
The Policy of the Balkan Countries towards Albania and the Balkan Pact (1934)

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the political situation in the Balkan and the influence of the European Great Powers to guarantee peace and stability in the region. It is focused on the diplomacy of the neighboring countries towards Albania concerning its participation in the Balkan Pact, signed in Athens, on February 9, 1934. At first, Italy put under pressure the Balkan states, particularly Greece, that in case of Albania admission to the Pact, their relations undermined. Rome insisted on maintaining its dominance on Albania considering it an Italian protectorate. Secondly, the Balkan neighbors refused to invite the Albanian delegation sign the Pact of the Balkan Agreement due to its *sine quo non* condition on the solution of minority's issues. The Balkan Entente between Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey intended to foster cooperation and their economic and political integration. Also its purpose was to ensure the territorial integrity and the political independence of the Balkan countries, thus the geopolitical status quo in the region.

Keywords: Balkan countries, Albania, Italian diplomacy, geopolitical status quo, Pact of Balkan Agreement

7. Introduction

In the early 1930's, the Balkan countries faced with the necessity to overcome the effects of the Great Depression (1929-1933) and to resist the pressures of the Great Powers encouraged the idea of a Balkan unity. Its purpose was to maintain the geopolitical *status quo* in the region and further develop the economic, political, social and cultural cooperation between the Balkan neighbors (Castellan, 1996: 456). So, they would guarantee peace and stability in the peninsula.

The Balkan movement began by Alexander Papanastassiou, leader of an agrarian party and former prime minister of Greece. He proposed the organization of semi-official conferences where politicians and intellectuals discussed the possibility of a Balkan federation (Puto, 2009: 520). This project was approved by the governments of Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and Albania. The last one, too, accepted the invitation of the Greek Head of the Parliament, Joanis Tsirimokos, to participate in the first Balkan Conference, taken place in Athens, October 5-12, 1930, which would contribute to a stable unity and Balkan's progress (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1930: 2). The Albanian monarchy used this diplomatic event to reduce the influence of Italy and attend an independent foreign policy (*History of the Albanian people*, vol. 3: 308).

Based on the support of the League of Nations and the Balkan civil society, four conferences were held, in Athens (1930), in Istanbul (1931), in Bucharest (1932) and in Thessaloniki (1933) that established a number of commissions to deal with nonpolitical issues, such as: economic affairs, intellectual cooperation, communications, and social and health problems (Stavrianos, 2000: 737). These meetings helped the Balkan delegations understand that only mutual collaboration with peaceful means may solve the disagreements and improve their fate. This perception led to the signing of the Balkan Pact, on February 9, 1934 (*Ora*, 1930: 1).

8. Albania and the Pact of Balkan Entente (1934)

The Foreign Affairs' Ministers of Balkan Countries held consecutive discussion aimed at preparing the project of the Balkan Pact. They shared different opinions regarding its content. The Romanian diplomat Nicolae Titulescu advocated a general formula to ensure the territorial integrity in the region, meaning the maintaining of the *status quo*. This proposal was rejected by the Yugoslavian authorities who considered the agreement incomplete without the presence of Bulgaria. Such declaration dissatisfied the representatives of Greece and Turkey that recognized the potential threat of their lands along the Aegean coast from the advancement of Serbia-Bulgarian partnership. Even Romania wanted to preserve its position in Dobrich and Danube, for that reason it didn't see positively the same time adherence of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria to the Balkan Pact based on mutual agreement. Otherwise, Yugoslavian minister, Jefitch, emphasized the importance of good neighborhood in the southeast borders and also the inclusiveness of Albania in every Balkan Unity (*Gazeta e Korçës*, 1934: 1).

But, the Prime Minister of Greece, Tsaldaris, didn't support Albania join the Balkan Pact due to its specific political orientation, referring to the close relationship with a non-Balkan state, like Italy. The Albanian delegates opposed this viewpoint by arguments on the natural cooperation between their country and other Balkan neighbors. They admitted the friendship with Italy build on bilateral interests. On one hand, the Albanian necessity for an ally, and, on the other hand, Italy was interested in an independent and strong Albania in the Balkan. However, this relation differed not very much from that of the neighbors with the Great Powers (Meksi, 1934a: 1).

