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania*, p. 201.

32. N. D. Smimova, *Politika Italii na Balkanah. Ocerk diplomaticheskoi istorii. 1922-1935 g.g.* Izdatjelstvo, "Nauka" Moskva 1979, p. 228.

33. Idem, pp. 228-229.

and opposed the Bulgarian delegation; the Bulgarians demanded the postponement of the discussions until the signing of bilateral agreements on the problem of minorities³⁴. Mehmet Konica, the head of the Albanian delegation, defined the ratification of the Pact by the governments of all Balkan countries as “a great step forward for the establishment of the Balkan Entente”³⁵. At the end of the Third Conference, he gave an interview to the Belgrade newspaper “Politika”, in which he declared once again that “the Balkan Pact constitutes the first instrument that is going to bring confidence between the Balkan peoples...”³⁶. This attitude was a direct reflection of Tirana’s political aim of approaching and cooperating with the Balkan states in order to reduce the wholesale dependence on Italy.

Embarrassed, Rome closely followed the manoeuvres of the Albanians, especially those favoring Belgrade. General Pariani, the Italian Military Attaché in Tirana, had warned Rome that under the circumstances if the Italians did not act firmly and clearly they would lose ground³⁷. At the beginning of 1933, the Italian Legation in Albania reported to the Foreign Ministry in Rome that the visits of the Yugoslav minister with Zog had recently become very frequent and confidential. “It is clear”, said the report, “that Zog is anxious to improve the economic situation without us and that the appointment of M. Konica at the head of the Albanian delegation for the Commercial Treaty with Yugoslavia and the retention of Rauf Fico in Belgrade are symptomatic”³⁸. Rome tried to press Zog for the customs unification between the two countries. As a result, a frightened Belgrade sounded the alarm in London and Paris. The Italians were obliged to retract their action.

At the beginning of 1933, Albania’s economic situation became much worse. In spite of the measures taken by Zog, the Albanian coffers remained nearly empty. The Albanian economy had no possible means to bear the country burden. In June, after failing to secure the loan from the League of Nations, Zog turned to Belgrade, and demanded aid of 3

34. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1932, Dos. 72, f. 269.

35. Robert J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 74.

36. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1932, Dos. 72, f. 249.

37. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1932, Dos. 91, f. 12.

38. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1933, Dos. 2, f. 39.

million gold francs. The Yugoslav Legation in Tirana reported that “without our assistance, anarchy or capitulation to Italy is inevitable”³⁹. The Yugoslav government turned for aid to the member states of the Little Entente, and proposed that each of them contribute one million gold francs; however, they refused to make such a sacrifice⁴⁰. In autumn, the Albanian government started a diplomatic offensive for securing economic assistance by any means. Tirana intensified its offensive that November during the Fourth Balkan Conference. The Albanian delegation agreed with the decisions taken, and foremost with the proposal for the establishment of the Balkan Entente. Zog played nearly every cards to escape from the Italian whirlpool. He “is fretting at the crossroads”, but “Mussolini is watching and waiting”, wrote the US diplomat, Hodgson, from Tirana to the State Department, in November 1933⁴¹. In a report sent to Belgrade at the beginning of November, the Yugoslav Legation unveiled some of Zog’s letters, including his request to be accepted in the Little Entente and the signing of a secret treaty concerning mutual protection⁴². Even the appointment of Mehmet Konica to head the Albanian commercial delegation to Belgrade at the end of November, served these or similar aims. Zog’s counsellor, together with Fico, held talks with King Alexander and the Yugoslav foreign minister. The Italians were convinced that “Konica’s mission does not intend a commercial treaty but the acceptance of Albania into the Balkan Pact” and that “Konica works actively to put Albania within the Balkan grouping, in order to detach it from the Italian influence”⁴³.

The signing of the Albanian-Yugoslav commercial agreement on 20 December 1933 was received in Rome uneasily. According to the Italian minister in Tirana, Koch, the Yugoslav government intended to use this treaty to start a policy of penetration into Albania. Belgrade could easily develop and transform this policy into political penetration at a

39. Vuk Vinaver, “Anglia dhe pozita ndërkombëtare e Shqipërisë midis dy Luftave Botërore”, *op.cit.*, p. 225.

40. Zhviko Avramovski, *Kontribut studimit të Historisë së Shqipërisë në periudhën midis dy Luftave Botërore*, p. 145.

41. N.A. R.G. 59, Department of State, Decimal File 1910-1939, M. 1211, Roll. 8.

42. Vuk Vinaver, “Anglia dhe pozita ndërkombëtare e Shqipërisë midis dy Luftave Botërore”, *op.cit.*, p. 226.

43. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1933, Dos. 14, f. 23.

time when cooperation with Italy was decreasing⁴⁴. The assistance that Yugoslavia gave to Albania toward acceptance in the process of Balkan unity had the same function. Not since 1924 had Zog been on such good terms with Belgrade. But neither side nourished illusions about sincerity with respect to each other. Their interests were joined temporarily and both were playing the game of politics. The foreign diplomats in Tirana who knew Zog understood that his move towards Yugoslavia or other Balkan countries were a step forward on the road of economic struggle and independence; so far that he could not still hear the jingle of coins up the other road. However, Zog never stepped Italy⁴⁵. The Italians considered all Zog's moves against them as a bluff, a game to provoke Italy. They believed Zog was convinced that he couldn't expect anything good from Belgrade nor could he expect the other Balkan governments to fulfil his demands⁴⁶.

