

Beginnings of Czechoslovak-Albanian Relations

The representation of Czechoslovakia evaluated Albania as the country of great opportunities because of the mineral resources and the good geographic position

by Genc Mlloja
SENIOR DIPLOMATIC EDITOR

In an exclusive interview with Albanian Daily News, Mr. Matej Krepinsky, a second year student of master's degree of South-Eastern European Studies at Charles University in Prague with specialization in Albanology, reveals details on the beginnings and development of Czechoslovak-Albanian relations since 1922 until 1939.

Mr. Krepinsky's findings show the high level of economic and trade exchanges between Czechoslovakia and Albania and Prague's interest to increase its presence in this Balkan country. Everything is set in the background of the developments in the Balkans and interests of specific countries in the period between the First and Second World Wars. He gave a comprehensive lecture on the beginnings of the relations between Czechoslovakia and Albania at the time of Ahmet Zog's ruling at the Tirana University a few days ago speaking fluently Albanian.

"The Department of Political Affairs at the Foreign Ministry in Prague considered Albania as a country with interesting opportunities for Czechoslovakia, especially in the economic and trade fields," noted the Czech researcher in Albanology, Matej Krepinsky in the following interview:

- In the first place, could you say a few words on how has your interest in Albania, its language and history arisen?

- Everything started at the Balkan Desk of the Philological Faculty at Charles University in Prague where I chose to study the program of the Balkan studies being specialized on Albanian matters. Since my studies in the middle school I was interested

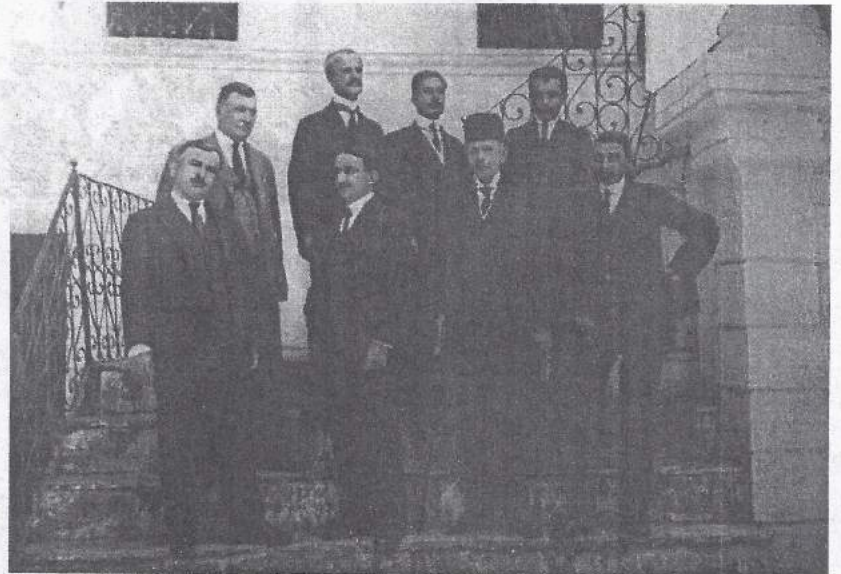
in history and geography in general. So to study a region with such an interesting and also complicated history was something attractive for me.

- You were in Tirana where you gave a comprehensive lecture on the beginnings of the relations between Czechoslovakia, and Albania at the time of Ahmet Zog's ruling at the Tirana University a few days ago. In your view, which was the main interest of Czechoslovakia to develop relations with Albania?

- Firstly, we should determine the beginnings of the relations between Czechoslovakia, and Albania. Czechoslovakia, which was founded on October 28, 1918 after the breakup of Austria-Hungary, started gradually to establish diplomatic relations with other countries among which was Albania at a later stage. The contacts started on July 5, 1922 when Prague established diplomatic relations with Tirana. That was made possible after Albania obtained the status of an independent and sovereign state following the First World War in the Conference of Peace in Paris in 1921.

