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The Balkan Entente in Turkish–Yugoslav relations (1934–41): the Yugoslav perspective

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Most of the works written in Turkey on the formation of the Balkan Entente in 1934 and its effects on the region reflect the Turkish perspective. This perspective intended to glorify the role of Turkey, by emphasizing how Ankara initiated such a pact and was able to convince other Balkan countries to participate in its establishment. In other words, the Turkish perspective underlined how Ankara's policy was driven not by self-interest, but by the interests of all Balkan countries during the formation of the Balkan Entente.¹ However, in other Balkan countries, there exist more nuanced views of the Balkan Entente and the Turkish role in its formation. When Italy attacked Greece in 1940, Athens insisted that Turkey should have come to the help of Greece under the obligations of the Balkan Entente. Turkey defended itself by pointing out that Greece included a reservation in the text of the entente that ruled out declaration of war on Italy under any condition.² But what is less known is that Yugoslavia criticized Turkey's reluctance to consider its obligations when Germany invaded Belgrade in 1941 in an attack that originated from Bulgarian territory. Therefore, this article analyzes Turkish–Yugoslav relations within the Balkan Entente based mainly on Yugoslav archival documents and aims to provide an alternative narrative that contests the conventional Turkish view.

The Balkan Entente was signed in February 1934 between Turkey, Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania. By signing the document, these countries declared their guarantee of mutual security over the Balkan frontiers. The entente was to protect the Balkan frontiers against any attack from within. Bulgaria was the country in question, as it did not want to become a member. Since Bulgaria aimed first to annex the territories that it had lost during the First World War, it refused to collaborate with other Balkan states.³ Two of the Balkan Entente countries, Turkey and Yugoslavia, had the same concern about a potential Bulgarian collaboration with Italy in an attack on their territories. Thus, the minor power Bulgaria could reach its goal with the support of Mussolini's revisionist Italy. Not only Bulgaria had territorial aspirations on Macedonia, but also Italy on Dalmatia.⁴ As far as Turkey was concerned, Bulgaria's aim of securing an outlet in the Aegean could have served Italy, which had already acquired the Dodecanese Islands in the south.

Thus, after its formation, the leaders of the four countries believed that the Balkan Entente was to guarantee security against any revisionist demands over the Balkans. To be precise, the Turkish political leadership believed that an attack might come on the

Balkans over the northern Yugoslav border.⁵ Therefore, Turkey concluded separate military accords with Yugoslavia and Romania, according to which each of the parties would declare war to help the other in the event of a Balkan attack, with or without the support of any other country. In other words, these accords reinforced the security dimension of Turkish–Yugoslav relations. In fact, Romanian Foreign Minister Nicolae Titulescu stated that Yugoslavia and Romania had to ‘ratify immediately’ the entente because they were now ‘confident in Turkey’ and convinced that military conventions would strengthen the bond.⁶ Yugoslavia and Turkey ratified the Balkan Entente in June and October 1934, respectively.

The Balkan Entente was positively received by the Turkish press. It was perceived as an agreement that would confront all kinds of aggression. It was to protect the borders and peace. It was even seen as one of the most important documents signed since the First World War, forming the basis for peace, not only on the Balkans, but also in all of Europe. The Turkish public opinion was disappointed by the absence of Bulgaria in the Balkan Entente and wished for its participation.⁷ The participation of Bulgaria in the Entente was also one of the major topics in Yugoslav public debate at that time. It was believed that the entente would bear few, if any, results without Bulgaria. Yugoslav Foreign Minister Bogoljub Jevtić declared that they had done everything possible to convince Bulgaria to be part, but that they could not do so by force. The Yugoslav King Alexander addressed concerns about the topic and argued that, thanks to the Balkan Entente, there would be no war on the Balkans.⁸

Even though the political leaders in Turkey and Yugoslavia became more optimistic about the future of the region after having signed the Balkan Entente, these two countries did not always have overlapping concerns. Changing governments and leaders pursued different agendas. Moreover, the priorities of the two countries differed based on the rapidly changing conditions in Europe. Consequently, their perception of threat changed over time. In other words, the Balkan countries, including Turkey and Yugoslavia, could not feel sufficiently secure within a regional entente during the increasing instability in Europe.

In the beginning, Turkey and Yugoslavia had joined their forces in order to resist the Italian expansionist policy. When Mussolini came to power in Italy, he claimed Fiume/Rijeka, a coastal city in Yugoslavia, and forced Belgrade to recognize Italy’s sovereignty over the city in 1924. Similarly, Turkey was concerned about the Italian military presence along its Aegean border, on the Dodecanese islands. Furthermore, a decade later, in March 1934, Turkey and Yugoslavia were shaken by two events. The first was a speech by Benito Mussolini stating Italy’s intention on expansion in Asia and Africa and the need for some countries to be armed. This speech influenced the Turkish government to accord greater significance to the rearmament of its military and to pass laws to this end in the Turkish parliament in 1934.⁹ Since there was no military agreement between the four countries of the Balkan Entente, Ankara believed that it could not rely solely on the defensive nature of the entente and that it had to make additional efforts towards strengthening its military potential.