In addition to Yugoslavia, Greece was very interested in Albania. But unlike Yugoslavia, Greece did not see her relations with Albania as anti-Italian. On the contrary, Athens accepted the increase of Italian influence and the establishment of a virtual protectorate over Albania with much less unease than Belgrade. The Greek government had expressed "understanding" towards the Tirana Pact of November 1926 and its foreign minister had declared that "Greece considers the Tirana Pact as a diplomatic instrument that in itself cannot be harmful..."⁴⁷. Athens followed a pragmatic policy. Its interest in Albania depended on the level of relations with Rome. While relations were good, especially after 1928 when the two countries signed a friendship treaty, Greece was careful not to exceed the boundaries of its relations with Albania, for that could raise suspicions in Italy. On its side, Rome was in favour of peaceful co-existence between Athens and Tirana. At the same time, it didn't want very close relations between Albania and Greece⁴⁸.

Albanian-Greek relations have always been characterized by ups and downs, with the periods of depression predominating. On the eve of the

44. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1933, Dosja 14, f. 5.

45. N.A. R.G. 59, Department of State, Decimal File 1910-1939, M. 1211, Roll. 8.

46. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1933, Dosja 187, f. 5.

47. *Historia e Shqipërisë III*, Tiranë 1984, p. 327.

48. Κώστας Αλ. Καραμανλής, *Ο Ελευθέριος Βενιζέλος και οι εξωτερικές μας σχέσεις 1928-1932*, Ελληνική Ευρωεκδοτική, Αθήνα 1986, p. 153.

First Balkan Conference, relations between the two countries were normal, although there were two or three unsolved problems that led to friction time after time. These had to do with the treatment and rights of the minorities in the respective countries, the reparations that the Greek government should pay to the Albanian proprietors for their confiscated properties in the Camëria region during the implementation of the agrarian reform, and the status of the Albanian Autocephalus Orthodox Church. Since the Albanian government was seeking friendships and alliances in the Balkans, it remained temporarily silent or treated with great care the issues contested with the Greek government. It was more inclined to find points of mutual interest and fields of cooperation between both countries. In the summer of 1930, Zog gave the first indications of this attitude. In his encounter with the Greek minister Melas in Tirana, the Albanian king declared himself in favour of political rapprochement and of strengthening economic and commercial relations between the two countries. He even requested the opening of a branch of the Greek Commercial Bank in Tirana⁴⁹.

Zog's overture was not encouraged by Athens. The Greeks exploited it to revive once again the issue of the Orthodox Church, appealing to Tirana to demonstrate a greater understanding towards Greek demands on this issue⁵⁰. The Greek government had considered it as an attribute of the Albanian independent state, without needing a prior agreement with any individual or center abroad⁵¹. As a result, Albanian-Greek relations experienced a notable decline by the beginning of autumn including the withdrawal of the Greek minister Melas from Tirana. The Albanian foreign minister Fico and the Greek chargé d'affaires, Kollas, found the same language and in November there appeared on the horizon new signs of good will between the two countries to solve pending problems⁵². Doubtless this decrease of tension was also influenced by the spirit of the First Balkan Conference, hosted by Greece. In May 1931, Kollas was appointed the Greek minister in Tirana⁵³. He

49. *Idem*, p. 153.

50. *Idem*.

51. Απ. Γλαβίνας, *Η Ορθόδοξη Αυτοκέφαλη Εκκλησία της Αλβανίας. Kisha Orthodoxe Autoqefale e Shqipërisë*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1992, p. 47.

52. Κώστας Αλ. Καραμανλής, *op.cit.*, p. 154.

53. *Idem*, p. 158.

believed that the mutual elimination of negative feelings and the gradual breeding of a climate of confidence would play an important role in solving the problems between the two countries. Kollas' expectations were not justified. The year 1932 was relatively calm in Albanian-Greek relations, but it was followed by their drastic aggravation a year later. In April 1933, the Albanian Parliament amended the articles of the constitution that allowed the functioning of private and religious schools in Albania. This measure, drawn up in order to attack the Italian interests, also affected the Greek private schools in the south of Albania. After the failure of attempts to solve the existing conflict through bilateral negotiations, the issue went to the League of Nations and then to the Court in the Hague. The latter, in April 1935, found the decision of the Albanian government to close the private schools groundless⁵⁴.

