

BALKAN CONFERENCES (1930-1933) – SIGNIFICANT MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF THIS GEOGRAPHICAL REGION STATES

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Abstract. The four Balkan conferences are one of modern history's cornerstones because they offered the opportunity to the representatives of the public opinion of this geographical area to meet, discuss and agree upon certain common programs, and organize procedures in the spirit of what had been settled.

Still of the utmost importance remains the fact that by organizing these conferences during the interwar the Balkans ceased to be the "Powder Keg" of Europe and became a zone dominated by a positive spirit and promoting solutions for a better mutual understanding and appreciation of the respective peoples.

Key words: Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Albania, Greece, Istanbul, Bucharest, Belgrad, Athens.

Since the middle of the 19th century till the second decade of the 20th century, the Balkans were considered the "Powder Keg" of Europe, due to the fact that this region was haunted by serious tensions and numerous military conflicts.

The years 1875-1876 witnessed the war of Serbia and Montenegro against Turkey, as well as anti-Ottoman uprisings in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Bulgaria.

In 1877-1878 took place the Russo-Romanian-Turkish war, which had as main consequence the acknowledgement of the state independence of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro and the creation of the Principality of Bulgaria, vassal to the Ottoman Empire. In January 1878 a strong anti-Ottoman ravaged Thessaly, a territory that would unite with Greece in 1881.

Between November 14, 1885 and March 3, 1886 a war broke out between Serbia and Bulgaria.

In April-December 1897 a Greco-Turkish war followed, lost by Greece.

On October 5, 1908, Bulgaria proclaimed her independence. On October 6, 1908, Bosnia and Herzegovina were attached to Austro-Hungary.

In March-October 1912 eventuated the Balkan Alliance, through bilateral treaties signed by Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Montenegro, against the Ottoman Empire. From April till August 1912 took place a powerful uprising of the Albanians against the Ottoman Empire, after which, on November 28, 1912, Albania proclaimed her independence.

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Between October 18, 1912 and May 30, 1913, the first Balkan war came about between the Balkan Alliance and the Ottoman Empire, and was won by the allies.

The second Balkan war (29 June-10 August 1913), was fought between Bulgaria, on the one hand, and Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, Turkey and Romania, on the other hand, and ended with the defeat of the Bulgarian army. By the peace treaty signed in Bucharest, on the 10th of August, Romania received Southern Dobruja (the departments of Durostos and Caliacra). It is worth noticing that in 1913, for the first time, Balkan issues were solved exclusively by the states of this region.

On June 28, 1914, the archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the throne of Austro-Hungary, was assassinated at Sarajevo by a Serbian nationalist, fact which constituted the pretext for starting World War I, on the 28th of July 1914.

During World War I, the Balkan states were in hostile camps: Bulgaria and Turkey were part of the Central Powers Alliance (Germany and Austro-Hungary), while Serbia, Romania and Greece were included in the Entente (France, Great Britain and Russia). Victory belonged to the Entente: Bulgaria capitulated on the 16/29th of September, the Ottoman Empire on the 17/30th of October. Germany declared herself defeated on the 29th of October/11th of November 1918, marking the end of World War I.

The end of the war brought about important territorial modifications in the South and East of Europe. In 1918, Romania achieved her national unity incorporating Bessarabia, Bucovina and Transylvania, and in parallel the Kingdom of the Serbians, Croats and Slovenians was founded in the South of the Danube.

In 1919, Paris hosted the Peace Conference. By the Treaty of Neuilly sur Seine (September 10, 1919), Bulgaria lost Western Thrace to Greece and her 1913 frontier with Romania was confirmed. The Trianon Treaty (June 4, 1920) concluded with Hungary, acknowledged the union of Transylvania with Romania, as well as the union of Croatia and Slovenia with Serbia. By the Sèvres Treaty (August 10, 1920), Turkey was losing several territories, such as Eastern Thrace and the European coast of the Dardanelles, which were ceded to Greece.

The war between Greece (supported by Great Britain) and Turkey, led by Mustafa Kemal, was fought during 1919-1922, and was ended by the Lausanne Treaty (July 24, 1923), which established her up to the present day valid borders.

At Lausanne the regime of the Straits Bosphorus and Dardanelles which connected the Black Sea to the Mediterranean was also established. On this occasion, Romania pleaded for the free circulation in the Straits, as well as for the necessity of ensuring Turkey's security, position which contributed to the rapprochement of these two states.

A trend developed after the war aiming to improve the relations of Balkan states through a better mutual knowledge and by implementing a beneficial cooperation for the peoples living in this geographical zone.

An important part was played by the intellectuals, who pleaded for the promotion of the cultural lore created by Balkan peoples over the time. Several cooperation organisms were established, such as the Balkan Medical Union and the Balkan Journalists' Union. An important role was also played by the Institute for Balkan Studies, founded at the initiative of the Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga as early as 1914. Additionally, the exchange of professors and students, especially between Bucharest and Sofia, contributed to a better mutual understanding.