The Department of Political Affairs at the Foreign Ministry in Prague considered Albania as a country with interesting opportunities for Czechoslovakia, especially in the economic and trade fields. For this reason it proposed the immediate opening of the diplomatic mission in the Albanian state to protect the economic interests of Prague in face of the increase of competition by the other states.

- Which are some of the highlights of the diplomatic moves of Prague to extend



Nov. 1920, First cabinet of Iljaz Vrioni (front row, wearing fez)

the relations with Albania following the establishment of diplomatic ties on July 5, 1922?

- The first step was the opening of the first diplomatic mission of Czechoslovakia on April 1, 1925 in Tirana as a consulate. It operated in such a status until 1929 when the government of Prague adopted a decision to upgrade the representation to the level of the embassy headed by a charge d'affaires. At the same time, in December 1925, the provisional trade agreement between Prague and Tirana was adopted.

Besides the Embassy in Tirana, since 1929 two honorary consulates started to function in the country - in Shkodra and Korca. The representation in Tirana proposed to the Foreign Ministry in Prague their creation because Czechoslovakia had its trade interests in those towns. But the state of communication at that time in Albania prevented diplomats from travelling often from Tirana to Shkodra and Korca. The Trade Ministry in Prague accepted the proposal on the opening of the consulates, especially the one in Shkodra, planning the increase of trade contacts between the two states. So the creation of the honorary Consulate in northern Albania was adopted by the Czechoslovak government

in February of 1929 and was opened in the same year. The honorary Consulate in the southeastern Albania, that is in Korca, started its work in August 1929.

- How much was Albania known in Prague at that time, and what efforts its government undertook to make Czechoslovakia known in Albania?

- The society in general in Prague did not have much knowledge on Albania, but there were some persons who dealt in depth with its history and politics. For example, the first Councilor of Czechoslovakia to Tirana, Josef Miloslav Kadlec published a small book entitled "Today's Albania" and later other studies on the economy, diplomatic history and political situation of Albania.

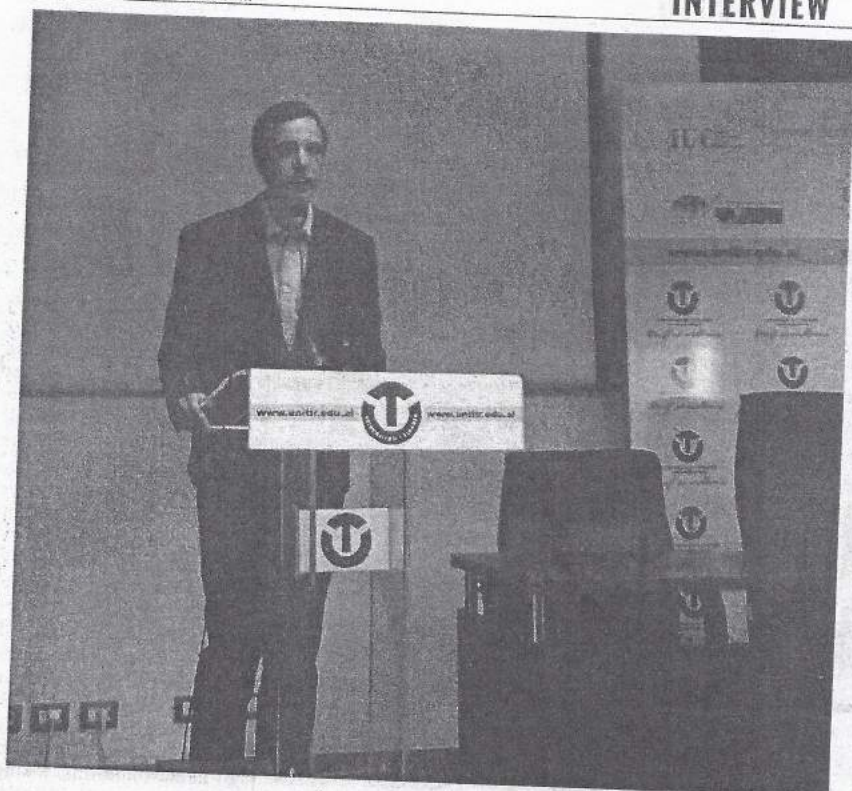
On the contrary, Czechoslovakia was considered by Albanian political circles as well as the society as an ally of Serbs. Some Albanians, who were known at that time as exponents of Belgrade in Tirana, helped even the Czech mission to support Prague's interests in Albania. Among these persons was the minister, Musa Juka thanks to whom a Czechoslovak surgeon was appointed as chief of the hospital of Shkodra, something which, according to the diplomatic mission;