The second event was the signing of the Rome Protocols between Italy, Austria, and Hungary. Shortly after the signing of the protocols, Mussolini made a declaration supporting Hungarian territorial ambitions on the Balkans. Yugoslavia was the first Balkan Entente country in their path after Austria, and Hungary seemed to have been wooed by Italy’s

promises in the Rome Protocols.¹⁰ Therefore, Yugoslavia reacted very negatively to the Rome Protocols due to its fear of a hostile encirclement around its borders and of a possible restoration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹¹ In fact, Turkish Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras visited the Yugoslav ambassador in Vienna to receive first-hand information on an anti-Yugoslav propaganda campaign launched by Hungary.¹²

Another indication of Turkey's support to Yugoslavia came after the assassination of King Alexander on 9 October 1934. Immediately after the king's death, Atatürk declared that Turkey was ready to send its troops to the Turkish–Bulgarian border in order to demonstrate its readiness to stop potential Bulgarian interference in the situation in Yugoslavia.¹³ King Alexander's death did not have an abrupt negative effect, neither on the firmness of the Balkan Entente, nor on Turkish–Yugoslav relations. However, it opened a way for future prime ministers to set their own direction in Yugoslavia's foreign affairs, owing to the fact that Regent Prince Paul was less authoritarian in leading the country. Thus, Milan Stojadinović, who became prime minister on 24 June 1935, was oriented towards a rapprochement with Bulgaria and Italy. This move gradually undermined the Balkan Entente.

From 1935 onwards, Turkey and Bulgaria accused each other of concentrating troops on their shared border.¹⁴ Under these circumstances, Turkey was not only holding its regular annual military manoeuvres in Thrace, but also modernizing its army.¹⁵ For instance, on 12 October 1935, the Yugoslav Foreign Minister was informed that, in Turkey, there was 'a strong movement aimed at not letting Bulgaria have access to the Aegean Sea and reclaiming the whole of Thrace'. According to the Yugoslav report, Bulgarian military officers 'realized that the only way in which Bulgaria would gain access to the Aegean Sea and recover Thrace was through friendship with Yugoslavia'. For that reason, 'all officers in Bulgaria, regardless of their political affiliations, wished a sincere rapprochement with Yugoslavia'.¹⁶

However, the Yugoslav legation in Ankara interpreted these manoeuvres as being defensive in character and against any possible attack coming from the Bulgarian–Turkish border.¹⁷ Turkey placed new orders of war materials from countries such as Germany and Czechoslovakia. These Turkish efforts also reflected Ankara's concern, because of the Italian military presence on the Dodecanese Islands and aggression towards Abyssinia. In fact, concerning the imposition of sanctions against Italy during the Italian–Abyssinian War (1935–36), there was full unanimity between the Yugoslav and Turkish governments, as well as the governments of other member states of the Balkan Entente, as the Yugoslav envoy reported.¹⁸ Regarding the Italian policy in the region, the priority of Turkey was to remilitarize the Straits, and this intention was openly declared at the League of Nations in November 1935 and again in April 1936. This Turkish move was supported by the Yugoslav delegation that 'wholeheartedly advocated' Turkish control over the Straits at the Montreux Conference in July 1936. Yugoslav support of Turkey could be interpreted as solidarity among the Balkan Entente countries, which was bringing 'concrete results' to its member states. Shortly thereafter, during Stojadinović's visit to Ankara, a Turkish communiqué emphasized 'identification of interests and a total unanimity of views in all questions'.¹⁹

Stojadinović wrote that, in November 1936, he and the Turkish leaders agreed on the main principles for the future direction of their bilateral relations that were keeping them away from the conflicts among the great powers and from ideological fronts. Another

principle was encouraging solidarity between the four Balkan countries for maintaining peace in this part of Europe. At the same time, Stojadinović stated that he was able to secure the Turkish leaders' acceptance of a possible Bulgarian–Yugoslav agreement, and this seemed to him 'the biggest success' of his visit to Turkey.²⁰ Stojadinović's statement proves that he was already preparing the ground for a Bulgarian–Yugoslav agreement. There is no further evidence that Turkey accepted such an initiative. The Turkish leaders, however, could have talked with Stojadinović about the possibility of a Yugoslav initiative to convince the Bulgarians to come to an agreement with all the Balkan Entente countries. The Yugoslav move towards Bulgaria was one of the events that demonstrated Yugoslavia's insecurity and exposed the instability of the Balkan Entente, which reacted only in words to this Yugoslav double play.

It was clear that, although Turkish and Yugoslav diplomats expressed their sincerity and their resolve to assure peace on the Balkans, the Yugoslav government was pursuing a double policy and wished to be as close as it could possibly be to both the Balkan Entente countries and to its obvious enemies, Italy and Bulgaria.²¹ After the signing of the *Treaty of Eternal Friendship* with Bulgaria in January 1937, Yugoslavia tried to further secure its international position by consolidating its relations with the Balkan Entente, in case the treaty with Bulgaria failed. However, by signing agreements with Yugoslavia's uneasy neighbours, Stojadinović damaged the fragile Balkan Entente and the relations among its member countries.²² Stojadinović's government had also gradually started to change Yugoslav pro-French policy by shifting relations with Germany and Italy, in addition to other smaller countries in the neighbourhood, which were regarded as enemies, but needed to be appeased.²³

Belgrade apparently did not trust the Balkan Entente and the Little Entente as guarantees against Germany's and Italy's expansionist tendencies. In March 1937, Yugoslavia signed the Treaty of Friendship with Italy. The Italian intention to undermine the Balkan Entente was combined with Stojadinović's wish to continue his policy of appeasing Yugoslavia's neighbours with a series of agreements, to the detriment of the Balkan Entente.²⁴ Although Stojadinović claimed that these treaties would not compromise Yugoslav responsibilities towards the Balkan Entente, other Balkan Entente countries considered these treaties as contrary to the aims of the entente because Yugoslavia had signed treaties with revisionist countries.²⁵ These Yugoslav agreements can be viewed as the first signs of weakness of the Balkan Entente, from which it could not recover in the following years when the political tensions in Europe further increased. A pact based solely on mutual trust, without a military component, resisted for less than three years (February 1934–January 1937) before being undermined by Yugoslavia. And the dark pre-war years were still to come.