The difficult negotiations continued with the Bulgarian Prime Minister requests, in return for its adherence to the Balkan Pact. At first, Mushanoff asked the Greek government to acknowledge the full sovereignty for Bulgaria of an area and a port in the Aegean Sea. Secondly, Yugoslavia ought to guarantee the Bulgarian minorities in Macedonia the right of education and worship in their own language. Thirdly, the Executive Head of Bulgaria required a diplomatic formula that included the article 19 of the Statute of the League of Nations regarding the re-examination of the treaties (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1934: 1).

These claims were unacceptable especially for Beograd and Athens, thus the Bulgarian minister in Greece informed Mr. Tsaldaris that his government in Sofia encouraged good relations with neighbors, but couldn't join the Balkan Pact (*Besa*, 1934: 2). According to the Bulgarian newspaper "Demokrateski Sgovor", if Bulgaria signed the agreement, it was equal to the recognition of Neuilly Treaty and the abandonment of historic rights and national duties. The abstention of Bulgaria would undermine the Balkan Pact (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1934: 1).

Meanwhile, the Foreign Minister of Greece, Mr. Maximos, took a long journey to the European capitals intended to make the Great Powers known the objectives of the Balkan Pact. After the visit in Paris, the Greek diplomat met the Italian Head of Executive, B. Mussolini, in Rome, to explain that the main aim of the agreement was the peace consolidation in the Peninsula. He rejected the views of certain Italian political groups who considered the Balkan Federation as a mechanism in favor of Little Entente and in opposition with other powers, particularly Italy. The purpose of their attitude was to impede the efforts of the Balkan countries to have an independent existence, based on the political agreements and the economic cooperation, in order to ensure the sovereignty of the participant Balkan states. After the Italian approval, Mr. Maximos found the support of Foreign Office, too (*Gazeta e Korçës*, 1934: 1).

The Pact developed during negotiations in Geneva between the Foreign Ministers of Romania and Greece, with the consent of Yugoslavia and Turkey, to be concluded in Beograd, on February 4, 1934. The diplomats of the four Balkan countries signed the Pact during a solemn ceremony in the Academy of Athens five days later. The agreement was composed of a preface, three articles and a secret protocol. In the preface was mentioned that "1) the four countries will contribute to peace consolidation in the Balkan; 2) they are determined to maintain the existent territorial order in the peninsula; 3) elaborate the Kellogg-Briand Pact and the decisions of the League of Nations relating to the peaceful way of conflict solution and 4) respect the treaty obligations signed previously" (*Besa*, 1934: 2).

Furthermore, the provisions of the Balkan Pact were as follows: "Article 1 - Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania and Turkey shall mutually guarantee the security of their Balkan borders. Article 2 - The Contracting Parties agree to take measures in case of threat to their interests as defined by this agreement. They assume the obligation not to take any political action towards any other Balkan country which is not a signatory to the Pact, without a prior mutual notification and not to assume any political obligation towards any other Balkan state without the consent of the other Contracting Parties. Article 3 - The Agreement will come into force upon its signing by all the Contracting Powers and shall be ratified within the shortest possible time. The Agreement will be open for accession to any Balkan country which shall be taken into favorable consideration by the Contracting Parties and shall be put into effect as soon as the other signatory countries notify their consent" (*Vatra*, 1934: 1).

Albania was not invited to sign the Balkan Pact. The neighbors, Greece and Yugoslavia blamed the Albanian government not to have participated in the agreement, intended to avoid their historical responsibilities. Though conscious of its need for collective security from the Balkan and extra Balkan threats, the neighboring countries were indifferent to the Albania's efforts to adherence to the Pact, for many reasons: at first, they felt powerless to compete with the Italian policy and had doubts about the possibility of Albania separation from the influence of Italy. During his visit in Rome, the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Maximos, was ordered not to accept Albania in the Balkan Pact. Secondly, the participation in the agreement enabled the Albanian government to cooperate with the member states to resolve the minority issues and avoid each compromise at its expense. Thirdly, the Albania accession to the Balkan Pact meant a stabilized and a consolidated state that was not in conformity with the Greek and Yugoslavian goals. They wanted a weak state and an ineffective government to justify their plans for the partition of Albania (Bakalli, 2001: 67-70).