Zog could not find in Greece a partner to help him balance the Italian pressure, especially when he tried to play the nationalist card. In 1933 Albanian-Greek relations were at the height of the crisis. Athens couldn't sacrifice the fragile equilibrium of its relations with Rome for the sake of Albania, with whom it had a lot of contested issues. The conservative cabinet that replaced the Venizelos government could make concessions to another neighbouring country, stronger than or at the same level with Greece, but not to Albania, for they perceived no immediate threat from it. Athens had treated Albania more as an Adriatic problem than as a Balkan one⁵⁵. Based on this political philosophy, in September 1933 the Greek government signed a friendship and non-aggression treaty with the Turkish government, although the gap between Greece and Turkey was much wider than the one with Albania. Zog, interested more than ever in foreign support and believing that the signed treaties indicated a possible broadening of the Entente, asked Athens and Ankara for Albanian participation in this treaty. The Greek government rejected this request⁵⁶. This was enough for heated remarks between the two governments. Tirana even expelled the Greek language

54. *The Greek Minority in Albania. A Documentary Record (1921-1933)*, Edited by Basil Kondis - Eleftheria Manda, Institute for Balkan Studies, Thessaloniki 1994, p. 108.

55. R. J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 120.

56. Centralen Drzhaven Istoriceski Arkiv / NPB / (CDIA), f. 176, op. 6, a.e. 2020, p. 79.

teachers who still remained in the 20 schools of the Greek minority. In response, the Greek minister in Tirana declared that the Greek government was not going to extend the June 1933 Albanian-Greek commercial agreement, after the termination of its 6-month term⁵⁷. Apart from its positive recommendations the Fourth Balkan Conference in Thessaloniki, in November 1933, did not succeed in liberating official Balkan policy from prejudgements. This was the last conference held and Albania's chances of joining the Balkan Entente were fewer than in the other Conferences.

The other Balkan countries who participated in these Conferences in general had eclectic attitudes towards Albania. In one way or another, their attitudes were connected with greater and more important interests with Italy and they didn't wish to challenge demonstratively the Italian policy in Albania. Moreover, they did not have common frontiers with Albania. Among these countries, it was Bulgaria that showed the greatest interest for relations and cooperation with Albania during the Balkan Conferences.

In general, Albanian-Bulgarian relations in the twenties and the thirties, were not negative but were characterized by a lack of dynamism, a lack of serious contradictions and joint interests⁵⁸. Besides the fact that the two countries were not neighbours, this level of relations, which stayed the same during the first half of the thirties, was strongly influenced of external factor, especially by the relations both had with Italy and Yugoslavia. By marriage, the Bulgarian Dynasty was related to the Italian one. However, a more important reason for the friendship between the two countries was conflict with Yugoslavia. Albania's ups and downs in its relations with Italy and Yugoslavia, partially influenced relations with Bulgaria.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations in the year 1922, the only major problem in the relations between Bulgaria and Albania concerned some villages in southeastern Albania; Albanian authorities had not recognized the status of the Bulgarian minority. This involved Albania in the old conflict between Sofia and Belgrade for the ethnic

57. *Idem.*

58. Bobi Bobev, *Bulgaria and Albania between the Two World Wars: An Overview of Bilateral Relations*, Southeast European MONITOR 1/1995, p. 96, 97, 98.

belonging of Vardar Macedonia. Despite the continuous Bulgarian demands, until 1930 Zog not only didn't allow the opening of the schools in the Bulgarian language, but followed a general restrictive policy. However, in October of that year, during the First Balkan Conference in Athens, the two delegations held in the same position during discussions about the problem of minorities. When the Bulgarian delegation set forth a draft resolution respecting the rights of minorities and putting this issue in the agenda of the Conference, it was supported by the Albanian delegation. In the Second Balkan Conference, the two delegations forcefully raised the problem of minorities, but were opposed by the other delegations, especially the Yugoslav one.

The cooperation in the first two Conferences brought about a notable improvement of Albanian-Bulgarian relations. The Bulgarian chargé d'affaires in Tirana informed the Foreign Ministry in Sofia that a positive change in the treatment of Bulgarians was visible in Albania. They were allowed to keep the portrait of the King of Bulgaria in their houses and shops, they were allowed to visit the Bulgarian Legation freely, Bulgarian newspapers were sold in the markets like all the other ones, and that the Legation was distributing a lot of books⁵⁹. An important development between the two countries was the signing in Geneva, on 9 January 1932, of a Protocol on the reciprocal protection of minorities in Albania and Bulgaria. On the basis of the protocol, the two governments undertook to open schools or courses for the teaching of the languages of the minorities regardless of the number of students. They also agreed to conclude as soon as possible the Balkan pact of friendship, arbitration and non-aggression, with a reservation that all the other Balkan countries should accept the condition about minorities. The sides agreed that very soon they would sign a commercial agreement⁶⁰.