The Turkish legation in Belgrade closely followed Stojadinović's diplomatic actions and the effects of his policies on the stability of the Balkan Entente.²⁶ The Yugoslav treaties undoubtedly worried Turkey and prompted the Belgrade visit of Prime Minister İnönü and Foreign Minister Aras in April 1937.²⁷ The aim of their visit was to renew the weakened trust between Turkey and Yugoslavia. Even though Turkish and Yugoslav diplomats assured the Yugoslav press that there was no risk of dissolution or weakening of the Balkan Entente, the diplomatic situation remained as tense as it had been before.

The double policy implemented by Stojadinović continued with his visits to Italy in December 1937 and to Germany in January 1938. He was greeted extremely cordially in

both countries. In Italy, he accepted to 'work against the spreading of German influence towards the Adriatic and the Danube basin'. In Berlin, Stojadinović declared to Hitler that Yugoslavia would not enter into alliances directed against Germany. These visits further eroded the credibility of Yugoslavia as a member of the Balkan Entente.²⁸ During the same year, in June 1937, German Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath visited Yugoslavia, on which occasion Stojadinović expressed Yugoslav friendship towards Germany and stated that Yugoslavia 'could not and would not' come to Czechoslovakia's help in the case of German aggression.²⁹ Stojadinović's promise to Germany concerning Czechoslovakia was a sign of Belgrade's denial of the mutual defence agreement with this country based on the Little Entente.³⁰

Overall, the friendly visit of Neurath was viewed negatively in other Balkan countries and as a sign of Yugoslavia's pro-German rather than pro-Balkan Entente attitude. The pro-Axis tendencies of Belgrade did not reflect the views of all Yugoslav political leaders and the public, who were generally pro-French and anti-German. In general, most of the Serbian political leaders, who followed the policies of the late king, thought that Stojadinović's pro-Axis policy was too radical and against the 'natural' leanings of the Serbian foreign policy – for example, its leaning towards France.³¹ Stojadinović, who did not want to confront other countries, travelled to Paris in 1937 to renew the treaty of friendship with France, under which Paris did not assume any obligation to secure Yugoslavia from aggression.

The Turkish political leadership, although not in the same way as the Yugoslav one, was also oscillating from one side to another because of the rapidly changing balance of power in Europe. On the one hand, Turkey was feeling strongly threatened by the Italian military presence, but at the same time it was gradually falling under German economic domination by signing clearing agreements, as did other Balkan states.³² On the other hand, its relations with Britain were improving since London signed the Montreux Convention in 1936. Ankara–Paris interactions were not yet settled due to the Hatay issue, despite the British efforts to ameliorate this situation. An indication of Turkey's inclination to keep all its options open can be found in Aras's statement to the Yugoslav envoy in December 1937. Aras said that the Balkan Entente served its purpose well, but that it was 'still mainly ideological' and that, 'if it ceased to exist for some reason, that would not be a loss for Turkey', because the resulting 'void would be automatically filled with the Greek–Turkish pact which came into existence before the Balkan Entente; and the former fused into the latter, not to perish in it but to rise again the moment the Balkan Entente disappeared'.³³ This statement can also be seen as Turkish precaution, its contingency plan for a future action in the case the Balkan Entente proved faulty or failed. And Yugoslavia had its agreements with Bulgaria and Italy as plan B, in the case the entente failed. At this time, the entente already turned into a broken shell of a pact, which had to be replaced with other plans. Since both Turkey and Yugoslavia were making contingency plans, the leaders of these countries were already convinced that relying solely on the Balkan Entente would not guarantee their security. Yugoslavia had signed agreements with Bulgaria and Italy, against which the entente was actually formed. Turkey ameliorated its relations with Britain after London's acceptance of Montreux. Yet, representatives of the Balkan Entente countries continued to meet, despite plan B conceived of by some of the countries. In fact, they thought that all options should remain open.

As a reaction to the Yugoslav agreements with Bulgaria and Italy, Turkey came to a special agreement with another Balkan Entente country, Greece.³⁴ The Yugoslav envoy commented that Greece and Turkey had common interests in the Aegean Sea and in Thrace, as well as common enemies: Italy with its fortifications on the Dodecanese Islands, and Bulgaria with its pretensions on the Thracian corridor. Moreover, they were concerned because of a possible establishment of a South Slav bloc on the Balkans. The Greek ambassador said that the Bulgarian–Yugoslav agreement ‘sparked uneasiness’, but that Stojadinović ‘cleared the situation’ by saying that the Balkan Entente was above the Bulgarian–Yugoslav agreement in order of importance. Nevertheless, the mentioned agreement had been remembered as ‘inconvenient’.³⁵ Aras stated his hope to the Yugoslav envoy that the additional Greek–Turkish agreement ‘could serve as a model to other members of the Balkan agreement, here including Bulgaria, too’.³⁶ But the earlier Yugoslav agreement with Bulgaria was still viewed negatively.

