

SALI KADRIA, PhD, Researcher  
Institute of History, Albanological Studies Academy of Tirana  
Tirana, Republic of Albania  
kadriasali@gmail.com

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## A VIEW ON ALBANIAN-YUGOSLAV RELATIONS DURING 1922-1923

**ABSTRACT:** *This scientific article aims to reflect some of the aspects of Albanian-Yugoslav relations in the years 1922-1923. During this period, there were two options facing the political leaders in Albania: Orienting their country toward Italy or the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, as the two countries that were interested the most on the Albanian issue. Albanian-Yugoslav relations during these years were affected by several factors, such as: the Albanian issue in Kosovo and other ethnic areas located within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes; the Italo-Yugoslav rivalry in Albania, as well as the orientation of the various Albanian political groups in Albania in relation to its neighboring countries.*

**KEYWORDS:** Albania, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Italy, Italian-Yugoslav Rivalry, Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations

Addressing the issue of Albania's relations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, during 1922-1923 could serve to better illuminate, among others, two important problems: 1. Were the political leaders of the Albanian state well-oriented in the field of international relations during these years? 2. Was the attempt of the Albanian Government for the normalization of Albania's relations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes the right political movement in favor of the interests of the Albanians or should it had had improved its relations with Italy?

In the early 1920s, one of the main concerns for the key political leaders of the Albanian Government was where the Albanian state should be oriented in its foreign policy. During this time, there were no diplomatic relations between Albania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. From 1920 to 1922, an informal communication corridor continued to function between the two countries, if it could be called that.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paskal Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927* [Albania and Yugoslavia 1918-1927], (Tiranë: Enciklopedike, 1992), 106.

In 1920, the eviction of Italy from Albania and the Balkan Peninsula was in the best interests of Albania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In the spring of 1920, the Albanian state took the first step to start cooperation with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The Albanian Government sent MP Sejfi Vllamasi on a secret mission to Belgrade. During the talks held at the ministry of foreign affairs, among other things, Vllamasi asked the SCS Government for help with weapons and ammunition to expel the Italians from Vlora. The Yugoslav officials promised to provide weapons and ammunition to the Albanian Government.<sup>2</sup> They assured the Albanians that if the Italians were to be expelled from Albania, they too would withdraw from the interior of the Albanian borders decided in 1913.<sup>3</sup> Despite the nice words about aid in arms and ammunition, the Albanians never received this help from the Yugoslav state. Thus, Sejfi Vllamasi's Belgrade mission failed.

This attempt to lay the foundations of cooperation between the Albanians and the Yugoslavs failed for several reasons: *First*, the Yugoslav Government did not trust the Albanians nor their liberation war against the Italian troops. *Second*, apparently, during this time Belgrade continued to be in talks with Rome to resolve their disputes over Albania as part of the "Adriatic Question".<sup>4</sup> *Third*, the key political figures in the Yugoslav Government failed to perceive clearly the existing internal political developments in Albania. After the "Congress of Lushnjë" (January 1920) a national government had come to power in Albania, while the SCS officials still continued to rely on Essad Pasha Toptani.<sup>5</sup>

Essad Pasha Toptani's political activity affected a cool atmosphere in bilateral relations. After the arrival of the new Albanian political group at the helm of Albania in the early 1920s, Essad Pasha did not dare to set foot in Albania. However, through his supporters, such as Osman Bali and Halit Lleshi, Essad Pasha tried to restore his power within the country.<sup>6</sup> When it became clear that the "Essadist" movement was endangering the internal stability of the Albanian state, the government forcibly suppressed this movement in Central Albania. On June 13, 1920, Essad Pasha Toptani's problem was finally solved with his assassination in front of the "Continental" Hotel in Paris.<sup>7</sup>

One factor that kept Albanian-Yugoslav relations under tension was the so-called "Strategic Line." In the autumn of 1918, with the authorization of the

<sup>2</sup> Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942*, [Political confrontations in Albania 1897-1942] (Kujtime dhe vlerësime historike) [Historical memories and assessments], botim i dytë [Second edition], (Tiranë: Neraida, 2000), 194–196; P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927*, 106–107.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Swire, *Shqipëria. Ngritja e një mbretërie* [Albania. The Rise of a Kingdom], përkthyer nga [translated by] Kujtim Ymeri, (Tiranë: Dituria, 2005), 260.

<sup>4</sup> P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927*, 107.

<sup>5</sup> Dragan Bakić, "Nikola Pašić and the Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 1919-1926", *Balkanica*, XLVII, (2016), 298.

<sup>6</sup> J. Swire, *Shqipëria. Ngritja e një mbretërie...*, 257.

<sup>7</sup> Bernd Jurgen Fischer, *Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri* [King Zog and the Struggle for Stability in Albania], përkthyer nga [translated by] Krenar Hajdëri, botim i tretë në shqip [Third edition in Albanian], (Tiranë: Çabej, 2004), 31–32.

French commander Franchet d'Espèrey, the Serbian Army occupied a part of northern Albania up to the Drin River. This area was named the "Strategic Line". The Albanian territories included within the "Strategic zone" included almost half of the northern part of Albania in 1913, with a population of about 126,000 Albanians. From the Yugoslav point of view, the "Strategic Line" was a defensive zone against the attacks of the Albanian rebels, while in fact, it was a political maneuver, which tended to legitimize the occupation of the Albanian territories included within this strategic line, based on the decision of the Supreme Allied Command of 1918, and then to annex it. Serbian political circles were determined to occupy northern Albania, as they aimed to extend westward, descending to the Albanian shores of the Adriatic.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Yugoslavs had promised to withdraw from northern Albania if the Italians left Vlora, they refused to do so after the Albanian victory over the Italian troops.<sup>9</sup>

Another factor that aggravated Albanian-Yugoslav relations was the activity of the Albanian and Serbian nationalist circles. The scholar Jason Tomes notes that in the 1920s, expansionists in Belgrade continued to publish maps showing all of northern Albania as part of a Greater South Slav kingdom resembling the Serb empire of the fourteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

The Albanians were also very dissatisfied with the borders set for Albania by the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1913. This conference decided that more than half of the population and ethnic territories inhabited by an Albanian majority should remain outside the borders of the Albanian state, making it one of the rare cases in Europe. That very same year marked the start of the Albanian political movement demanding the unification of Kosovo and other areas inhabited mostly by ethnic Albanians into a single Albanian state. In 1918, their leaders such as: Kadri Prishtina, Hasan Prishtina, Bajram Curri, Bedri Pejani, Qamil Bala, Sali Rama, Hafiz Ismet Dibra, etc., laid the foundations of the Committee of "National Defense of Kosovo" (NDK), which aimed to inspire the movement of resistance among the Albanians.<sup>11</sup>

Naturally, the question arises about the attitude of the Albanian Government toward the leaders of the "National Defense of Kosovo" Committee. During 1920, the Albanian Government leaders felt that Albania should establish normal relations with the Yugoslav state. The Albanian political group known as "Krahu

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<sup>8</sup> J. Swire, *Shqipëria. Ngritja e një mbretërie...*, 265, 267; By an Australian [Morton F. Eden], *Albania and her neighbours*, London: [There is no publishing house], July 1921, 4; Armend Mehmeti, *Diplomacia e Britanisë së Madhe në marrëdhëniet shqiptaro-jugosllave 1919-1939* [British diplomacy in Albanian-Yugoslav relations 1919-1939], botim i Institutit të Historisë pranë Akademisë së Studimeve Albanologjike [Published by the Institute of History at the Academy of Albanological Studies], (Tiranë: Kristalina – KH, 2020), 111.