The Albanian-Bulgarian protocol on minorities caused a severe reaction in Belgrade. The US Legation reported to the State Department that the agreement "has produced a painful impression in Yugoslavia..."⁶¹. This feeling was particularly reflected in the Yugoslav press. The newspaper "Politika" wrote that "instead of a friendly convention

59. *Idem*, p. 101.

60. N.A. R.G. 59, Department of State, Decimal File 1910-1939, M. 1211, Roll. 12.

61. *Idem*.

of all Balkan nations, we come to a dual arrangement of some special solidarity solely between Bulgaria and Albania... This alone is sufficient to trouble the atmosphere of sincere collaboration and reduces the faith in the goodwill of those who worked on the rapprochement of Balkan nations”⁶².

This joint attitude on the problem of minorities would not last for long between Tirana and Sofia. Zog sensed that antagonizing Belgrade over the problem of minorities was not in his interest. There were more urgent problems, and Zog needed Yugoslav support to enter the Balkan Entente and deflect Italian pressure. For this reason, in the last two Conferences the Albanian delegation did not support the Bulgarian delegation’s insistence that the Balkan pact not be signed without reaching an agreement on minorities⁶³.

Albanian-Bulgarian relations deteriorate during 1933 not only because no step was taken in implementation of the protocol of 9 January 1932, but also because arbitrary measures against the so-called Bulgarian villages occurred. In March 1933, 150 families were violently deported from the village of Gorica. The Bulgarian chargé d’affaires in Tirana informed Sofia that apart from Zog’s promises and the appearance of friendship “I am convinced that the secret wish of the Albanians is to see all Bulgarians out of Albania”⁶⁴. In 1935, having been excluded from the Balkan Entente and turned to the Adriatic, Zog tried again to improve relations with Bulgaria.

When the process of Balkan rapprochement and cooperation began, Albania’s relations with Turkey were nearly non-existent. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did not recognize Zog as the King of the Albanians. The crisis in relations between Albania and Turkey lasted three years, from 1928 to 1931. Turkey built its policy towards Albania in the first half of the 1930’s on the basis of two geopolitical factors: Turkey’s own interest in a more active presence in the Balkans —especially in Albania— and Italy’s sensitivity towards any attempt that might come from others to penetrate its protectorate over Albania. Ankara was aware that activity in Albania could antagonize Italy. The Turks were not

62. *Idem*.

63. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1933, Dosja 129, f. 94.

64. CDIA, f. 176, op. 6, a.e. 2049, 1.21.

satisfied with Italian policy in Albania and nourished no sympathy for the fascist regime of Mussolini. However, the Turkish government preferred to accept Italian control over Albania rather than arouse Rome's interests and intentions in Asia Minor⁶⁵.

The Balkan Conferences and the draft of the Balkan Pact offered Ankara the chance to present its ideas for a Balkan policy and to take concrete steps for the improvement of relations with the other Balkan countries. Within this framework, Turkey was the first to undertake the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with Albania. On the occasion of the Second Balkan Conference in Istanbul, in October 1931, Atatürk sent a telegram to Zog, in which for the first time he addressed him as a king. In return, at the beginning of 1932 Zog re-opened the Albanian Legation in Ankara and appointed a new minister to it⁶⁶. Atatürk and Zog exchanged friendship and cooperation messages several times during the first half of the 1930's, but went no further in firming up relations. Ankara, like Athens, refused to include Albania in the Greek-Turkish Treaty of September 1933. In November of that year, the Turkish foreign minister, Ruzhdi Arras, in a meeting with M. Konica, rejected the Albanian government's demand and advised it "to return to Italy and not seek other friends"⁶⁷.

Tirana also received nearly the same advice from Bucharest. At the beginning of 1933, when Albania, through Yugoslavia, tried to get the status of a neutral state under the guarantee of the League of Nations, Romania interfered to hinder the process. The Romanian minister in Tirana, Buzdugan, pressured both the Yugoslav minister Gjonovic and King Zog to reach a good will agreement with Italy, which would accommodate Albania as well as "the reasonable Italian demands after many years of sacrifices"⁶⁸.

The position of Albania at the end of 1933 was dire. Apart from

65. O. N. Reshetnikova, *Albaniaja v mezballkanskjoj politike v pjervoj pollovine 30-h XX veka*, p. 122.

66. Gazment Shpuza, *Ataturku dhe Shqiptarët*, Shtëpia Botuese Dituria 1994, pp. 77-78.

67. O. N. Isajeva, *Problema bezopasnosti ballkanskij gosudarstv 1925-1934*, Moskva 1988, p. 68.

68. Zhviko Avramovski, *Kontribut studimit të Historisë së Shqipërisë në periudhën midis dy Luftërave Botërore*, p. 147.

Yugoslavia, it found no support from the other Balkan countries to buffer the Italian pressure. Albania's participation in the Balkan Conferences and the active role of its delegation in favour of the Balkan Pact gave Tirana hopes of the protection of the Balkan umbrella. It thought that it was going to secure room for a policy relatively independent from Italy. But what did not understand Tirana was the changes in form and purpose between the Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente. Albania's participation in the Balkan Conferences was welcomed because they were formally non-governmental activities. The decisions were of a recommending character and the Conferences aimed at a philosophical union of all the Balkan peoples into a federation. The Balkan Entente was more restrictive in its aims. It was a political alliance that officially engaged the member states in the protection of the status quo and guaranteed the Balkan frontiers⁶⁹. Although it participated in the four Balkan Conferences, Albania was invited neither to the meeting of Belgrade for compiling the final text of the Pact nor to its signing in Athens, on 9 February 1934. Albania had approved the draft of the Pact, without any reservations, in the last Balkan Conference. Why then did the other nations refuse Albania's membership in the Balkan Entente?