Having in mind the Anschluss, Aras said to the Yugoslav envoy that ‘certain conditions in Central Europe evolved faster than it could have been presumed and their repercussions could have an effect on all Balkan countries. To make the Balkan Entente an adequate buffer, it should be reinforced from the outside and from the inside: from the outside through the inclusion of Bulgaria; and from the inside by enhancing precise mutual obligations’. Interestingly enough, Aras was also warning the Yugoslav envoy by stating that ‘Turkey is exposed to possible surprises only indirectly, [and] it leaves the initiative to those who are directly exposed to possible repercussions, but with the readiness to accept the initiative and help’. Here, Yugoslavia constituted probably the one country that was ‘exposed to possible repercussions’. Aras also added that ‘all sides [of the Balkan Entente] are free in their actions, but a mutual guarantee of integrity and military cooperation supersedes everything in case of need’.³⁷

Accordingly, the Permanent Council of the Balkan Entente was held in Athens in February 1937 and ratified military conventions concluded in November 1936. These conventions eased the tensions between the Balkan Entente countries, because they entailed a military cooperation in the case of a Bulgarian attack on one of the members of the Balkan Entente.³⁸ Moreover, there were reciprocal military visits between Turkey and Yugoslavia. While the Chief of the Yugoslav General Staff, General Milutin Nedić, was present during the annual Turkish military manoeuvres in Thrace in August 1937, Turkish Chief of Staff Marshal Fevzi Çakmak attended the Yugoslav military manoeuvres in September of the same year.³⁹ According to the Yugoslav envoy, Çakmak had ‘the best impressions’ about the Yugoslav military and hospitality.⁴⁰ However, neither Çakmak’s impressions nor the praises of the Yugoslav military readiness coming from the Turkish press reflected reality. The Yugoslav army was in poor condition; it had only a few armoured or mechanized units and was thus incapable of successfully defending itself in the event of an Axis attack.⁴¹

Çakmak’s visit to the Yugoslav military manoeuvres was followed by the Yugoslav War and Navy Minister Ljubomir Marić’s visit to Turkey in May 1938, which included an extensive inspection of Turkey’s military power, including its army, navy, arms factories, and so on.⁴² During this visit, Aras told Marić that it was in the interest of Turkey for Yugoslavia to be ‘as strong as possible because the only serious attack on Turkey comes through the Balkans’. He also said that Turkey did not expect ‘any active help’; instead, passive help was enough – that is, ‘for a strong Yugoslavia to stop the intrusion of other nations into the Balkans by its very existence’. The Yugoslav military attaché in Turkey throughout his

report on Marić's visit never missed the chance to compare the words of Turkish officials with the Yugoslav information on the state of the Turkish army and arms factories. Identifying discrepancies, he wrote that some Turkish military numbers concerning their industrial capacity were exaggerated, as well as the capacity of the factories to meet Turkish military needs.⁴³

Nevertheless, such Turkish–Yugoslav military cooperation demonstrated their self-confidence and possible self-reliance when it came to handling the Axis threat. Furthermore, during the meeting between the Turkish Foreign Ministry Secretary General, Numan Menemencioglu, and the Greek and Yugoslav envoys in September 1937, Menemencioglu stated that in the wake of the troubling situation in Europe, the Balkan Entente countries 'had to take into account only their own interests' and cooperate in all matters, while at the same time not allowing Britain and France to 'use' smaller countries, as they had done in the matter of sanctions against Italy, and 'then to leave them on their own again'.⁴⁴

The Balkan Entente countries wished to prevent Bulgaria from falling under the influence of the Axis and collaborating with them to remove the status quo on the Balkans. Since the Entente members were unsuccessful in their attempts to draw Bulgaria into their alliance, they resorted to another solution, which was to sign an agreement that would give Bulgaria some concessions in exchange for its neutral stance vis-à-vis its neighbours. This deal demanded that the Entente countries disregard the fact that Bulgaria was rearming itself and accept the view that Bulgaria alone could not threaten the Entente, as long as its members were united in their actions. The signing of the military alliance in Athens in February 1937 was one of the facts that emboldened them in their attitude.

Thus came about the Thessaloniki Accord (or Salonika Agreement), signed in July 1938 between Bulgaria and the Balkan Entente. With this agreement, Bulgaria rid itself of the arms restrictions that had been placed on it by the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine in November 1919; furthermore, Bulgaria was allowed to re-militarize the demilitarized zone on its border with Greece and Turkey. In exchange, Bulgaria committed itself to a policy of non-aggression toward its neighbours.⁴⁵ The Yugoslav chargé d'affaires in Ankara reported that 'the entire Turkish press received with great pleasure' the news of the signing of the accord and called it 'the first step in the orientation of Bulgaria towards the Balkan Agreement and a prelude to an effective cooperation among Balkan countries'.⁴⁶ Yet, just a few months later, on 14 November 1938, Turkish Foreign Minister Saracoğlu did not forget to tell the Yugoslav envoy that 'the foreign policy of Turkey remains unchanged'; he emphasized that the Balkan Entente 'presents an important fact on which the Turkish foreign policy is relying' and wanted Yugoslav leaders to know that.⁴⁷

In February 1939, the Balkan Entente countries during their conference in Bucharest made the statement that they must follow a policy of mutual defence without firm support from the British or French and proclaim neutrality towards great alliances.⁴⁸ This statement coincided with the fall of Stojadinović from power as a consequence of his political party's poor results in the December 1938 elections. Furthermore, the radical shift that he had made in Yugoslavia's foreign policy and the strengthening of his position as both prime minister and foreign minister were obvious reasons for Prince Paul's decision to remove him from his post. Dragiša Cvetković replaced him as the new prime minister, and Aleksandar Cincar-Marković became the new foreign minister.