was important to increase the position of Prague in Albania.

In general, the relations between the two states were considered as good and friendly. Moreover, in a report of 1931 the charge d'affaires, Lev Vokac commented on the good name of Czechoslovakia in the Albanian society. According to him, this fact could be linked with the import of good quality goods from Czechoslovakia. But probably that could be influenced by the memories of Albanians on the Austro-Hungarian rule during the First World War, when the Czech soldiers deployed in Albania won popularity among the local people. Also, during all the diplomatic receptions in the Royal Court, Zog I expressed sympathy for Czechoslovakia and its representatives and showed interest in the internal affairs of the country.

- Why was Albania politically an attraction of the Czechoslovak diplomacy at that time and in this frame can you please describe the political situation in the region in that period?

- In the year 1921 the alliance between Prague, Belgrade and Bucharest was created which was known as the Little Entente. These three countries joined forces against the revisionist efforts of Hungary after the signing of



Matej Krepinsky

the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. So the interests of Czechoslovakia in Albania influenced in the alliance between Prague and Belgrade. The indirect political interest for the support of the position of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in Tirana added to the economic interest which was against the expansionist influence of the fascist Italy.

- As a follow up, how much interested was Albania and King Zog to develop these relations?

- Zog I showed interest for the good relations with Prague mainly due to the intensive trade exchanges and the further development of the economic activities of Czechoslovakia in Albania. However, after the opening of the Consulate in Tirana the Albanian government did not have such a positive attitude towards the Czechoslovak mission because Zog was displeased by the form of representation. According to a remark by the charge d'affaires, Kadlec at that time the level of representation was not considered as a mutual question in Albania but showed the interest of a state towards Albania. And Czechoslovakia was the only state which had a Consulate in Tirana.

As I have mentioned this was solved after the upgrading of the Consulate to the

level of Embassy in 1929. After this the charge d'affaires, Bedrich Nechutny informed Prague in 1937 that the King spoke on the deepening of the relations between the two countries at all levels expressing deep sympathy for Czechoslovakia.

- According to your findings, which was the extent of the economic interest of Czechoslovakia in Albania, and which economic fields were its priority and how much attractive were the Czech goods in Albania?

- In the economic and trade field, the Consulate and later the Embassy of Czechoslovakia in Tirana were very active led by the profit interest. But some diplomatic reports mention also the fact that Prague's action in this field could help Yugoslavia to reduce the Italian presence in Albania. Besides this, the situation was more delicate due to some peculiarities of the then Albanian market. Particularly, the mission mentions the massive corruption.

Irrespective of this fact, the Czechoslovak representation achieved some successes. The Embassy tried to secure electricity for big Albanian cities through the Czechoslovak company Ceskomoravska Kolben-Danek. The power project was implemented in Durres, where the first elec-

tric central was constructed in this city by that company.

The representation of Czechoslovakia evaluated Albania as the country of great opportunities because of the mineral resources and the good geographic position. So it proposed to Prague some steps for the intensification of the economic and trade activities, for example the construction of a warehouse in Durres together with a textile factory which would use Albanian wool. Also, it proposed the participation in the timber concession.