According to Bernd J. Fischer, Albania adherence to the Pact would meet a partial success. On one side, it was an alternative for King Zogu to reduce or totally eliminate the Italian influence. But, on the other side, the Albanian government lacked the financial assistance from the neighbors. Romania and Turkey were less interested in the welfare

of Albania. Greece feared the international complications in case of engagement. Yugoslavians, despite their promises for economic support, faced itself too many financial difficulties. Thus, there were no good chances for Albania's acceptance in the Balkan Pact (Fischer, 2004: 235-236).

The Great Powers, like France and Britain, welcomed the agreement, but, at the same time, expressed their regrets for the absence of Bulgaria and Albania as Balkan states. The British newspapers "The Times", "The Daily Telegraph", "Daily Mail" and "The Morning Post" emphasized the geostrategic position of Albania as a crossing bridge between West and East and its role in the region peacekeeping (Besa, 1934: 2). Even the French senator Justin Godart admitted the significance of all Balkan countries collaboration in favor of maintaining the established order in the peninsula (Llagami, 1934: 4).

The printed media also commented widely the lack of Balkan Pact deadline. The Greek newspapers considered this fact similar to the Pact of Locarno. In concrete terms, the time flexibility of the agreement referred to the last article that declared the Pact remained open for the other Balkan countries to sign (R. D., 1934b: 1). But, the Albanian diplomatic position in the region was complicated. It was like "a man in between two chairs". The relations with Italy had changed and the country was outside the Balkan unity. However, the Albanian government clarified that the friendship with Italy didn't mean an approval of its dominance in the Balkan (Meksi, 1934b: 1).

The Pact was highly criticized by "The Times" newspaper in London, too. The article accused the signatory Balkan countries for the delay in realizing the ideal of Balkan unity for the interest of peace consolidation in the region. The advantage of Greece, Turkey and Romania seemed to be the obstacle to the movement of an independent coalition between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. As well as Athens and Istanbul called it a warning against a potential Slav pressure to the Aegean coast. Even Romania believed that its southern borders were better ensured by maintaining the existing balance of power in Balkan. While Yugoslavia was free to engage in a political activity with Bulgaria, after the prior notification to the contracting parties (*Gazeta e Korçës*, 1934: 1).

"The Times" article added that the Balkan Pact was in contradiction with its name because it excluded Albania and Bulgaria. The remark was justified. Romania and Yugoslavia was European as much as Balkan countries. The main interests of Turkey were focused on Asia Minor. In some way, Greece was a Mediterranean state. Only Bulgaria and Albania didn't have extra Balkan borders. The non-participation of Albania, an Italian ally, was caused perhaps by Greek and Turkish diplomacy that wanted to avoid the break of the relations with Italy. On the other hand, the signatory Balkan countries intended to join Bulgaria to the Pact, but they didn't achieve their objective because Sofia insisted on the re-examination of the treaties (*Vatra*, 1934: 1).

Likewise, the Greek opposition rejected the content of the Balkan Pact because it was not in conformity with the foreign policy of Helen Republic (R. D., 1934a: 1). The Head of the Greek liberals, Venizelos, called the agreement a dangerous diplomatic act for Greece, mentioning the existence of a secret annex that stipulated military obligations, as follows:

"Article 1 - Any country will be considered as an aggressor who has committed one of the acts of aggression foreseen by Article 2 of the London Convention on July 3-4, 1933.

Article 2 - The Balkan Pact is not directed against any Power. Its aim is to guarantee the security of the Balkan frontiers against any aggression on the part of a Balkan State:

Article 3 - However, if one of the High Contracting Parties is victim of an aggression from any other non-Balkan Power and if a Balkan State participates in this aggression, either simultaneously or subsequently, the Balkan Pact will produce its full effect with regard to such Balkan State. ...