Cincar-Marković was a former envoy to Berlin and a very prudent diplomat loyal to Prince Paul. German comments showed that their plans for Yugoslavia were hindered by

the fall of Stojadinović, whereas the Cvetković administration tried to remain neutral and distanced to both blocs. In fact, Yugoslavia proclaimed its neutrality during the German invasion of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and the Italian occupation of Albania in April 1939, and demonstrated its will to respect good relations with the Axis. Immediately following these events, Cincar-Marković visited Italy and Germany to make sure of their peaceful intentions towards Yugoslavia, which was staying out of the war.⁴⁹

Caution became the most prominent feature of the new Yugoslav foreign policy. When the Anglo-Turkish declaration was signed in May 1939, Yugoslavia's view was that Turkey had violated the Balkan Entente because it had signed a treaty without the consent of the signatories of the entente. Cincar-Marković feared that the Axis would be encouraged by the fact that the Entente now abandoned its policy of neutrality, and he held Turkey responsible for breaking the neutral policy set out by the member countries.⁵⁰ During Prince Paul's and Cincar-Marković's visit to Germany in May 1939, they declined Hitler's wish that they sign the Anti-Comintern Pact and that Yugoslavia leave the League of Nations. Also, they refused to sign a statement of friendship towards Germany.

Prince Paul only then realized that a Yugoslav programme of rearmament was badly needed. Reciprocal visits of their armies' chiefs of staff during the previous year were misleading, making them overconfident in their capacity to confront the superior armies of the Axis. In July 1939, Germany demanded that Yugoslavia leave the Entente, which Belgrade refused to do. Yugoslavia then tried to bring Bulgaria into the Entente; however, this effort failed.⁵¹ Therefore, the Entente was then still a guarantee of security on the Balkans, and even though Germany tried to dismantle it before acting more radically, Yugoslavia believed that a united Balkan alliance with Bulgaria would ameliorate their position.

After the German invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Italian occupation of Albania, Turkey's permanent concern for its own security and the security of the Balkans became especially strong.⁵² The Italian entry into the Balkans was the incentive for Turkey to step into action.⁵³ For instance, Saracoğlu confirmed to the Yugoslav envoy that the fall of Albania was the reason for the Turkish abandonment of the policy of neutrality and the move towards the 'front of peace'.⁵⁴ According to a Yugoslav report written in May 1939, Turkish troops were at that time concentrated in Thrace and on the Dardanelles and were involved in a large mobilization of reserves. Yugoslav diplomats attentively followed the events during the coordination of the defense of Thrace and reported that these activities did not include other Balkan Entente members, but only Greece.⁵⁵ Turkey, in fact, was already putting into effect its plan B.

Turkish–Yugoslav relations became less sincere after the British–Turkish Declaration of Mutual Assistance on 12 May 1939, because Yugoslavia did not approve of the Turkish rapprochement with Britain and France. According to Yugoslav reports, with this declaration, Turkish foreign policy changed its course from 'a principled neutrality' to an inclination towards 'the democratic belt' and 'appeared on the international diplomatic field in its new role of the British representative in the Mediterranean'.⁵⁶ The reason for this Yugoslav stance was that Germany and Italy might have considered Yugoslavia leaning towards Britain and France as well. After all, its ally from the Balkan Entente was now tied to clear enemies of German and Italian interests on the Balkans. Although the Yugoslav government expressed its dissatisfaction to Turkey through diplomatic means, Turkey had no intention of changing its attitude.⁵⁷ The Yugoslav agreement with Bulgaria in January

1937 had shaken the Entente, and Turkey's agreement with the Allies had damaged it irreversibly.

A Yugoslav report from that time states that Turkey was demonstrating understanding and trust towards Yugoslavia and its position, 'but that was not stopping the Turkish press' from writing about the Yugoslav foreign policy 'from a certain high position, giving advice in the tone of a much older brother to a younger brother, which exactly matches the tone of self-confidence which was reigning in the Turkish circles' after the British–Turkish Declaration.⁵⁸ It was as if the declaration had helped Turkey to regain its confidence that had been shaken by the lack of security stemming from the weakened Entente. Nevertheless, Turkey was trying to convince Yugoslavia that its attitude toward Britain and France was not compromising the Yugoslav 'wish to maintain neutrality under all circumstances' and responded with Prime Minister Refik Saydam's statement in the Turkish parliament, in which he strongly emphasized Turkish neutrality.⁵⁹

A Yugoslav report stated that, after the signing of the declaration, 'the attitude of Turkey towards Bulgaria remained unchanged: Turkey is ready to plead for the accession—but an unconditional one—of Bulgaria to the Balkan Entente, but at the same time it is prepared to most vigorously stop any Bulgarian attempt to cause a violent change of Balkan borders with the help of other forces'.⁶⁰ The report stated that seven Turkish divisions on the Bulgarian border clearly attested to this Turkish intention and also had the task of stopping the Italian penetration into Thrace. Within this context, Saracoğlu said to the Yugoslav envoy that the Balkan Entente guaranteed the borders of its members only from a Bulgarian attack, and that it was needed to ensure guarantees against all other possible attackers.⁶¹ He also added that Yugoslav neutrality would have helped the independence of the Balkans in the face of the Axis danger, 'but Germany knows that too and this is why, when the time comes, it will not respect that neutrality which is tying its hands'. İnönü also pointed out to the Yugoslav envoy that the Axis danger could have been avoided 'only if these powers know that the Balkan Entente is firm'.⁶²

Just before the war spread into the Mediterranean, the Yugoslav government wanted to be informed about the position of Ankara concerning Balkan security before the Axis threat. Saracoğlu replied that Turkey was faithful to the decisions of the Balkan Entente Permanent Council meeting in Belgrade, 'concerning solidarity in the case of an attack on the Balkans and military collaboration'.⁶³ According to him, a preparation of military plans for the Balkan Entente was imperative, with or without its political counterparts. The Turkish government deemed it necessary to conclude military agreements, because 'without them, the political agreements would have no real value'. Therefore, Turkey insisted on an urgent meeting of the general staffs of the Balkan Entente members in Athens. At the same time, Saracoğlu declared that Turkey was 'ready to take upon itself the responsibility of defending Yugoslavia in all cases of an attack through Yugoslavia',⁶⁴ under the condition that Yugoslavia did the same.