* * *

The signing of the Balkan Pact on 9 February 1934 by Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania and Turkey was a political act, that had intensive diplomatic behind the scenes maneuvering, not only regional but also European. Even the refusal of participation to Albania was the result of both Balkan and extra-Balkan factors. The diplomatic push for the signing of the Balkan Pact started in the autumn of 1933. The starting point was the Treaties already concluded at those times (September-November), Greek-Turkish, Turkish-Romanian, and Turkish-Yugoslav Treaties, and the renewal of the Bulgarian-Turkish Treaty of 1929. They were accompanied by an exchange of visits of the high Balkan governors, which ended the obstacles for the signing of the Pact. Despite attempts to convince Bulgaria, Sofia did not agree to unite with the other countries, for it had territorial problems with its neighbours. After

69. Branimir M. Jankovic, *The Balkans in International Relations*, pp. 155-156; P. Papastratis, *From the "Great Idea" to Balkan Union*, p. 171.

securing the support of the member states of the Little Entente, the attention was concentrated on the Great Powers. On behalf of the four Balkan governments, the Greek foreign minister Maximos toured Paris, London, and Rome at the end of December 1933. After these visits he declared that "...the Great Powers, Italy, England and France will approve the pact and will make it a useful instrument for the consolidation of peace"⁷⁰. On 4 February 1934, the foreign ministers of the four Balkan countries met in Belgrade, and approved the final text of the pact of the Balkan Entente. Five days later, on 9 February, the four nations signed the pact in Athens⁷¹.

Albania was isolated from diplomatic preparations for signing the Balkan Pact, though in the end it expressed its desire to participate in it. At the Fourth Balkan Conference, the Albanian representative Naci (Nachy) declared that his government was desirous "of seeing the union of our countries accomplished... and would be happy to enter into contact with the other governments if they are animated by the same thought"⁷². After this Conference, Zog realized that he was going to remain outside the Balkan Entente; in the beginning of December 1933, he hastened to send M. Konica first to Belgrade and then to Athens and Ankara⁷³. The king's counsellor did not succeed in obtaining the approval of the Greek and Turkish governments. The refusal to invite Albania to the signing of the pact was painfully received in Tirana; it caused disillusionment and confusion in both public opinion and official circles⁷⁴.

The invitation of Albania to sign the Balkan Pact was an object of discussion not only between the Balkan countries, but between the Great Powers as well. For reasons explained, Yugoslavia favoured Albania, but Romania, Turkey and especially Greece opposed its membership. Rome applied great and direct pressure in the Balkan capitals to keep Albania from being invited to sign the Pact. The Italian ambassador in Ankara warned the Turkish foreign minister that "Italy is never

70. R. J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 124.

71. *Idem*, pp. 126-127.

72. *Idem*, p. 111.

73. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1933, Dosja 14, f. 23.

74. CDIA, p. 176, op. 6, a.e. 2051, 1.66.

going to look in favour of Albania's invitation to participate in the Balkan Pact"⁷⁵. In January 1934, during the Greek foreign minister Maximos' visit in Rome, Mussolini asked that Albania not join in the Pact⁷⁶. Maximos himself would declare that "its adherence (of Albania - P.M.) in a Balkan grouping is not going to be welcomed by Italy, which is so much troubled by the projects of King Zog, to rescue his kingdom from the Italian tutelage..."⁷⁷. Belgrade remained dissatisfied with Maximos' declaration, but it was worn down by the pressure of the other Balkan governments, who were afraid of a confrontation with Italy. In the end, Albania was not invited to Athens for the signing of the act of establishment of the Balkan Entente.

Paris and London welcomed the agreement among the four Balkan countries. France was satisfied because the Pact guaranteed the existence of the status quo and because two signatories, Yugoslavia and Romania, were participants in the network of French alliances. England greeted the Pact with the hope that it would contribute to peace and general cooperation between the Balkan states and that it would not be directed against a third part⁷⁸. The Pact was not well received in Rome, though. On 13 February 1933, the Romanian minister in Italy's capital described "the impression and trouble the Balkan Pact caused within the political circles of Rome"⁷⁹. Italy could not look with favour on any consolidation of the Balkans which would not only strengthen the hand of Yugoslavia by associating her definitively with Greece and Turkey, but would also offer a prospect of removing both Albania and Bulgaria from their Italian moorings⁸⁰. It also appreciates this Entente as a challenge to France in a region where traditionally there had existed a confrontation of Italian-French interests. On 17 March 1934, Mussolini, with a tendency for spectacular replies, concluded a protocol in Rome with Hungary and Austria on following a harmonized policy in the future

75. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1934, Dosja 54, f. 56.