<sup>9</sup> By an Australian [Morton F. Eden], *Albania and her neighbours*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Jason Tomes, *King Zog, self-made monarch of Albania* (Sutton Publishing, 2007), 40–41.

<sup>11</sup> Marenglen Verli, "Rrymat politike brenda Komitetit 'MKK' dhe pozicioni i Hoxha Kadri Prishtinës" [The political currents within the 'NDK' Committee and the position of Hodza Kadri Prishtina], *Studime historike*, 3–4, (2012), 253–270.

Kombëtar” [National Wing], which included Ahmet Zogu, Eshref Frashëri, Sejfi Vllamasi, and part of the political leaders of Albania, thought that at this time the Albanian state did not have the military and diplomatic opportunities to achieve the unification of Kosovo and Albania. What the Albanian state urgently needed was peace. Representatives of this political group thought that before the Albanians could undertake an irredentist policy of any kind, Albania should initially become stable internally and return to a stable situation. That is why the question of Kosovo and the fulfillment of the national aspiration of the Albanian population outside Albanian borders had to be postponed.<sup>12</sup>

The Albanian Government’s primary task during this time was to persuade the Great Powers to accept Albania as an independent and sovereign country. For the sake of internal stability, the delimitation of the final state borders, and the provision of international recognition of the Albanian state, the government in Tirana agreed to make small concessions to its neighboring countries.<sup>13</sup> The pursuit of a pragmatic policy, moderate and not provocative by the Albanian state, gradually began to yield positive results in the following years.

Some of the leaders of the “National Defense of Kosovo” Committee, such as Hasan Prishtina and Bajram Curri continued their efforts to unite all Albanians, without taking into account the difficult situation that Albanians and the mother country were in. This Albanian nationalist group did not agree with the position of the Albanian Government. They said they had fought all their lives for Kosovo and therefore they could not abandon their people.<sup>14</sup> Hasan Prishtina, Bajram Curri, and some others came out against the restrained and realistic policy of the Albanian Government of the time and went into open conflict with them, becoming an important part of the coups and armed anti-government uprisings that were quite dangerous for the existence and stability of the Albanian state.<sup>15</sup>

After the border incidents in the area north of Shkodra in July of 1920, Albanian Interior Minister Ahmet Zogu expressed his regret to the Yugoslav representative in Shkodra, Vukotić, for the incident that occurred on the Albanian-Yugoslav border and asked for input from both parties to clarify the circumstances of this incident.<sup>16</sup> After this, Albanian Prime Minister Sulejman Delvina asked Kadri Prishtina, Bajram Curri, and Ndoc Çoba to keep the inhabitants of the northern part of Albania under control.<sup>17</sup> Ahmet Zogu wrote to Elez Isufi, a

<sup>12</sup> B. J. Fischer, *Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri...*, 41; J. Tomes, *King Zog, self-made monarch of Albania*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> Nicola C. Guy, *Lindja e Shqipërisë – Nacionalizmi Etnik, Fuqitë e Mëdha të Luftës së Parë Botërore dhe Lindja e Pavarësisë Shqiptare* [The Birth of Albania], përkthyer nga [translated by] Krenar Hajdëri, (Tiranë: Pegi, 2012), 290, 300.

<sup>14</sup> B. J. Fischer, *Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri*, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Beqir Meta, “Procesi i ndërtimit kombëtar në vitet 1920-1930” [The process of national construction in the years 1920-1930], in: *100 vjet Pavarësi: Aktet e Konferencës Shkencore Ndërkombëtare* [100 years of Independence: Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference], Tiranë, më 26-27 nëntor 2012 (Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2014), 16.

<sup>16</sup> P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927*, 114–115.

<sup>17</sup> Central State Archive of the Republic of Albania (hereinafter: AQSH), Fund (hereinafter: F.) 152, Year (hereinafter: Y.) 1920, File (hereinafter: F.) 223, p. 67, Telegram of the Prime

popular leader in the northeastern part of Albania, that the Albanian Government intended to take control of the territory of Albania established in 1913 through diplomatic means.<sup>18</sup> During this period, at the request of Hasan Prishtina, Gabriele D'Annunzio sent to the ports of Shëngjin (San Giovanni di Medua) a quantity of weapons and ammunition for the Albanian nationalists to start a war against the Yugoslav state, but the Albanian Government decided to prevent the landing of this quantity of weapons.<sup>19</sup>

At the end of September of 1920, talks took place between the Albanian Government representatives and Ljuba Nešić, the Yugoslav representative in Shkodram. The Yugoslav delegate tended to justify the occupation of the territory of Albania in 1913 by Yugoslav troops on the grounds that they were within the "Strategic Line" occupied in agreement with the Allied Powers for reasons of security. He raised the concern that in Albania there was a secret political organization called the "Committee for the Defense of Kosovo", which aimed to start an uprising on the territory of the Yugoslav state and that they were receiving weapons and war materials sent through the Italian nationalist leader Gabriele D'Annunzio.<sup>20</sup>

During the talks with the Yugoslav side, the Albanian Government apparently promised the Yugoslavs that in exchange for their withdrawal from Albania, it would try to contain the Kosovo Albanian political leaders. The "Kosovo National Defense" Committee considered A. Zogu's talks with the Yugoslavs which aimed at reaching a compromise, as a betrayal. Indeed, in the conditions in which Albania was in this period, it must be admitted that compromise was the right solution.<sup>21</sup> Bernd J. Fischer considers A. Zog's action as "realistic" by which he managed to temporarily avert the danger posed to his country by the Yugoslav side.<sup>22</sup>

Even for Albania's accession to the League of Nations, the neighboring countries, including the Kingdom of SCS, expressed opposition. With the help of France, they went so far as to demand the abrogation of the decisions for Albania taken by the London Conference in 1913.<sup>23</sup> When the issue of Albania's membership in this international organization was submitted for approval, among those who had opposed this accession so far had been the Yugoslav representative, but contrary to expectations, the SCS delegate voted in favor of Albania joining the League of Nations.<sup>24</sup>

Minister Sulejman Delvina to Hoxha Kadri, Sotir Peci, Ndoc Çoba, Bajram Curri, Tirana, August 5, 1920.

<sup>18</sup> Ismail Strazimiri, *Lufta kundër pavarësimit të Shqipërisë – Kujtime historike për Lëvizjen Kombëtare në Qarkun e Dibrës* [The war against the independence of Albania – Historical memories for the National Movement in the Region of Dibra], (Tiranë: Naimi, 2010), 99, 101.

<sup>19</sup> Eqrem bej Vlora, *Kujtime (1885-1925)* [Memories (1885-1925)], përkthyer nga [translated by] Afrim Koçi, (Tiranë: Shtëpia e Librit & Komunikimit, 2003), 477.