Concerning the question of an attack on the Balkans through Yugoslavia and Turkey, the Yugoslav ambassador called Saracoğlu's answers 'conditional'. The ambassador commented that it looked as if the Turkish government was setting a condition for Yugoslavia to defend Turkey from an attack through the Balkans, or from any other side, but that Turkey would unlikely defend Yugoslavia, even if it accepted this Turkish condition. He based his assumptions on the words of Saracoğlu, who mentioned that, during the preparation of the Tripartite Agreement, the Turkish security zone included only Bulgaria. It seemed to

him that Turkey was ready to 'let Yugoslavia fall' and enter the war when the enemies reached the Bulgarian–Turkish and Greek–Turkish borders. The ambassador also concluded that Turkey wanted Yugoslavia 'to accept military talks, and then Turkey would have precisely declared its political position in all possible contingencies'.⁶⁵

When Ankara received new information on the movements of German troops in Romania towards the Yugoslav and Bulgarian borders in January 1941, it instructed the Turkish ambassador in Belgrade to be 'in permanent contact' with the Yugoslav foreign minister, to 'exchange information and to consult him on the attitude of Yugoslavia'.⁶⁶ After having talks in Belgrade, the Turkish ambassador reported to Saracoğlu that Yugoslavia was extending its 'policy of extreme caution'.⁶⁷ Yugoslav Regent Prince Paul considered such an attitude a provocation towards Germany and a good excuse for the Germans to invade the Balkans.⁶⁸ But Turkey was still waiting for a Yugoslav response to the following question: 'If Germany attacks Greece through Bulgaria, will Yugoslavia mobilize and step into action against the attackers?'⁶⁹ The Yugoslav ambassador viewed the Turkish position as contradictory: 'On one side sternness, precision and insistence when it comes to the suggestion of the Turkish government to us, and on the other side impreciseness and a certain calmness when the German attack on Greece through Bulgaria is in question, as well as hesitance in the question of infiltration'.⁷⁰

In February 1941, Saracoğlu was still pressuring Yugoslavia to confirm that there was a danger for both countries and to agree on a common action. He also said that it was 'impossible' to explain what the Turkish intentions were before Yugoslavia gave a response, because the actions would be different with or without Yugoslav collaboration. The British and the Greek ambassadors told the Yugoslav ambassador that the question of Yugoslav collaboration was important for the Turkish decision as to whether to take action – then Turkey would be prepared to have 'military combinations which would refute the rumors about the strictly defensive character of Turkish military intentions'.⁷¹ Yet, Yugoslavia did not want to incite German reaction with its cooperation with other Balkan countries.

However, once German troops entered Bulgaria, Saracoğlu expressed his fear that it was too late for mutual activity. He thought that Germany 'would be able to finish up every single country on the Balkans'.⁷² Under these conditions, Saracoğlu did not immediately want to respond to Yugoslav questions about establishing 'full trust, especially considering military plans and intentions of Turkey and its allies'.⁷³ This gave the impression that he did not give the same importance to permanent diplomatic cooperation as he had done before. Additionally, two events – Yugoslavia joining the Tripartite Pact (25 March 1941) and a pro-Allied coup d'état in Yugoslavia two days later – changed the course of events. This time the efforts by Yugoslavia and its military mission to Turkey towards a possible Turkish–Yugoslav cooperation intensified unsuccessfully. A few days after the German invasion of Yugoslavia on 6 April 1941, Saracoğlu also commented that Turkey had wished for a mutual action with Yugoslavia, but that after the aggression on Yugoslavia it was too late.⁷⁴

Yugoslav Foreign Minister Momčilo Ninčić insisted on Turkish action according to the above-mentioned 1934 Turkish–Yugoslav military convention.⁷⁵ Turkey refused the Yugoslav demand of intervention, stating that this bilateral military convention was an annex of the Balkan Entente and that one could invoke it only if they had the right to invoke the Balkan Entente; this right belonged to the signatories only under the condition that all of

its signatories respected the Entente's obligations. Romania officially proclaimed that the Entente had lost its value. Yugoslavia had signed the Tripartite Pact and therefore automatically come into a position of being in pact with Bulgaria, and that was contrary to Article 2 of the Entente. Therefore, the Yugoslav ambassador reported that Yugoslavia had dismissed the principles of the Entente that it was now invoking.⁷⁶

The members of the Balkan Entente, especially Yugoslavia and Turkey, did not feel that the Entente had guaranteed full security to its members as early as in 1937, and the additional military conventions did not help in the way in which they were supposed to. The Entente was dismantled not through military aggression, but through the agreements, which its members signed with other countries. This did not stop them from referring to the entente in their relations up until 1941, when it became as inappropriate as the comment in the paragraph above states: 'Yugoslavia had dismissed the principles of the pact that it was now invoking.'⁷⁷