76. Vuk Vinaver, "Anglia dhe pozita ndërkombëtare e Shqipërisë midis dy Luftërave Botërore", *op.cit.*, p. 227.

77. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1934, Dosja 54, f. 3.

78. R. J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 126.

79. Campus Eliza, *The Little Entente and the Balkan Alliance*, Bucuresti 1978, p. 80.

80. R. J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 126.

and openly supported Hungary in her demands to revise the frontiers⁸¹.

In any event, Italy also had reasons for being satisfied with the way events happened with the Balkan Pact. Bulgaria and Albania did not sign it. Rome especially thought that it gave a good lesson to Zog and it showed its pleasure openly. "Question at the admission of Albania in the Balkan Pact does not exist for Italy", declared the Italian minister in Tirana, Koch⁸². The Italian diplomats also declared that "we knew how to make the point everywhere that Albania is our untouchable zone, and everybody who has something to do with it must first get the permission of Italy"⁸³.

Zog found himself situated in a very difficult position after Albania was not accepted in the Balkan Pact. The failure of his anti-Italian political move risked boomeranging against him. The economic crisis in Albania was at its worst, and Zog was aware that without foreign financial aid his regime had no future. Tirana was in a state of confusion and reacted negatively towards its rejection by the other Balkan governments. It decided not to participate in the Balkan movement that aimed at further deepening Balkan understanding. After the signing of the Balkan Pact, A. Papanastasiou sent the national representations of the Balkan countries, including Albania, the invitation to participate in the annual council of the Balkan Conference, which was to open in Athens on 31 March 1934. M. Konica, instructed by Zog, sent a note to Papanastasiou expressing the Albanian representation's refusal to attend this meeting. This attitude, as it was stated in the note, was a sign of protest for Albania's not being invited to sign the Pact of the Balkan Entente⁸⁴. Papanastasiou answered that the Balkan Conference could not be held responsible for the attitude or the actions of the governments in adopting the new political Pact. The Conference—he stressed—is an instrument for expressing the opinion of the Balkan peoples in respect to the protection of peace, the development of relations and rapprochement of the Balkan peoples, and that after conclusion of the Pact, the Conference was turned into a more useful instrument for achieving this⁸⁵.

81. Bogdan Krizman, *Vanjska politika jugosllavenske drzave 1918-1941*, p. 67.

82. CDIA, f. 176, op. 6, a.e. 20-51, l. 66.

83. CDIA, f. 176, op. 6, a.e. 20-51, l. 66.

84. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 30, f. 10.

85. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 30, f. 10; R. J. Kerner and Harry N.

Papanastasiou informed the meeting of the Council about the decision of the Albanian representation not to participate. The argument it raises, he said, is not grounded at all because the Balkan Conference does not represent the governments, and if there are mistakes in the Pact of the Balkan Entente, we should try to correct them. Although, said the Greek head of delegation, it does not completely respond to the decisions of the Balkan Conference, nonetheless, it constitutes an important event because it manifests the determination of four Balkan countries to secure peace in the Balkans and rapprochement of the Balkan peoples⁸⁶. Papanastasiou declared that he did not believe that the Albanian delegation would stay out of the movement and that he did not think that the work for the Conference was over. In this spirit, the Council approved the reply sent to the Albanian representation in Tirana⁸⁷.

The Albanian delegation's protest was an act of despair targeted against the Balkan countries for abandoning and isolating Albania in its confrontation with Italy. Zog, however, was a man who did not surrender his arms so easily. He thought it was more reasonable to insist once more for admission in the Balkan Entente rather than surrender to Rome. Toward this end, he cited article 3 of the Pact, which stated that the agreement would be open to all other Balkan countries, with admittance after the parties of the Pact had examined the petition⁸⁸. The Albanian king opted to achieve this goal foremost through Yugoslavia, which continued to support the Albanian demand for its own interests. Therefore, from March 1934, Zog started down a path of reaching political and economic agreement with Yugoslavia. Italy, which had closely followed every movement of Zog and had its agents in his royal court and in the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, picked up the scent of the secret Albanian-Yugoslav attempts. One document that testifies to these relations and that was in the hands of the Italians was the telegram the Albanian minister in Belgrade, Rauf Fico, sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tirana on 19 May 1934. This document revealed that the Albanian government had asked for support and financial aid from the Yugoslav government and, through it, from the French. Belgrade

Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 134.

86. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 30, f. 10.

87. *Idem*.

88. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1934, Dosja 55, f. 204.

imposed some conditions on Zog, which he accepted. One of these, which became known, was the Yugoslav insistence on the withdrawal of Italian organizers, especially the military ones. The Yugoslav government assured Tirana that by the beginning of the new stage of friendship between the two countries, the Albanian Kingdom would have no need of an army and the border would be secure. As far as financial aid was concerned, Fico reported that Belgrade was in agreement with the French government and was awaiting its final reply⁸⁹.

On 27 May, King Zog met with the Yugoslav minister in Tirana and informed him of the heavy pressure and conditions imposed by Italy, especially the demand to colonize Albanian lands. Zog said to the Yugoslav diplomat that he wanted to get rid of the Italian influence, but for this he needed economic and financial aid from the Little Entente⁹⁰. On 2 June, the foreign ministry answered Fico congratulating him for the contribution given for "the creation of the new stage of friendship with the Kingdom of SKS and indirectly with its Great Ally"⁹¹. Fico was authorized to inform the government of Belgrade about "the modalities of the delivery of the sum of money in the negotiations" assuring that its withdrawal would be by instalments in order not to raise doubts and not to leave questions unanswered⁹².

The Albanian government was not satisfied merely with the intermediation of Belgrade, but made direct contact with Paris for the loan. On 4 June, the Albanian Legation in Paris was advised of the conditions on base which the French government was going to the loan. They were: the signing of a 7-year renewable non-aggression, friendship and cooperation treaty between France and Albania, in effect starting the signing day; exclusive French rights for the exploration and exploitation of every new mine discovered in the Albanian Kingdom; the field of Myzeqeja as a concession, where a number of French families would be settled according to the agreement. An agrarian bank would be established with the loan, in order to assist landlords and farmers. The Albanian government would denounce the Italian-Albanian Alliance Treaty, the consequences of which the French government would handle. The two

89. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 33, f. 5.

90. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 16, f. 4.

91. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 33, f. 8.

92. *Idem*.

countries would sign a new commercial treaty giving French products “most favoured” status, and thus a special custom tariff. The French government would subsidize some French commercial companies in annually buying Albanian exports. In all Albanian secondary schools, the teaching of the French language would be compulsory, to be taught by French professors. The secondary schools of Korça and Shkodra would have a French professor as their technical director⁹³.

After deliberating over the French conditions, the Albanian government accepted most of them and expressed reservation for only two. First, they preferred that exclusivity for the exploration and exploitation of the mines not be extended to the oil fields because they might be given to English companies. Second, they asked that the French government not insist on the concession of the field of Myzeqeja, and for the establishment of the agrarian bank. The Albanian government officially acknowledged that even this demand be realized in the near future⁹⁴.

Italy, which was sensitive towards every French step in the Balkans, could not allow this open challenge in Albania. Aware of Zog’s secret negotiations with Belgrade and Paris, Mussolini decided to apply military pressure on Albania, to stop him. On 22 June 1934, twenty-two Italian battle ships approached Durrësi harbour without any warning and without the permission of the Albanian authorities. Zog complained to the representatives of England and France in Tirana and their governments requested explanations in Rome. Both sides were advised to solve the disagreements and the incident through negotiations⁹⁵.

The incident of Durrësi was closed and relations with the Italians started to improve. Zog continued to follow a double-faced policy, though, and did not cease in his attempts to maintain good relations with Yugoslavia and to become a member of the Balkan Entente⁹⁶. In July, M. Konica declared that “Albania is a Balkan country and has every interest in having direct relations with her neighbours, especially with Yugoslavia. For some time the relations between these two countries have become sincerely friendly and I can say that they will surely be-

93. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 37, f. 14.

94. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1934, Dosja 37, f. 20.

95. *Historia e Shqipërisë III*, Tiranë 1984, p. 367.

96. R. J. Kerner and Harry N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930-1935*, p. 145.

come even closer”⁹⁷. Similar messages also continued to come from Belgrade. Not long before, King Alexander had expressed once again the wish that Albania join to the Balkan Pact, thus contributing to the liberation of the Balkans from any foreign influence and interference⁹⁸. Belgrade’s attitudes continued in this vein but were to be contradicted by Romania, Turkey and especially Greece. In the meeting of the Balkan Entente in Ankara, in October 1934, the Greek foreign minister, Maximos, declared that the admission of Albania to the Balkan Pact should be taken under consideration after the problem of the Greek minority in Albania was solved in a satisfying way⁹⁹. This also served to avoid any Italian reaction.

In the summer of 1935, the Albanian government undertook a new and final diplomatic offensive for the admission of the country in the Balkan Entente. In July, Zog asked the Yugoslav and Romanian ministers in Tirana to deliver to their governments his request for support for Albania’s admission in the Balkan Entente¹⁰⁰. The new Yugoslav prime minister, M. Stojadinovic, who was at the same time also the minister of foreign affairs, declared to the Albanian representative in Belgrade that he wished to see Albania in the Balkan Entente. Conscious of Rome’s accusations that Belgrade pushed Zog in this direction, Stojadinovic emphasised that the decision to join the Pact should be taken by the Albanian government itself, under conditions of total freedom and in conformity with the engagements it had towards its ally, Italy¹⁰¹. Zog clarified that Albania was totally free to be admitted to the Balkan Entente because the Albanian-Italian treaty had only a defensive character¹⁰². On 18 July, the Secretary General of the foreign ministry, Martinac, stressed again that “Albania’s admission in the Balkan Entente would be received with great pleasure by Yugoslavia”¹⁰³.