<sup>20</sup> P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> J. Tomes, *King Zog, self-made monarch of Albania*, 42.

<sup>22</sup> B. J. Fischer, *Mbreti Zog dhe përpjekja për stabilitet në Shqipëri*, 35.

<sup>23</sup> J. Swire, *Shqipëria. Ngritja e një mbretërie*, 273.

<sup>24</sup> N. C. Guy, *Lindja e Shqipërisë – Nacionalizmi Etnik...*, 278.

During April of 1921, the Albanian Government sent a delegation headed by Ali Riza Kolonja to Belgrade to discuss all issues of common interest. He presented to the Yugoslav Government a note containing several proposals: 1. The Yugoslav Government should recognize independent Albania with its borders according to the decisions of the London Conference of 1913 and therefore vacate the entire Albanian territory occupied by Yugoslav troops; 2. The Albanian Government promised the Yugoslav Government to maintain its neutrality and not to sign any defense or aggression treaties with any state; 3. As soon as diplomatic relations were restored between the two countries, the Albanian Government would agree to conclude a trade treaty and a customs agreement on reciprocity with the Yugoslav Government. This mission also ended in failure and the Albanian delegation returned to Tirana empty-handed.<sup>25</sup>

On May 11, 1921, the Albanian Government took another step toward normalizing Albanian-Yugoslav relations. Through its delegation to the League of Nations, the Albanian Government proposed to the Yugoslav Government to reach an agreement on the basis of the above three points stipulated in Belgrade. The Yugoslav Government did not accept these proposals but presented its conditions to the Albanian Government, including: the establishment of a military alliance and the approval of a project for the formation of a federation between the two countries. The Albanian delegation did not accept the Yugoslav Government's terms and the talks ended without any results.<sup>26</sup>

The Yugoslav Government tried to extend gradually from the Albanian eastern areas to the Mirdita region, to have the latter as a strategic base, with the objective of reaching the Albanian coast and later annexing all of northern Albania.<sup>27</sup> Pašić tried emphatically to create a favorable situation for the Kingdom of SCS on the ground. For that purpose, he covertly supported the Roman-Catholic inhabitants of Mirdita who occupied a strategically important curve along the Drin River in their rebellion against the Tirana Government.<sup>28</sup>

In early June of 1921, the Yugoslav Government tried to implement this political goal through Mirdita leader Marka Gjoni, who was known as a friend of the Serbs.<sup>29</sup> Marka Gjoni took advantage of the poverty of the inhabitants of this province of Albania, inciting their dissatisfaction against the Albanian Government. Marka Gjoni went to Prizren with some of his supporters, returning to

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<sup>25</sup> The British National Archives (hereinafter: TNA), Foreign Office (hereinafter: FO) FO 371/5727, Telegram of H. C. A. Eyres to Foreign Office, Durrës, June 2, 1921; Arben Puto, *Shqipëria politike 1912-1939* [Political Albania 1912-1939], (Tiranë: Toena, 2009), 305.

<sup>26</sup> P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927*, 129–130.

<sup>27</sup> D. Bakić, "Nikola Pašić and the Foreign Policy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, 1919–1926", 302.

<sup>28</sup> Bogumil Hrabak, „Mirditi između Italijana, arbanaskih nacionalista i Srba (1918–1921)“, *Istorija 20. veka*, 1–2, (1993), 35–51.

<sup>29</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 5726, Telegram of H. C. A. Eyres to Foreign Office, Durrës, May 13, 1921; Ibidem, FO 371/ 5727, H. C. A. Eyres to Earl Curzon of Kedleston, Durrës, June 16, 1921; Albert Mousset, *Shqipëria përballë Europës (1912-1929)* [Albania in front of Europe (1912-1929)], përkthyer nga [translated by] Asti Papa, (Tiranë: Dituria, 2004), 35.

Mirdita from the territory of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes with a large sum of money.<sup>30</sup> He incited the Mirdita uprising against the Albanian Government and after the intervention of Albanian Government troops, he withdrew to Prizren. On 17 July 1921, the Yugoslav Press Office announced the proclamation of the “Republic of Mirdita”.<sup>31</sup>

The creation of the so-called “Republic of Mirdita” was really an attempt by the SCS Kingdom to separate the northern part from the Albanian state, based on a proposal made at the Peace Conference on 14 January 1920.<sup>32</sup> This further strained relations between Albanians and Serbs. When the Albanians saw that even the few remaining territories of the state were again in danger of being reduced, this further ignited the desire of the Albanian nationalists to start an Albanian widespread-scale uprising in Kosovo.<sup>33</sup>

In late October of 1921, Yugoslav troops launched a military operation inside the territory of Albania. Yugoslav troops occupied Lura, Oroshi and Shëngjin [San Giovanni di Medua], approaching about 60 kilometers from Tirana, the capital of Albania.<sup>34</sup> Already, the Albanian state was in serious danger of losing part of northern Albania.<sup>35</sup> British military experts estimated that the Yugoslav Government aimed at the occupation of all of northern Albania. In these circumstances, British Prime Minister David Lloyd George called on the Council of the League of Nations to approve measures to be taken under Article 16 of the League of Nations Convention if the Yugoslav Government refused to implement the commitments it had made.<sup>36</sup>

The dissatisfaction caused within the cabinet indicated that Pašić’s handling of Albanian affairs had met with strong opposition in governmental and public circles.<sup>37</sup> According to the agreement of 9 November 1921,<sup>38</sup> the Great

<sup>30</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 5728, H. C. A. Eyres to Earl Curzon of Kedleston, Durrës, July 7, 1921; *Ibid.*, FO 371/ 5731, Telegram of Pandeli Evangjelit to Eric Drummond, Secretary General of the League of Nations, Tirana, September 25, 1921.

<sup>31</sup> AQSH, F. 146, Y. 1920, D. 35, p. 20, Telegram of Marka Gjoni to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Belgrade, Prizren, July 17, 1920.

<sup>32</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 5728, British Military Attaché William Strang to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Belgrade, July 6, 1921; *Ibid.*, FO 371/ 5728, Telegram of W. Strang to F. O., Beograd, July 13, 1921.

<sup>33</sup> J. Tomes, *King Zog, self-made monarch of Albania*, 46.

<sup>34</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 5733, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durrës, October 30, 1921; *Ibid.*, FO 371/ 5732, Telegram of H. C. A. Eyres to Foreign Office, Durrës, October 31, 1921.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/ 5733, Colonel Liet. James M. Blair, Assistant Military Attaché to the British Legation in Belgrade, November 2, 1921.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/ 5733, Telegram of the British Prime Minister D. Lloyd George to Sir E. Drummond, Secretary-General of the League of Nations, Geneva, November 7, 1921; A. Mousset, *Shqipëria përballë Europës (1912-1929)*, 36.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/ 5735, Extracts of the Serbian newspapers attached to Sir A. Young’s report to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Belgrade, November 23, 1921.

<sup>38</sup> *Çëshija shqiptare në aktet ndërkombëtare pas Luftës I Botërore (1919-1926)* [The Albanian question in International acts after World War I (1919-1926)], vol. III, Arben Puto (ed.), (Tiranë: “albin”, 2001), doc. no. 39, 305–306, Declaration of the Governments of the British Empire, France, Italy and Japan concerning Albania, Paris, November 9, 1921.