Finally, when comparing Turkey and Yugoslavia with respect to their position towards the Balkan Entente, one can draw the following conclusions: Turkey's Balkan Entente policy formed a precursor to its neutrality policy during the Second World War. Ankara saw the entente as a means of deterrence to stay away from the war. When the Turkish political leadership was faced with war, they signed the Tripartite Alliance with Britain and France in October 1939 in order to be on the safe side. In order not to become involved in the war, Turkey avoided coming to the help of Yugoslavia, even though it signed a military agreement with this country. Indeed, it managed to stay out of the war. As for Yugoslavia, even though it resisted being drawn into the war the longest of the other two member states, it was invaded by Germany in 1941. Because of its geographic proximity to the Axis powers, Yugoslavia was more vulnerable in comparison to Turkey. Yet, Stojadinović's pro-Axis policy had prepared the ground for this vulnerability. Yugoslavia, in contrast to Turkey, already in 1937 started not seeing the Balkan Entente as a factor of deterrence. On the eve of the German invasion of Yugoslavia, Belgrade referred to Turkey, a member of the Balkan Entente with which it had signed a military agreement, as a last resort in the face of impending disaster.

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Notes

1. Among these works are İ. Soysal, 'Balkan Paktı', in Y. Yücel (ed.), *Ord. Prof. Yusuf Hikmet Bayur'a Armağan* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1985) and B. Ertem, 'Atatürk'ün Balkan Politikası ve Atatürk Döneminde Türkiye Balkan Devletleri İlişkileri', *Akademik Bakış Dergisi*, Vol.21 (2010).
2. İ. Soysal (ed.), *Türkiye'nin Siyasal Andlaşmaları* (Ankara Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1983), p.458.

3. D. Barlas and S. Güvenç, *Turkey in the Mediterranean During the Interwar Era* (Bloomington: Indiana University Turkish Studies Series, 2010), p.144.
4. M. Türkeş, 'The Balkan Pact and Its Immediate Implications for the Balkan States, 1930–34', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.30 (1994), p.140.
5. H. Öksüz, 'The Reflections of the Balkan Pact in Turkish and European Public Opinion', in *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies, Annual*, Vol.11 (İstanbul: Bigart, 2006), p.165.
6. AY (The Archives of Yugoslavia), Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-43-212, 7 May 1934.
7. N. Uzman, 'Balkan Paktı ve Basındaki Yansımaları', in *Yedinci Uluslararası Atatürk Kongresi*, Vol.II (Ankara: Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, 2015), pp.1270–72.
8. Uzman, pp.1278–80.
9. Consequently, the budget of the Turkish Ministry for National Defense for 1935/36 was 10,000,000 Turkish Lira more than it had been in the previous year: AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-3-190, 370-3-191, 4 Jan. 1936.
10. M. Radojević, 'Predgovor', in N. Petrović (ed.), *Izveštaji Ministarstva inostranih poslova Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1935* (Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2011), pp.V–VI, XIII–XIV. Italy obliged itself to help the economic development of Hungary and Austria through economic cooperation and implied that it would support their political aspirations against other countries, for example, Hungarian aspirations against Yugoslavia. In his above-mentioned speech, Mussolini explicitly supported Hungarian aspirations. As for Austria, Mussolini promised to defend its sovereignty against German aspirations.
11. M. Ristović, 'Predgovor', in N. Petrović and J. Đurišić (eds.), *Izveštaji Ministarstva inostranih poslova Kraljevine Jugoslavije za 1934. Godinu* (Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2010), p.IX.
12. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Arşivleri, A. IV-6, D. 54, F. 78.
13. Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske zemlje i velike sile 1935–1937* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1968), p.21; M. Ristović, *Turska osmatračnica. Jugoslovensko-turski odnosi u Drugom svetskom ratu i njihov balkanski kontekst* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa; Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2013), p.22.
14. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-3-8, 370-3-9, 3 April 1935; 370-3-19, 370-3-20, 12 April 1935.
15. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-3-562, 16 Aug. 1936; 370-3-212, 3 Sep. 1936; 370-3-604, 3 Sep. 1937; S. Derinçgil, *Turkish Foreign Policy During the Second World War: An 'Active' Neutrality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.32, 36.
16. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-3-28, 12 Oct. 1935.
17. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-3-562, 16 Aug. 1936; 370-3-212, 3 Sep. 1936.
18. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-3-190, 4 Jan. 1936.
19. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-14-374.
20. M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt. Jugoslavija između dva rata* (Rijeka: Otokar Keršovani, 1970), pp.389–90, 397–402.
21. A. Özgiray, 'Türkiye-Yugoslavya İlişkileri (1920–1938)', *Tarih İncelemeleri Dergisi*, Vol. XIV (1999), pp.21–2.
22. A. Životić, 'Predgovor', in N. Petrović (ed.), *Izveštaji Ministarstva inostranih poslova Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1937* (Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2013), pp.XI–XII, XIX–XX.
23. M. Radojević, 'Predgovor', in N. Petrović (ed.), *Izveštaji Ministarstva inostranih poslova Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1935* (Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2011), p.XIV.
24. E. Boia, *Romania's Diplomatic Relations with Yugoslavia in the Interwar Period, 1919–1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.217–18.
25. E.S. Değerli, 'Balkan Pact and Turkey', *Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi – The Journal of International Social Research*, Vol.2 (2009), p.144; Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske zemlje i velike sile 1935–1937* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1968), pp. 309–17.