Article 7 - The Balkan Pact is a defensive instrument; consequently the obligations proceeding from this agreement cease to exist for the High Contracting Parties in respect of any signatory Balkan state which should become an aggressor against any other country". (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1934: 1)

Concerning the above provisions, Venizelos argued that, if Italy attacked Yugoslavia from the Albanian territory, Athens based on the Pact would intervene militarily in Yugoslavia, so the war against Italy and Albania would be disastrous for Greece, referring to the Italian great naval power. Thus, the former Prime Minister of the Helen state suggested the admission of Albania to the Balkan Pact (*Kuvendi Kombëtar*, 1934: 1).

On the contrary, the Greek newspaper "Proia" reasoned that Venizelos had forgotten that not every disagreement with Italy ended in a military conflict. Not only because of their friendship relations, but also the basic logic would prevent Italy to require the hostility of Greece and Turkey. Also each conflict between them would be subjected to the arbitration procedure provided by the Italian-Greek Pact (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1934: 1).

However, the Greek political parties in opposition, at the meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, Tsaldaris, put under pressure the government that no ratification of the Balkan Pact was possible if the Foreign Affairs' Minister, Maximos, would not read the following declaration in the Parliament: "Greece was not obliged to fight against an extra-

Balkan state though it was an ally of Bulgaria or Albania". This formula contested the content of the Pact secret protocol (Shpuza, 1998: 77). Moreover, the Balkan Pact itself had not the expected value due to great restrictions. The contracting parties agreed to ensure only their borders in the Balkan, while an attack from other boundaries constituted no obligation for a joint action (R. D., 1934b: 3).

In early April 1934, was held in Athens the Council of the Balkan Conference. The head of the Albanian Balkan Group, Mehmet Konitza, refused the invitation of A. Papanastassiou and the representative of the American Institute "Carnegie", Babcock, to participate in the Council session, because of the dissatisfaction of the public opinion in Albania. He called the Pact in contradiction with the Balkan interests (*Vatra*, 1934: 1). Since the First Balkan Conference, the Albanian delegation set as a *sine qua non* condition the discussion of the minority's issue, which was considered essential for the Balkan Federation. But the conferences' meetings and the Pact signature didn't resolve the problem of respecting the minority rights, of great importance to peace and stability in the region (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1934: 2).

During the discussions at the Council meeting, the Bulgarian Chief Representative, Sakazof, insisted on the request of political and customs union of the Balkans and the Balkan Federation admission of all countries in the peninsula. While the Yugoslavian delegation head, Jovanovitch, supported the arguments on the absence of the Albanian Group and suggested postponing of the Balkan Conference for the next year. This proposal was rejected by the other members in the Council who argued that the dispute resolution could be achieved only by continued cooperation (*Gazeta e Korçës*, 1934: 4).

In fact, the Yugoslavian government regularly asked for the participation of Albania in the Balkan Pact. But, due to the persistent objection of Greece, the issue was decided to be discussed on May 10, 1935, in Bucharest. The Turkish diplomats justified their indecisive attitude towards Albania with the purpose of not undermining the relations with Italy. They even proposed the ways how to facilitate the Albania's adherence to the Pact in the near future. So, the Albanian position in the region depended on the European and Balkan policy (Shpuza, 1998: 71).

Meanwhile, the Italian and the British press advised the Albanian government to choose either the collaboration with the neighbors or the pro-Italian orientation. The minister of Italy in Beograd, Galli, declared that Albania took the right decision not to join the Balkan Pact because it had no interests to pursue a policy against Italy. Also the author Bell in his article published in "Near East" argued the lack of importance of the Balkan Pact without Bulgaria and Albania, too. According to him, the government of Tirana must understand that the maintaining of the independence needed the admission to a Balkan Union or Federation. When the Balkan countries refused to accept Albania due to the Italian hostility, King Zogu I had no other alternative, but to reach a friendship agreement with Italy (Shpuza, 1999).