Powers turned on the green light to the domination of Italian interests in Albania. The British Minister in Belgrade, A. Young, said that it was no longer a for occupation and that it was in the best interest of the Serbs to try to establish closer cooperation with the Albanian Government. The British diplomat saw this as a way of balancing to some extent what had been given to Italy at the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris.<sup>39</sup>

In early 1922, the Albanian Government was faced with the need to strengthen Albania's international position and encourage economic exchange with neighboring countries to bail the country out of its difficult political and economic situation.

In a resolution adopted on 2 October 1921, the Assembly of the League of Nations charged the Council of this organization by setting up an inquiry commission of three "impartial" members, with the task of going to Albania to oversee the implementation of the decision of the Great Powers (when the decision was made) and to investigate the internal problems and incidents on the borders of Albania, which it had to report to the Allied Powers. On 3 October 1921, the Council of the League of Nations decided that the inquiry commission should leave for Albania without delay.<sup>40</sup>

In April of 1922, the inquiry commission to the Council of the League of Nations<sup>41</sup> recommended to the Albanian Government to normalize its relations with neighboring countries. According to the experts of the League of Nations, the de-tensioning of Albania's relations with Italy could be facilitated by several factors. *First*, Italy was a major European power and a natural market suitable for Albanian agricultural and livestock products, due to the geographical proximity and high level of economic development of this European country. *Second*, Albania did not have an active maritime policy that would be influenced for the avoidance of conflicts of interest between the two countries. *Third*, in the southern part of Italy there lived an Arbëresh (Albanian) community, therefore, Italy would be interested in playing an important role in the future political, economic, and social developments of Albania.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Pranvera Teli (Dibra), *Shqipëria dhe diplomacia angleze 1919-1927* [Albania and English diplomacy 1919-1927], (Tiranë: Neraida, 2005), 190.

<sup>40</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 7329, A historical overview on the Albanian issue drafted by a member of the Council of the League of Nations, April 1922.

<sup>41</sup> The Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations enjoyed a great authority and sympathy among Albanians. In the report submitted by the Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations noted "the great moral authority and prestige enjoyed by the League of Nations in Albania". Moreover, all the members of this Commission expressed the opinion that "Albania owed its independence and its very political being to the League of Nations". (See: *Rapport à la Troisième Assemblée sur l'oeuvre du Conseil*, 3 Juillet 1922; A. Mousset, *Shqipëria përballë Europës (1912-1929)*, 38). The Lord President of the British Council Arthur Balfour would emphasize that "no organization or statesman could have reached such achievements in Albania as the League of Nations". (See: *Resumé mensuel des travaux de la Société des nations*, Mai 1922, 106).

<sup>42</sup> TNA, FO 371/7329, General report on Albania by the Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations, April 24, 1922.

Despite this recommendation, the Italian Government's relations with the Albanian nationalist group that took over the country's political leadership in 1920, remained tense since the "Vlora War" in 1920, when the Albanians routed the Italian troops. The signing of the protocol between the Albanian and Italian governments on 2 August 1920 was simply a symbol of the change in the tactics of Italy's foreign policy. What Italy had not managed to achieve through war in Albania, Italian diplomacy aimed to achieve through other "friendly" means.<sup>43</sup>

During the years covered by the study, there were a series of incidents between Albania and Italy, which due to the lack of space, cannot be part of this paper. Italy insisted on maintaining a contingent of military troops in northern Albania, controlling international telegraphic communication in Albania,<sup>44</sup> maintaining cooperation between Italian diplomats and military officers and the Albanian Catholic population of these areas, acting as supporters of the interests of this population, in order to play the same "game" as the Yugoslav Government had done with the Mirdita Uprising in 1921.<sup>45</sup> At the insistence of the Albanian Government in the League of Nations, on 11 April 1922, about 500 Italian troops left the city of Shkodra.<sup>46</sup> These incidents were transient and not so great, but the essence of the irritation between both sides was related to Italy's political intentions to maintain its presence in Albania. Through political, diplomatic and military pressure, the Italian Government tried to bypass and humiliate the legitimate Albanian Government.

The Albanian Government confirmed to the British Minister resident in Albania, Harry C. A. Eyres, that they had reliable data proving that the insurgent movement that took place in Albania in March of 1922 was a coup organized by the Italians. The Albanian Government was aware of the fact that some Albanian political figures, such as Hasan Prishtina, Bajram Curri, Monsignor Luigj Bumçi (a well-known figure of the Albanian Catholic clergy) and others, maintained close ties with Italian diplomats. The British diplomats in Albania as well as the international representatives in the Inquiry Commission to the Council of the League of Nations and in the Serbo-Albanian Border Commission said that for the Albanian Government and ordinary Albanians, it was clear who was behind the March 1922 uprising, given the fact that the above Albanian political leaders did not have adequate personal financial resources to take over the organization of such a large-scale uprising.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "The New Europe", in: *Nation*, London: August 26, 1920, p. 3.

<sup>44</sup> TNA, FO 371/7330, Narrative report of F. Giles, the British member at the International Boundary Commission between Albania and the SCS Kingdom for the period from 22 July to 9 September 1922, Camp near Struga, September 9, 1922; *Ibid.*, FO 371/8531, Report of the Secretary General of the League of Nations on the activity of the Inquiry Commission to the Council of the League of Nations for Albania for the period from June 1 to December 18, 1922, Geneva, January 6, 1923.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/7331, The British Minister H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durres, March 17, 1922.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/7331, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durres, April 15, 1922.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/7331, Telegram of H. C. A. Eyres to the Foreign Office, Durres, March 7, 1922; *Ibid.*, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durres, March 16, 1922; *Ibid.*, FO

Establishing relations between Albania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was one of the most sensitive and difficult issues to be resolved by the Albanian political elite. Maintaining a cold attitude by Albania toward the Yugoslav state could be justified by the difficult historical past between the two nations, the issue of Kosovo and other regions inhabited mostly by the ethnic Albanians, which were part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, as well as the demands of the Albanian people living in the Yugoslav state made to the Albanian Government to exert more influence on Belgrade for the protection of their national rights. However, the normalization of Albania's relations with the Yugoslav state dependent on several other important utilitarian factors. *First*, the Albanian state had most of the length of its border line with the Yugoslav state, where many problems that inevitably arose on both sides of the border had to be resolved. *Second*, a large number of ethnic Albanians lived within the borders of the Yugoslav state. Laying out their problems required maintaining an official line of communication with the Yugoslav Government. *Third*, the inhabitants of the northern parts of Albania were interested in easing the strained relations with the Yugoslav side, due to their blood ties with the inhabitants across the border as well as to traditional trade in the markets of the cities near the border on the Yugoslav side. For the above reasons, the League of Nations Inquiry Commission also asked the Albanian Government to start a dialogue with the Yugoslav Government.<sup>48</sup>

This undertaking on the part of the Albanian side was not so easy, given the fact that Albanian-Yugoslav relations during the previous years had had various fluctuations. In addition to the factors mentioned earlier, the Albanian political leaders were conditioned by several factors too, such as: the Italo-Yugoslav rivalry for political and economic domination in Albania, as well as the orientation of Albanian political groups in Albania in the foreign policy.