26. This can be concluded from the reports sent by the Turkish legation in Belgrade to Ankara, which included transcripts of Stojadinović's speeches held in 1936 and 1937: BCA (Turkey's Prime Minister's Reublican Archives), BMGM, No.30.10.0.0/252.701.5, 3 April 1936; 30.10.0.0/253.702.5, 21 July 1936; 30.10.0.0/253.703.3, 17 Feb. 1937.
27. M. L. van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy: The Balkan Clue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp.75–7; M. Ristović, *Turska osmatračnica. Jugoslovensko-turski odnosi u Drugom svet-skom ratu i njihov balkanski kontekst* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa; Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2013), p.30.
28. M. Radojević, 'Predgovor', in J. Đurišić (ed.), *Izveštaji Ministarstva inostranih poslova Kraljevine Jugoslavije 1938* (Belgrade: Arhiv Jugoslavije, 2014), pp.IX–X; E. Boia, *Romania's Diplomatic Relations with Yugoslavia in the Interwar Period, 1919–1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp.225, 232–3.
29. Boia, pp.218–19.
30. The Little Entente was a mutual defense arrangement between Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania, based on several treaties (1920–21). In fact, it aimed at the protection of the members' territorial integrity and political independence against German and Hungarian domination.
31. Boia, pp.220–21.
32. D. Barlas, *Etatism & Diplomacy in Turkey* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp.146–55.
33. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-43-581, 19 Jan. 1938.
34. After Greek Prime Minister Metaxas's visit to Ankara in October 1937 and again in February 1938, Bayar and Aras went to Athens on 27 April 1938 to sign the Additional Treaty to the Treaty of Friendship, Neutrality, Conciliation and Arbitration (signed on 30 Oct. 1930) and to the Pact of Cordial Friendship (14 Sep. 1933): AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-9, 5 March 1938; 370-4-20, 7 May 1938.
35. Ibid.
36. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-20, 5 May 1938.
37. Ibid.
38. Životić, pp.XVIII–XIX. The agreement was signed by the chiefs of general staff of the Balkan Entente countries in November 1936 and confirmed in Athens in February 1937 as a military agreement intended to expand the Balkan Entente with (until then non-existent) military obligations.
39. BCA, BMGM, No.30.10.0.0/252.703.13, 21 Aug. 1937; 30.18.1.2/78.74.9, 26 Aug. 1937; 30.18.1.2/78.78.6, 10 Sep. 1937.
40. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-7-628, 20 Oct. 1937.
41. Z. Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.120.
42. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-24, 1 June 1938; No.370-8-7, 13 June 1938; *Ayin Tarihi*, Basın Genel Direktörlüğü, No.54 (May 1938), pp.136–43.
43. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-8-9, 370-8-10, 370-8-11, 370-8-12, 370-8-13, 370-8-14, 370-8-15, 370-8-16, 370-8-17, 13 June 1938; *Ayin Tarihi*, pp.136–43.
44. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-43-549, 8 Sep. 1937.
45. G. Schreiber, B. Stegemann, and D. Vogel, *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol III: *The Mediterranean, South-East Europe, and North Africa 1939–1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 375.
46. The process of ratification of the agreement in the Entente members' parliaments lasted until February 1939: AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-44, 370-4-45, 1 Sep. 1938; 370-43-653, 25 Feb. 1939.

47. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-8-52, 14 Nov. 1938.
48. Boia, pp. 255–6.
49. Boia, p.259.
50. Boia, p.261. It was as if he had forgotten that his predecessor Stojadinović had also endangered the entente by doing in 1937 the same thing that Turkey did two years later.
51. Boia, pp.262–3.
52. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-489, no date; M.L. van Creveld, *Hitler's Strategy: The Balkan Clue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp.75–7; Ristović, p.30.
53. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-410, 3 June 1939; 370-4-439, no date; 370-4-654, 8 July 1939.
54. The Archives of Yugoslavia, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-489, no date.
55. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-613, 370-4-614, 370-4-615 and No.370-4-651.
56. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-408, 370-4-409, 3 June 1939.
57. N. Tamkin, *Britain, Turkey and the Soviet Union, 1940–1945: Strategy, Diplomacy and Intelligence in Eastern Mediterranean* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.33; Ristović, pp.24–5.
58. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-4-411, 3 June 1939.
59. AY, Fond No.370-4-415, 5 July 1939.
60. AY, Fond No.370-4-411, 3 June 1939.
61. AY, Fond No.370-4-489, 370-4-490, no date.
62. Ibid.
63. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-8-342, 19 May 1940; 370-8-343, 370-8-344, 21 May 1940.
64. Whether from Italy, from Germany, or from Italy and Germany together.
65. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-8-343, 370-8-344, 370-8-345, 21 May 1940.
66. AY, Fond No.370-8-432, 13 Jan. 1936.
67. AY, Fond No.370-8-483, 370-8-484, 24 Jan. 1941.
68. H. Knoll, *Jugoslawien in Strategie und Politik der Alliierten 1940–1943* (München: Oldenburg Verlag, 1986), pp.78–9; L. Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1962), pp.130-31; Ristović, p.36.
69. Creveld, p.122; Ristović, pp.35–7.
70. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-8-492, 370-8-493, 370-8-494, 1 Feb. 1941.
71. AY, Fond No.370-8-531, 25 Feb. 1941. M. Ristović, *Turska osmatračnica. Jugoslovensko-turski odnosi u Drugom svetskom ratu i njihov balkanski kontekst* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa – Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2013), pp.40–41.
72. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-8-549, 370-8-550, 3 March 1941.
73. Ibid.
74. AY, Fond No.370-8-640, 9 April 1941; 370-8-597, 4 April 1941; 370-8-598, 6 April 1941; 370-8-643, 10 April 1941; Ristović, 43.
75. AY, Fond No.370, Legation of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Turkey – Constantinople, Ankara, document No.370-8-643, 10 April 1941.
76. AY, Fond No.370-8-652, 14 April 1941.
77. Ibid.