Otherwise, France continued its intensive efforts to guarantee Bulgaria's adherence to the Balkan Entente. Only a stable agreement between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia helped peace consolidation in the peninsula. For that reason, the visit of King Alexander I in Paris would focus on this bilateral cooperation (*Gazeta e Korçës*, 1934: 1). But, the Bulgarian newspaper "Macedonia" published the text of the second secret protocol signed by Titulescu, Jefitich, Maximos and Rushdi Beu that foresaw the partition of Bulgaria and the territory invasion of respective armies in case of conflict (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1934: 1).

The European Great Powers worried about the existence of the secret protocol advised the Contracting Parties the registration of the Balkan Pact and the protocols by the Secretariat of the League of Nations. In Geneva, the Foreign Ministers of the signatory Balkan countries debated on the request of the Greek opposition regarding the Balkan Pact. The Yugoslavian representative refused to accept the interpretation of the Pact by Maximos, even with the withdrawal of the Helen state from the Balkan Entente. It was the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Titulescu, who in favor of Pact continuity and Balkan solidarity appealed for the approval of the modifications proposed by Greece (*Gazeta shqiptare*, 1934: 1).

At the same time, "Journal de Genève" reported on the organization in Istanbul of the Fifth Balkan Conference, on October 1-6, 1934. The Head of the Conference, Hassan Beu sent the invitation for participation to all Balkan national groups. The Albanian government chose to attend an isolation policy in the Balkan. While one member of the Bulgarian delegation, Trifon Tifonof, admitted the intension of Bulgaria to participate highlighting the solution of the political problem. Anyway he accepted the justifications of the International Peace Bureau in Geneva to discuss the economic issues first that fostered cooperation and the progress of the nations, and leave aside the complicated political problems, such as the minority issue, in terms of nationalism growth in Europe and Balkan (*Gazeta e Korçës*, 1934: 1, 4).

The political situation in the region worsened by the assassination of King Alexander I of Yugoslavia during his state visit in Marseilles, France. The diplomats of the four Balkan countries held in Beograd, on October 19, 1934, an extraordinary meeting of the Permanent Council of the Balkan Agreement, where they pointed out the need for inter-Balkan collaboration to find the responsibilities and to take measures in order to avoid the crime repetition in the future (*Gazeta e Korçës*, 1934: 1).

The regular meeting of the Permanent Council was held in Ankara a few days later under the chairmanship of the Greek Foreign Minister, Maximos. There was signed the Statute of the Balkan Agreement which defined the creation of a Political Council, as a unanimity decision-making body, an Economic Council and the legislation adoption (Castellan, 1996: 456).

Thus, the Balkan Entente replaced the Balkan Conferences concerning the exclusion of Albania and Bulgaria. But, these two diplomatic bodies were not completely similar. The Balkan Conferences tried to gather all the countries in the peninsula aimed at resolving the important issues. While the Balkan Entente as an intergovernmental organization intended to maintain the geopolitical *status quo*. Its Permanent Council had the right to make decisions, contrary to the conferences that provided recommendations. This overlapping of tasks led to the cancellation of the Fifth Balkan Conference in Istanbul (Shpuza, 1999).

9. Conclusions

The Balkan Entente initiative came from the European diplomacy aimed at guaranteeing the existing *status quo* in the peninsula. The idea was articulated first by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Aristide Briand, and presented by the International Peace Bureau in Geneva. This proposal intended to ensure the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Balkan states and to further develop their political and economic cooperation.

At first, the Balkan Conferences (1930-1933) and the Pact of Balkan Agreement reflected the rivalry between France and Italy for zones of influences in the Balkan and the role of the European Powers on the foreign policy of the Balkan countries. Secondly, the Balkan Pact signed by Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey highlighted the political disagreements between them and the uncompleted political issues, such as the respect of the minority rights, of great importance to peace and stability in the region.

The Italian pressure on the four Balkan states, on one side, and the obstacles to solve the minority issues, on the other side, caused the non-adherence of Albania to the Balkan Pact. The absence of the two Balkan countries, like Albania and Bulgaria and the influence of the Great Powers made the Balkan Entente partial and an ineffective organization.

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