We emphasize that apparently it was the Albanian politicians who had the courage to take the first step to break the ice in Albanian-Yugoslav relations. The efforts of the Albanian state to establish diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes began in January of 1922.<sup>49</sup> The first step toward rapprochement between the two governments was taken by the ministers of foreign affairs of Albania, Spiro G. Koleka and Theofan (Fan) Stilian Noli.

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371/7330, Report of the British Commissioner Col. Liet. F. Giles on the events in the Commission for the Delimitation of the Serbo-Albanian Borders from 1 to 31 March 1922, Shkodra, March 31, 1922; *Ibid.*, FO 371/7329, General report on Albania submitted by the Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations, communicated by the British Cabinet Office, April 24, 1922; *Ibid.*, FO 371/8531, E. H. Shearme, the representative of the "Anglo-Persian Company" to the Board of Commerce, December 12, 1922; Albana Mema, "Situata në Shqipëri pas krizës së rëndë politike të vitit 1921 dhe kryengritjes së marsit 1922" [The situation in Albania after the severe political crisis of 1921 and the uprising of March 1922], *Studime Historike* [Historical Studies], 3–4, (2014), 145.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, FO 371/7329, General report on Albania by the Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations submitted to the Council of the League of Nations, April 24, 1922.

<sup>49</sup> P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918–1927*, 147.

On 27 January 1922, Foreign Minister Fan Noli sent a telegram to the minister of foreign affairs of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes on the occasion of King Alexander's marriage to Princess Maria, expressing hope that his congratulatory message would be the first step toward reaching an agreement between Albania and Yugoslavia.<sup>50</sup>

Interior Minister Ahmet Zogu, who was an important factor in the Albanian Government of Prime Minister Xhafer Ypi, thought that Albania should pursue a friendly policy with all the neighboring countries, including the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. He tried to avoid a confrontation with the pro-Italian Albanian political group. Foreign impartial observers stressed that the aim of A. Zogu, through the establishment of peace and good neighborly relations with neighboring countries, to create more opportunities for the Albanian Government to focus on resolving its internal problems and stabilizing the Albanian state. He had come to this conclusion after recognizing the strength of the pro-Italian group in Albania, their political intrigues, the lack of funds of the Albanian Government, the high unemployment and the deep dissatisfaction that prevailed among Albanians within the country, due to poverty and bad crops. For this reason, Western diplomatic sources said that even in domestic politics, A. Zogu, wanted the country to be governed through reconciliation rather than through the use of violent means.<sup>51</sup>

The group of Kosovo Albanian political leaders who acted in Albania led by Hasan Prishtina, Bajram Curri, and others, opponents of Ahmet Zogu, started a fierce political campaign against the latter, who at that time was the "backbone of the Albanian Government". From their point of view, since Ahmet Zogu was the brother-in-law of Ceno Bey Kryeziu (Ahmet Zogu's sister was the wife of Ceno Bey Kryeziu) and the latter had close ties with Serbian political circles, consequently A. Zogu also pursued a policy in favor of the Yugoslav state. According to the representatives of this group, most of the supporters of Ahmet Zogu were not interested in the liberation of Kosovo from Yugoslav domination.<sup>52</sup> For this reason, they demanded that the Albanian state should look away from Italy, as they believed that its support for the creation of a strong Albanian state was in fact a defense for Italy.<sup>53</sup>

In early 1922, Ferhat Bey Draga,<sup>54</sup> who worked for the Religion Ministry in Belgrade, came to Tirana with a mission to bring the two governments closer.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> TNA, FO 371/7331, Sir A. Young to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Belgrade, January 30, 1922.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., FO 371/8531, E. H. Shearme, Anglo-Persian Company Representative to the Board of Commerce, December 12, 1922.

<sup>52</sup> S. Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897–1942* [Political confrontations in Albania 1897-1942], (*Kujtime dhe vlerësime historike*) [Historical memories and assessments], përgatitur për botim nga Prof as. dr. Marenglen Verli [prepared for publication by Prof. assoc. dr. Maranglen Verli], (Tiranë: Vllamasi, 2012), 205.

<sup>53</sup> TNA, FO 371/8535, Secret information of S. I. S. of the Ministry of War to the Foreign Office based on the confidential report of Count Verney, the Hungarian Minister in Rome to his government, May 11, 1923.

<sup>54</sup> Ferhat Bej Draga (1880–1944) was an Albanian political activist, who worked for the national rights of the Albanian people in Kosovo, in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was the brother and collaborator of Nexhip Draga. In 1919, he helped his brother Nexhip, to establish the legal

Apparently, Ferhat Bey accepted this task driven by the opinion that the normalization of relations between the two countries would affect the improvement of the Yugoslav state's relations with the Kosovo Albanians. Yugoslav Prime Minister Nikola Pašić had tasked him with proposing an agreement with the government in Tirana based on two main points: 1. The creation of a confederation between the two states; 2. Signing of a joint Albanian-Yugoslav military convention. During his stay in Albania, Ferhat Bey was convinced that the Yugoslav Government did not have sufficient data on the political developments that had taken place in Albania. He had concluded that the Albanian Government was not as weak as Belgrade thought, public order was established throughout Albania, the establishment of Italian domination could not be easily accepted by the Albanians and that the leaders of the Albanian Government wanted to adhere to the neutrality of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. At the end of the visit, Ferhat Draga expressed his opinion to the British diplomat H. C. A. Eyres that "he was returning to Belgrade clear and at the same time happy, as he had seen that Albania was a much better country than he had thought". He also said that as soon as he went to Belgrade, he would recommend to Prime Minister Pašić the establishment of diplomatic relations with Albania.<sup>56</sup>

After receiving this information, the Yugoslav Government prepared to recognize officially the Albanian Government, but it abandoned this idea as soon as it was informed that Hasan Prishtina and Bajram Curri had begun preparations for an uprising, aimed at overthrowing the Albanian Government of Xhafer Ypi. After the success of the Albanian Government in suppressing the March Uprising of 1922, the Yugoslav Government and press showed a greater interest in the Albanian state. A British diplomat in Albania said that "the Serbian consul in Shkodra has suddenly changed his anti-Albanian attitude and is not so outspoken against Ahmet Zogu".<sup>57</sup> Yugoslav diplomacy also welcomed the Albanian Government's request to the Conference of Ambassadors for the full withdrawal of Italian troops from Albania.<sup>58</sup>

With a clear view, Yugoslav Foreign Minister Momčilo Ninčić managed to point out that the aim of the political group headed by A. Zogu in Albania was to avoid Italian domination in the country and establish good

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political organization "Xhemijeti"[ Dzemijeti] and through his other brother, Hajdin, secretly connected and cooperated with the Committee "National Defense of Kosovo" in Shkodra. After Nexhip's death, in 1921, Ferhat Bey Draga became the chairman of the "Xhemijeti". As the representative of the "Xhemijeti" in the Yugoslav Parliament, in the first half of the 1920s, he denounced the policy pursued by the Yugoslav state towards the Albanians. On the eve of the parliamentary elections of 1925 and 1927 there were attempts to liquidate him. Finally, he was imprisoned. (Taken from *Fjalor Enciklopedik Shqiptar* [Albanian Encyclopedic Dictionary], Vëllimi [Vol.] 1, botim i Akademisë së Shkencave të Shqipërisë [Published by the Academy of Sciences of Albania], (Tiranë: Kristalina-KH, 2008), 508.