Tourism too had its share in consolidating the conciliation of Balkan peoples. Towns as Athens, Istanbul, Bucharest, Sofia and Belgrade, as well as the Greek islands, the historical monuments and works of art of Turkey, the Prahova Valley with its castle of Sinaia in Romania, the Yugoslavian resorts on the shores of the Adriatic Sea were all objectives of the greatest interest for individuals willing to admire the natural beauties of those countries, but also to know their history and culture.

The dynastic policy promoted by queen Mary of Romania strengthened the kinship ties between Balkan states. In 1921, for instance, prince Carol, heir to the throne of Romania, married princess Elena, daughter of king Constantin of Greece, and princess Elisabeta married prince George, heir to the throne of Greece. In 1922, princess Marioara espoused king Alexander of Yugoslavia.

After these marriages, Romania's relations with Greece and Yugoslavia became ever closer and queen Mary was called "the mother-in-law of the Balkans".

Mutual visits of parliamentary delegations mitigated political asperities and contributed to building a sound climate of mutual trust and respect.

Important steps were also taken in the direction of political relation development. Historical experience had already shown that more often than not the tensions in this region had been created and fostered by the great powers in order to impose their will more easily, according to the principle "divide et impera".

Referring to this reality, the Turkish foreign minister Terfik Rustu-Aras launched, in March 1927, the motto "the Balkans to the Balkan peoples"¹. In a discussion (November 4, 1927) with the Romanian diplomat Gheorghe Filality, the Turkish minister expressed his conviction that "the possibility of creating a Balkan bloc is absolute and that sooner or later it will be founded".²

Balkan cooperation was therefore growing more and more obviously solid. In 1921, Romania and Yugoslavia, together with Czechoslovakia, established a political and military alliance called the Little Entente.

¹ Eliza Campus, *Înțelegerea Balcanică*, București, Editura Academiei, 1972, p. 40

² *România –Turcia. Relații diplomatice*, vol. I. 1923-1938. Ediție Dumitru Preda, București, Editura Cavallioti, 2011, p.49

In March 1928, Romania and Greece signed the Non-aggression and Arbitration Treaty.

A year later, in March 1929, Greece and Yugoslavia too signed a treaty of alliance.

On June 11, 1929 Romania and Turkey ratified the Convention regarding Establishment, Commerce and Navigation.

In June 1930, Greece and Turkey signed the Convention regarding the final settlement of the problems ensuing from the Lausanne Treaty, and in October the same year, they signed the Neutrality, Friendship, Conciliation and Arbitration Treaty between the two respective countries.

These documents smoothed the passage to a superior stage, the stage of multilateral reunions of the representatives of the six Balkan states¹. On the occasion of the International Peace Congress, held in Athens, in June 1930, the Greek foreign minister, Alexander Papanastassiou, proposed to organize a Balkan conference in the capital of his country.

The Congress sanctioned this initiative. An organizing committee was constituted, composed of the representatives of Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania and Turkey. The committee recommended that delegates from different activity spheres – economy (Chambers of Industry and Agriculture), education (Universities), politics (Parliament), press, etc. – attend the Balkan conference. It was specified that they would not represent their governments, but the public opinion, namely, in today's vocabulary, civil society.

The committee also drew the *Rules of Procedure* of the Balkan Conference, which, under article 1, stated that its fundamental aim was to achieve “the rapprochement of Balkan peoples from all points of view”. It was decided that the conference be held in commissions, which were to analyze the ways of reaching the political, intellectual, and economic concurrence of the six states.

The first Balkan Conference was held in Athens, between the 5th and the 12th of October 1930. The conference approved the proposed regulations and commissions. The participants advocated the elimination of war in the relations of Balkan states, the settlement of all litigations solely peacefully, and the promotion of the common civilization elements of the peoples living in this region.

The conference decided to designate a Council of the Balkan Conference, composed of the representatives of the National Committees of the respective states.

The *Resolution* of the conference pointed out the importance of the event and proposed concrete measures for organizing different activities in the spirit of what had been agreed upon, such as progressively unifying legal legislation, concluding a multilateral treaty of legal assistance, diminishing custom duties for the goods coming from these countries, etc.

¹ V., per larg, Eliza Campus, *România și Conferințele Balcanice. 1930-1934*, București, Editura Militară, 1969.

The closing session was held in Delphi, where a *Message* was adopted stating that the debates of the conference “have brilliantly demonstrated that we are sister-peoples, able to reasonably and peacefully settle all the differences that distinguish us”.

During the next period, Balkan National Committees were constituted in the six states which designated their attendees to the Balkan Conference Committee. The “Inter-Balkan Week” hosted cultural activities meant to improve mutual understanding and esteem, and industrialists, bankers and tradesmen met and examined the development of the economic relations existing among the member states of the Balkan Conference. In their turn, governments and parliaments were asked to adopt the necessary decisions able to put into practice the measures established in Athens.

In this optimistic atmosphere was signed, on October 30, 1930, the friendship treaty between Greece and Turkey, which equated with a historical reconciliation of the two states.

On May 11, 1931 king Carol II met the czar Alexander, and during this reunion the two monarchs agreed that it was necessary to support the development of the friendly relations between Romania and Bulgaria.