Zog’s demand also found support in Bucharest. The Romanian

97. Idem, p. 153.

98. Idem.

99. O. N. Reshetnikova, *Albanija v mezballkanskoj politike v pjervoj pollovine 30-h godov XX veka*, p. 127.

100. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1935, Dosja 25, f. 4.

101. AQ i RSH, Fondi 251, Viti 1935, Dosja 141, f. 4.

102. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1935, Dosja 25, f. 4.

103. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1935, Dosja 25, f. 4.

foreign minister, N. Titulescu, instructed the Romanian minister in Tirana that the government was “for the approval of the demand of Albania for admission in the Balkan Entente and it would be pleased to give its positive vote on the occasion of the next meeting of the Permanent Council”¹⁰⁴. Even the Turkish government supported Albania’s demand. After the signing of the Balkan Pact, Ataturk himself had expressed his wish to see Albania as a natural and permanent member of this Pact. “We’re waiting for the right moment and we hold the hope —he had declared— that my desire will be realized in the near future, when the Albanian state will see itself in suitable conditions”¹⁰⁵. In the summer of 1935, Ankara thought these conditions had been created. Only Greece refused to approve the admission of Albania in the Pact. The Greek government promised to change its stance once Albania resolved the problem of schools for her minority following the Hage court’s ruling¹⁰⁶.

Rome was well informed about Zog’s dealings with the Balkan governments. However, as stated in a telegram from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to its Legation in Tirana on 9 August, “...the current circumstances and the development of negotiations do not advise us to make an official protest at this moment... It is not the time to tell Zog that we are aware that he undertook an initiative without consulting us and in opposition to the secret agreements that link him with us...”¹⁰⁷. Without irritating the Albanian government, Rome reacted and interfered energetically in the other Balkan capitals, trying to influence the respective governments not to press Tirana to seek admission in the Balkan Entente¹⁰⁸. Although they rejected Italian accusations, the Yugoslav and Romanian governments retreated because they did not want to provoke Italy¹⁰⁹. The new Yugoslav government of Stojadinovic, under advice from Paris, tried to improve relations with Italy. International relations, especially the situation in the Mediterranean, became worse in the autumn of 1935. Yugoslavia and the other Balkan countries did not

104. *Nicolae Titulesku precursor de l’unité européenne sous la redaction de Marin Aiftinca*, Editura Academiei Romane, Bucarest 1993, p. 111.

105. Gazmend Shpuza, *Ataturku dhe Shqiptarët*, *op.cit.*, p. 83.

106. AQ i RSH, Fondi 263, Viti 1935, Dosja 25, f. 4.

107. *Idem*.

108. *Nicolae Titulesku precursor de l’unité européenne*, *op.cit.*, p. 111.

109. *Idem*.

want to broaden this crisis to include the Balkans for the sake of admitting Albania in the Balkan Entente.

The withdrawal of support in the face of Italian pressure also provided Zog a moment of reflection regarding his relations with Rome. Of considerable influence in Zog's re-evaluation of his relations with Italy was an armed opposition movement against him in August 1935. The unfavourable international factors, the bad economic situation and the revival of the political opposition within the country obliged the Albanian king to return once again to Italy, this time for good. The establishment of a new government, headed by Mehdi Frashëri accompanied the return. As soon as he came to power in October 1935, the new Albanian prime minister closed the Albanian chapter on the Balkan Entente. He declared clearly that the admission of Albania in this Pact complicated relations with Italy, and Albania's political and economic situation¹¹⁰.

The years 1930-1934, when the Balkan Entente was conceived and created, mark a special stage in the history of the Balkan peoples. They testified to a political wisdom and emancipation of official circles and Balkan public opinion. Although the Balkan cooperation process initiated by the Balkan Conferences and institutionalized by the creation of the Balkan Entente was only partially developed and had many defects, it contributed to the decrease of tension in the Balkans and to the creation of a positive tradition that is appreciated even today. Although Albania did not succeed in becoming a member state of the Balkan Entente, these years are the most praised period for foreign policy during Zog's reign. Albania manifested its Balkan identity and its wish to be united with the family of the Balkan peoples, with a positive tendency for independence, cooperation and understanding.

110. Vuk Vinaver, "Anglia dhe pozita ndërkombëtare e Shqipërisë midis dy Luftave Botërore", *op.cit.*, p. 230; O. N. Reshetnikova, *Albanija v mezballkanskoy politike v pjervoj pollovine 30-h godov XX veka*, p. 127.