<sup>55</sup> P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927*, 149.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, FO 371/7331, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durres, February 21, 1922.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Sir A. Young to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Belgrade, March 19, 1922.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

neighborly relations with the Yugoslav Government. For this reason, he backed down from the previous Yugoslav policy of support to the idea of inciting the population of Mirdita Province against the Albanian Government with the ultimate goal of achieving its political goals through Mirdita's Catholic inhabitants.<sup>59</sup>

In such an atmosphere, diplomatic relations were established between the two countries on 25 March 1922, with Nastas Ilić, the charge d'affaires of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, arriving in Durrës on 28 April 1922.<sup>60</sup>

After the arrival of the Yugoslav representative in Tirana, Yugoslav diplomacy took the advantage over Italian diplomacy in Albania. This was also caused by the completely opposite attitude of the Italian Government toward Albania. Instead of a foreign, wise, and far-sighted policy, with which Italy would win the friendship of the Albanians, she decided to pursue a policy of domination over Albania. The British Minister H. Eyres concluded that "seen from all points of view, it is unfortunate for this attitude, with which Italy is likely to harm itself more than Albania".<sup>61</sup>

The Yugoslav Government was ready to offer Albania every possible service. Due to its rivalry with Italy, Yugoslav politics was clear that a contrary attitude on its part strengthened the political and economic position of Italy in Albania. With the mediation of the Yugoslav diplomat resident in Albania, an Albanian telegraph line with Tivar (Bar) was established; The Tirana-Sarajevo-Belgrade postal service started operating; a shipping line was established between the two countries; It was decided to create a "Serbo-Albanian Bank" in Cetina, which would have branches in Shkodra and Durrës. The Yugoslav Government did not raise further complaints about border incidents. British Minister H. C. A. Eyres said that a bad Italian policy had enabled the Albanian Government to prove to Italy that Albania did not have "only one wire" on which to rely. Through a soft political line, the Yugoslav Government tried to take the position that Italy should have secured earlier in Albania. The agile policy pursued by Yugoslav diplomacy prompted the British Minister to ironically say that, after the arrival of the Yugoslav diplomat, N. Ilić in Albania, the latter "did not let the grass grow" in favor of Italy.<sup>62</sup>

To strengthen Albanian-Yugoslav relations, in June of 1922, the Albanian Government decided to send an official Albanian delegation led by General Ali Riza Kolonja, to attend the wedding of the Yugoslav King. The Yugoslav press published the announcement that the Yugoslav Government was negotiating the issue of signing a trade treaty with the Albanian Government.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., Sir A. Young to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Belgrade, March 21, 1922; P. Milo, *Shqipëria dhe Jugosllavia 1918-1927*, 150.

<sup>60</sup> TNA, FO 371/7331, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durrës, April 30, 1922.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., FO 371/7331, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durrës, May 15, 1922.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., FO 371/7331, Sir A. Young to the Earl Balfour, Belgrade, June 15, 1922.

As its consul in Durrës the Yugoslav Government appointed Dušan Drecun, who was considered a diplomat with a hardline position regarding Italy.<sup>64</sup> He also expressed interest in setting up a Serbo-Albanian Bank.<sup>65</sup>

In September of 1922, the diplomat Andrea Katundi was commissioned by the Albanian Government to open the headquarters of the Albanian legation in Belgrade. He would remain in charge of the Albanian diplomatic service in Belgrade until the arrival of the Albanian minister plenipotentiary, Ali Riza Kolonja.<sup>66</sup> Although Ali Riza Kolonja secured the approval of the Yugoslav Government, he failed to take over as the Albanian minister plenipotentiary in Belgrade because he had been under investigation by the Albanian Parliament regarding his actions as Albania's representative in the International Commission for the delimitation of the border between Albania and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. His political opponents accused him of "holding a pro-Serb stance" during the demarcation of the above border.<sup>67</sup>

Foreign observers found that during 1922, the Albanian Government had the opportunity to turn its back on Italy and move closer to the Yugoslav Government, as the Italian government's influence in Albania was at its lowest level. However, this did not happen. The main reason was that most members of the Albanian Government thought that if the Albanian Government followed this policy, Albania could be oppressed by Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Therefore, the Albanian political leaders did not want Albania to go from one extreme to the other in international relations, as they were clear that through diplomatic means and political pressure the Albanian Government would be forced to fall into the lap of the Yugoslavs.

The normalization of Albanian-Yugoslav relations provoked harsh criticism from opposition leaders in cooperation with the hardline Albanian nationalist wing. Responding to these criticisms, Ahmet Zogu stated that "the Albanian Government [of Xhafer Ypi] was neither Serbophile nor Italianophile but was only Albanianophile and this position or attitude could not change any country".<sup>68</sup> Italian Minister Durazzo also informed Rome that during a conversation with Ahmet Zogu the latter had emphasized that just like Italy, which did not forget its brethren in Fiume and Dalmatia, so Albania could not abandon its compatriots in Kosovo who were living under Serbian domination.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., FO 371/7331, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durres, June 15, 1922.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., FO 371/7331, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durres, June 22, 1922.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., FO 371/7331, H. C. A. Eyres to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Durres, September 7, 1922.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., FO 371/7331, Narrative report of the British Commissioner Col. Liet. J. Giles on the events in the International Boundary Commission from November 3 to December 11, 1922, Belgrade, December 12, 1922.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., FO 371/7330, Report of the British Col. Liet. J. Giles on the events in the International Boundary Commission from 1 to 31 May 1922, Shkodra, May 31, 1922.

<sup>69</sup> *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani* (hereinafter: DDI), Settima Serie: 1922-1935, vol. I, (31 ottobre 1922 – 26 aprile 1923), Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Commissione per la Pubblicazione dei Documenti Diplomatici, Ruggero Moscati, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato P.

Despite the normalization of bilateral relations, the leaders of the Yugoslav Government were wondering whether or not the new political climate with Albania was bringing it the benefits it expected. One of the problems that affected Albanian-Yugoslav relations during the years 1922-1923 was the demarcation of the borders between the two countries. After securing the approval of the border rectifications in its favor in the sectors of Dibra, Podgorica, and Prizren by the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris,<sup>70</sup> the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes intended to take over Saint Naum as well. The Yugoslav Government kept the country occupied, arguing that the territory was recognized by Serbia in 1913.<sup>71</sup> She also claimed that St. Naum and the surrounding villages should belong to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes because their inhabitants were ethnic Slav Christians.<sup>72</sup>

On 6 December 1922, the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris adopted a special resolution, which made it known to the International Borders Commission as well as to the Albanian and Yugoslav governments that the Conference had decided to give the territory of St. Naum to Albania.<sup>73</sup> The president of the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris, Raymond Poincaré, told the Yugoslav minister on 23 December 1922 that the Conference of Ambassadors had decided that St. Naum should remain in Albania.<sup>74</sup>

The Yugoslav Government did not accept this decision, claiming that St. Naum and the surrounding villages were inhabited by Serbs. It felt that the monastery of St. Naum was a religious shrine for the Serb nation. For this reason, the SCS Government refused to hand over St. Naum to the Albanian state, or submit to the decision of the Great Powers.<sup>75</sup> In this way, during 1922, the question of St. Naum remained unresolved.