The **second Balkan Conference** was held in Istanbul between October 20 and 26, 1931. The delegates were greeted by prime-minister Ismet Inonu, who referred to the interdependence of nations and the necessity of resting the relations of Balkan countries on two fundamental principles: absolute equality among all the states and a compromise between the various interests of the peoples in this zone.

The conference laid stress on the economic issues, influenced by the global economic crisis, during which the developed European countries had adopted a protectionist policy meant to protect their own economies, by boycotting foreign produce and putting high custom duties especially on agricultural products.

J. Spiropulos, professor of international law at the University of Thessaloniki, presented, in the name of the Hellene group, the document entitled *Ante-project of a Balkan Pact*, inspired by the Pact of the League of Nations (1919), the Pact of Locarno (1925) and the Briand-Kellog Pact (1928). It focused chiefly on the elimination of war as a means of solving litigations, the peaceful solving of disputes and mutual attendance of victims.

The adopted *Resolution* underlined the necessity of concluding a pact which would bar war as a means of solving conflicts between Balkan states, as well as the recourse to arbitration and reciprocal assistance granted to the citizens inhabiting this geographic area.

After the conference the actions meant to ensure a better mutual understanding and esteem among the peoples in the Balkan Peninsula continued and even multiplied. At the same time, the decision-making individuals were urged to find concrete ways of political cooperation.

The third Balkan Conference was hosted by Romania's capital, Bucharest, between October 22 and 29, 1932. The participants were greeted by the Romanian foreign minister Nicolae Titulescu, who said: "The synonym for peace is not the lack of war. Peace means above all a state of mind composed of trust, mutual understanding, and confidence in the morrow. Peace is not to be proclaimed. Peace has to be conquered". Addressing the participants, the Romanian foreign minister argued: "The goal of your conferences is undoubtedly the quest of cooperation between Balkan nations or between nations that share the same interests and the identification of different modalities of preparing the public opinion for an even closer cooperation between these nations. Through your work you will greatly facilitate the actions of governments"¹. Titulescu enhanced the fact that due to their geographical position and their historical evolution these nations attained a multitude of common civilization elements, and quoted their sharing the same conceptions and the same lifestyle, reflected in folk art, sayings, poetry, music, etc.

The agenda of the conference included the issue of the *Balkan Pact*. The debates engendered certain divergences, fed by certain great powers which looked rather unfavorably on the apparition of a Balkan bloc that would substantially reduce their influence in this region. Germany and Italy interfered, in different ways, with Sofia's politics, suggesting to the Bulgarian officials not to pledge themselves to maintain the territorial status-quo, but to consider instead a policy of revising the peace treaties overtly promoted by Berlin and Rome, and beneficial to Bulgaria. Additionally, Italy, who was exerting a sort of protectorate over Albania, intervened so that the latter should not diverge from the path traced by Rome.

This Balkan Conference also exhibited divergences as to the statute of minorities. Bulgaria's and Albania's delegates expressed their dissatisfaction with the way their compatriots were treated in Yugoslavia, while the representatives of Belgrade rejected all accusations incriminating them.

Finally, *the text of the Balkan Pact* was adopted with a majority vote, and the Bulgarian delegation abstained from voting. It was decided that this document be submitted to the approval of the governments of the respective states, the sole who could decide in political matters.

The *Message* to the Balkan countries adopted by the Conference was estimating that "the hard times we are now living demand imperatively the union which is the only one that can help us efficiently to face the current crisis".

During the next period, the six Balkan states continued their cultural and economic activities dominated by a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.

¹ Nicolae Titulescu, *Documente diplomatice*. Redactor responsabil George Macovescu, București, Editura Politică, 1967, p.467

On the other hand, political issues were moving to the forefront more and more rapidly, as a consequence of the respective governments' involvement.

The **fourth Balkan Conference** was held in Greece, hosted by Thessaloniki, between November 4 and 11, 1933, and was attended by the Greek prime-minister Constantin Tsaldairis.

The discussions concerning the Balkan Pact were resumed, and the Bulgarian delegation seized the moment and renewed its objections, asking that the document should include the member states' obligation of ensuring full legal equality in Bulgaria's relations with the other Balkan states as well as the loyal and integral enforcement of the clauses from the treaties concluded at the end of the war regarding national minorities. The most vigorous request referred to the juridical and cultural protection of the Bulgarian minority living in other Balkan states.

The chairman of the commission for political concurrence, the Romanian jurist V.V. Pella, specified that the present conference was not an official organ therefore the issues raised by the Bulgarian delegation would have to be submitted to the respective governments. Confronted with these arguments, the Bulgarians gave up their claims and the Balkan Pact was voted unanimously.

On February 9, 1934, the foreign ministers of Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey signed in Athens the Pact of the Balkan Entente. Since the Bulgarian and Albanian officials were not present, the document was specifying that it "would remain open to any other Balkan country"¹.

¹ Ioan Scurtu, *România și Marile Puteri (1933-1940). Documente*, București, Editura Fundației România de Măine, 2000, p.31.