During the time between the two wars the trade relations continued to grow although the selling of the Czechoslovak goods had to face the competition of Hungary. Also Japan was mentioned in the case of the selling of textiles which, according to the embassy, were less qualitative as compared with the Czechoslovak ones, but were cheaper. In general the Czechoslovakia goods had a good reputation in Albania thanks to their quality winning a strong position in the Albanian market.

- How much did Italy prevent the expansion of the economic presence of Czechoslovakia in Albania at that time?

Naturally, Italy saw the presence of Czechoslovakia

and its economic activity in Albania with displeasure because of the connections between Prague and Belgrade, which was the rival of Rome in the Adriatic region. For Italians the simple presence of the consulate between 1925 and 1929 facilitated their steps against the economic and trade activities of Czechoslovakia. There was a lack of a direct contact between Kadlec with Ahmet Zog, who did not want to negotiate directly with diplomats of such a low rank.

The Czechoslovak diplomats were conscious that trade and economic activities would become more difficult with the increase of the influence of Rome. Evidence of this was the electrification case because besides Durres Czechoslovakia was interested to win the concession of the electrification of Tirana, Kavaja, Saranda and Shkodra. But with the increase of the influence of Italy, the prepared contracts were revoked by the Albanian side and the Italian company Societa elettrica albanese anonima won most of the concessions.

After the signing of the first Pact of Tirana in 1926 and the second one a year later, the mission informed Prague that due to the Italian steps it was almost impossible and dangerous from the profit point of view for Czechoslovakia to continue the economic activities and investments in Albania. In 1930 charge d'affaires Kadlec proposed disengagement of Prague in the economic field in Albania and suggested only the development of trade relations which were much intensive and successful.

- Besides the general 'good and friendly' assessment of the bilateral relations, were there diplomatic disagreements between Prague and Tirana and if yes which was their source?

- Yes, there were some cases in the 1929-1936 period when the reputation of Czechoslovakia was harmed in Albania, although not to the extreme. For example, in January 1929, the Ministry in Prague was informed that the Foreign Minister, Iljaz Vrioni had received a letter from a Slovak where the secession of Slovakia from Czechoslovakia was proclaimed. But before meeting Kadlec to clarify

the matter, Vrioni informed Zog and other politicians on that letter. Later, Vrioni met the Czechoslovak charge d'affaires explaining that the letter for the secession of Slovakia was a mystification. So Vrioni asked apologies to Kadlec and promised to explain the situation to the Royal office.

The worst most serious deterioration of the Czechoslovak position happened in January 1936 with regard to the marriage of Princess Sanjija, Zog's sister, with Mehmet Abid, who was the son of the former Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Turkey asked the other states of the Balkan Entente - Romania, Greece and Yugoslavia not to send their ambassadors to the ceremony as a sign of not approving this move. Charge d'affaires of Czechoslovakia Vlastimil Cermak showed solidarity with the Balkan Entente boycotting the marriage ceremony. Zog was very displeased by the action of the diplomats of the Balkan Entente and particularly with Czechoslovakia, which did not have any connections with the problem between Turkey and Ottoman dynasty.

- According to your study, why did the Czech diplomacy support more Belgrade than Tirana during the 1926-1939 period?

- The most important reason was that Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were allies in the frame of the Little Entente. So Prague was interested to support Belgrade even in Albania against the penetration of fascist Italy in this part of the Balkans. That would threaten the southern border of Prague's ally. Another reason was geographic because Czechoslovakia focused mainly on the situation in the Central Europe.

- In conclusion, can the status of the relations between the two countries at that time be considered as a positive element for the future relations between Czechoslovakia and Albania?

- Yes, particularly the economic contacts and the trade exchanges, which were considered as successful regardless of the rising influence of Rome. Afterwards, that is after the Second World War, they became the core of the bilateral relations.