Following the request of the Albanian Government in July of 1922 for the demarcation of the border line in the area of Vermosh, Yugoslav troops occupied this territory and refused to withdraw from there, using various pretexts, such as the need to use pastures by the inhabitants of the Kingdom of SCS

V. – Roma: 1953, doc. 78, pp. 42–43, Italian Minister Durazzo to the President of the Council and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mussolini, Durres, November 7, 1922.

<sup>70</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 7331, A. Young to the Marquis Curzon of Kedleston, Belgrade, January 30, 1922.

<sup>71</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 7327, Serbian Legation to the Foreign Office, London, August 12, 1922.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, Aide-Memoire of the Serbian Legation in London to the Foreign Office, London, August 29, 1922.

<sup>73</sup> *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX (1920-1924)* [History of Albanians during the twentieth century (1920-1924)], vëllimi [Vol.] II, (Tiranë: Botimet Albanologjike, 2019), 225; Arben Puto, *Historia diplomatike e çështjes shqiptare 1878-1926* (Tiranë: Dudaj, 2010), 337.

<sup>74</sup> *Shën Naumi dhe diplomacia e kohës* [St. Naum and the diplomacy of that time], trajtesë dhe dokumente të përgatitura nga [Treatment and documents prepared by] Prof. Dr. Kaliopi Naska, (Tiranë: Kristalina – KH, 2012), doc. no. 47, p. 127, Note of Raymond Poincaré, President of the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris to the Head of the Albanian Delegation at the Conference of Ambassadors, Paris, December 25, 1922.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, doc. no. 49, p. 129, The Prime Minister of Albania Ahmet Zogu to the Ministry of War, Tirana, January 22, 1923; *Ibid.*, doc. no. 50, p. 130; *Ibid.*, doc. no. 50, p. 130, The Prime Minister of Albania, Ahmet Zogu to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tirana, January 27, 1923; *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX...*, vol. II, 225.

in the areas near the border, the construction of the railway through this area, etc. In fact, the Yugoslav Government claimed that Vermoshi had been given to it as early as 1878 by the Congress of Berlin and in 1913 the Conference of Ambassadors in London left it within Albania, cutting off the Montenegrin tribes of Vasojević and Kuči going to Guci (Gusinje). In fact, the pastures of Vermosh were the mountains of Kelmendi, where this population had always grazed its cattle. The border of 1913, as it was, had left a large part of this province outside Albania. To verify the situation on the ground, during the months of June-July of 1922, the International Borders Commission went to Guci (Gusinje) and Vermosh and after hearing the interested parties concluded that Vermoshi should belong to Albania. This finding was fixed in the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris on 11 October 1922.<sup>76</sup>

The question of St. Naum entered a swirl of controversy between the Great Powers, especially between Great Britain and France over the establishment of hegemony in post-World War I Europe. In the autumn of 1922, British diplomats said that when the issue of St. Naum began to be discussed in the International Borders Commission, the Yugoslav representative did not, even for a moment, put forward any historical or religious arguments in defense of the thesis that St. Naum's monastery should belong to the Kingdom of SCS.<sup>77</sup> Lord Crewe, the British Ambassador in Paris, said that while the text of the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors of December of 1922 provided that St. Naum should be included into Albania and based on the conclusion of the experts of the Commission of the Albanian-Yugoslav Borders, the British Government had to notify the Conference of Ambassadors that it had reached the conclusion that St. Naum should go to the Albanian state.<sup>78</sup>

The French representative Laroche at the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris insisted on the reopening of the case of St. Naum. French diplomacy decided to withdraw from the decision of 6 December 1922.<sup>79</sup>

Xhemil Dino, the minister plenipotentiary of Albania in Paris, stated at the Conference of Ambassadors that Albania would not accept any other discussion regarding St. Naum or Vermoshi. It would no longer accept new mutilations of its territory. The Albanian Government claimed that otherwise it would not accept the new border with the Yugoslav state and would seek corrections for some territories that had been seceded from Albania in favor of the Kingdom of the SCS.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>76</sup> A. Mehmeti, *Diplomacia e Britanisë së Madhe në marrëdhëniet shqiptaro-jugosllave 1919–1939*, 149.

<sup>77</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 8532, Lord Crewe, the British representative at the Conference of Ambassadors to Foreign Office, Paris, May 31, 1923; *Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX*, vol. II, 225.

<sup>78</sup> TNA, FO 371/ 8532, Lord Crewe, the British representative at the Conference of Ambassadors to Foreign Office, Paris, 12 June 1923.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/ 8533, Rue D'Agnessean to Foreign Office, Paris, August 2, 1923; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar* [History of the Albanian People], vol. III, botim i Akademisë së Shkencave të Shqipërisë [Published by the Academy of Sciences of Albania], (Tiranë: Toena, 2007), 207.

<sup>80</sup> *Shën Naumi dhe diplomacia e kohës...*, doc. no. 95, pp. 223–224, Xhemil Dino, Plenipotentiary Minister of Albania in Paris to Raymond Poincaré, President of the Council and Minister of

Since neither side budged from its position on the case of St. Naum during the months of August-September, on 24 October 1923 it was concluded that the matter should be referred to the Committee of Jurists. The Conference of Ambassadors adopted the decision to invite experts in the field of law to express their views on the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors in London in 1913 and the decision of the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris on 9 November 1921. In this way, the year 1923 was closed without resolving either the issue of St. Naum or Vermoshi.<sup>81</sup>

Another issue that aggravated Albanian-Yugoslav relations in 1922-1923 was the case of the priest and the Orthodox Church in Shkodra, which was frequented by Slavic-speaking believers of Montenegrin origin. Before the proclamation of the Independence of Albania, this church had been part of the diocese of the Orthodox Diocese of Peja (Peć). After 1912, the archimandrite who had been in charge of this church left for Serbia. Shortly before this incident (1922), he was proclaimed bishop by the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate. Without prior consultation with the Albanian Government, the Yugoslav Government sent him as bishop of the Slavic-speaking Orthodox community of Shkodra. It took this action based on the argument that, in 1919 the Patriarchate of Istanbul had granted the right to the Orthodox Church of Shkodra to be under the jurisdiction of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate. The Orthodox Church in Shkodra passed unilaterally under the auspices of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate, although the believers of this church were Albanian citizens. In 1922, the Yugoslav Government decided to keep a Serbian Orthodox bishop outside the structure of the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (AOACH) in the Orthodox Church of Shkodra.<sup>82</sup>

On 21 February 1923, the Albanian Government protested to the Yugoslav Government and stated that it opposed this act, as it was contrary to the authority of the AOACH. To settle the dispute, the Albanian Government proposed that the Slavic bishop should obtain the permission of the head of AOACH to lead the Orthodox Church in Shkodra. The Albanian Government stated that any kind of appointment by another religious authority could not be made in the Albanian Orthodox churches, except by the head of AOACH officially recognized by the Albanian state. In these circumstances, the Albanian Government forced the Slavic priest to leave the Orthodox Church of Shkodra.<sup>83</sup>

Yugoslav Prime Minister Nikola Pašić threatened the Albanian Government saying that if it acted against the Orthodox Church in Shkodra and did

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Foreign Affairs of France, Paris, November 5, 1923; Paskal Milo, *Politika e Jashtme e Shqipërisë (1912-1939)* [Albania's Foreign Policy (1912-1939)], vëllimi i parë [First volume], (Tiranë: Toena, 2013), 559.

<sup>81</sup> TNA, FO 371/8534, Lord Crewe to Foreign Office, Paris, October 30, 1923.

<sup>82</sup> Beqir Meta, "Vështrim rreth kombëtarizimit dhe pavarësimit të Kishës Ortodokse (1920-1923)" [A look at the nationalization and independence of the Albanian Orthodox Church (1920-1923)], *Studime historike*, 1-2, (2012), published by the Institute of History at the Albanological Studies Academy, Tiranë, 71-99.

<sup>83</sup> AQSH, F. 163, Y. 1923, F. 46, p. 79, Note of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Albania to the Legation of the Serbian-Croatian-Slovenian Kingdom in Tirana, February 21, 1923.

not allow the Serbian priest appointed by the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate to preach the religion in the church, the Yugoslav Government would sever diplomatic relations with the Albanian state. The Yugoslav Government also raised the issue before the League of Nations.<sup>84</sup>

The issue of the Serbian Orthodox bishop in Shkodra aggravated Albanian-Yugoslav relations to the point that the diplomatic relations between the two countries could have been severed. The Albanian Government opposed the presence of a priest appointed by a non-Albanian religious authority in the church of Shkodra, considering the recent Yugoslav intervention as interference in the internal affairs of the Albanian state. It was concerned about the fact that, although at first glance this seemed like a religious issue, it could have political consequences, given the region and the environment in which the dispute took place. The Albanian Government supported the autonomy of the Albanian Orthodox Church and consequently its independence from the Yugoslav authorities. Its leaders demanded that the Albanian Autonomous Orthodox Church also to be based on the principle of its Balkan sisters: “An autocephalous church in a independent state”.

On the issue of the Serbian Orthodox bishop in Shkodra, the Albanian Government asked the Italian Government to intervene with moderation advice in Belgrade. Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini said that Italy should be careful and prevent the escalation of this dispute until an open conflict between Albania and Yugoslavia.<sup>85</sup>

The League of Nations recommended to the Albanian Government that this issue should be resolved amicably between the two governments.<sup>86</sup> In the face of Yugoslav pressure, which could call into question the official recognition of the Albanian state by one of the neighboring states, with which there should have been bridges of communication and cooperation on issues of mutual interest, the Albanian Government preferred its withdrawal from this issue. It was declared that it would allow the Serbian priest to perform personally the religious ceremonies, but without official status, until a final decision would be taken by the League of Nations.<sup>87</sup> In fact, this was a quiet withdrawal of the Albanian Government, aimed at finding a suitable solution to this issue by the two neighboring countries.

However, as a result of the de-tensioning of the political situation of the Albanian Government with the Yugoslav Government, during most of 1923, a kind of “detente” was created in Albanian-Yugoslav relations. The Yugoslav

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<sup>84</sup> TNA, FO 371/8536, Telegram of H. C. A. Eyres to Foreign Office, Durres, April 8, 1923.

<sup>85</sup> *DDI*, Settima Serie: 1922-1935, vol. I, (31 ottobre 1922 - 26 aprile 1923)..., doc. 684, pp. 483-484, President of the Council and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mussolini to the Italian Ambassadors in Paris, Romano Avezzana, in London, Della Torretta and Italian Ministers Negrotto Cambiaso in Belgrade and Durazzo in Durres, Rome, April 6, 1923.

<sup>86</sup> TNA, FO 371/8536, Alexander Cadogan to the French Ambassador, Count de Saint-Aulaire, F. O., May 29, 1923.

<sup>87</sup> AQSH, F. 152, Y. 1923, F. 27, pp. 61-62, Letter of the Minister of Internal Affairs of Albania to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tirana, June 12, 1923.

Government allowed residents of the provinces along Albania's northeastern border to go to their traditional markets in Gjakova [Đakovica] and Prizren. Every day, about 50 horses loaded with goods and products passed through each of the border crossings between the two states. The Yugoslav authorities even allowed the Albanian Government to purchase food products for its military troops in the area.<sup>88</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Looking at the development of Albanian-Yugoslav relations during the years 1922-1923, it can be concluded that the normalization of Albania's relations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was a difficult political move for the Albanian Government, but it was in the best interests of both parties. Taking this political step had a positive effect on the internal stability of the Albanian state, as it avoided to some extent external risks to the Albanian state and calmed down the tense internal situation especially along the northern borders of Albania. The de-escalation of Albania's relations with the Yugoslav state created some communication space for Albanians on both sides of the border, as well as enabling the Albanian Government to communicate directly with the Yugoslav Government about the rights of its compatriots within the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In the wide perspective, pursuing a policy of normalizing relations with neighboring countries could limit the grounds for the unilateral strengthening of the Italian influence in Albania.

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, FO 371/8534, The narrative report of the British Commissioner Col. Liet. J. Giles at the International Boundary Commission for the events that took place from July 11 to August 31, 1923, Prizren, August 31, 1923.

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SALI KADRIA, PhD, Researcher

Institute of History, Albanological Studies Academy of Tirana

Tirana, Republic of Albania

kadriasali@gmail.com

## A VIEW ON ALBANIAN-YUGOSLAV RELATIONS DURING 1922-1923

### *Summary*

In the early 1920s, establishing relations between the Albanian Government and the government of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was a necessity, but it was also one of the most sensitive and difficult issues to be resolved by the Albanian political elite. The normalization of these relations was seen by a considerable part of the Albanians as an abandonment of the interests of their Albanian compatriots living in Kosovo and other areas in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The Albanian state's efforts to establish diplomatic relations with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slo-

venes began in January of 1922. Ahmet Zogu, a prominent political figure in the government of Prime Minister Xhafer Ypi, thought that through the establishment of peace and good neighborly relations with neighboring countries, the Albanian Government would benefit more, as it would have the opportunity to focus on solving internal problems in Albania. On the Yugoslav side, Foreign Minister Momčilo Ninčić and Nastas Ilić, the chargé d'affaires of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in Albania, were among the first who understood clearly that the aim of the Albanian political group led by Ahmet Zogu at this time was avoiding Italian domination in the country and the establishment of good neighborly relations with the Yugoslav Government. As a result, during most of 1923, a kind of “detente” was established in Albanian-Yugoslav relations. The de-escalation of tension between the two countries was in the best interests of both sides, but this affected the internal stabilization of the Albanian state.

**KEYWORDS:** Albania, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Italy, Italian-Yugoslav Rivalry, Commission of Inquiry to the Council of the League of Nations