

## ROMANIA'S INVOLVEMENT IN BALKAN POLICY DURING THE GREAT WAR. THE ITALIAN ARMY IN THE PINDUS MOUNTAINS

**ABSTRACT:**In the mid-nineteenth century, the young Romanian state becomes more and more interested in the existing Aromanian communities within the Ottoman Empire which they considered part of its Romanian spirit. Through church and school, the authorities in Bucharest were trying to preserve the ethno-cultural identity of these Romanian of the south of the Danube, subject to an assimilation process specific to modern times. Nationalism promoted by political power in an expansionist purpose, led to disputes between the Bulgarian, Greek, Serbian or Romanian people, transforming the Balkans into a field of ethnic conflicts. In the context of the Great War, these divergent nationalist formulas, increased by the Italian military intervention in the area, will develop into an internal struggle during the summer of 1917. Many villages from the Pindus Mountains will try to proclaimate a sort of territorial autonomy, an attempt which will be soon crushed by the Greek royal army. Interested in protecting Aromanian communities from the area, the Romanian Kingdom has tried to stabilize the situation using a soft diplomacy in the region.

**Keywords:** Balkans, Romanian foreign policy, Aromanians, Epirus, Italian army, Pindus Mountains.

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In the mid-19th century, the young Romanian State became ever more interested in the communities of Aromanians from the Ottoman Empire, considered to be part of the pool of Romanianness in the Balkans. Through the church and the school institutions, the authorities in Bucharest attempted to preserve the ethnocultural identity of these “Romanians from the south of the Danube,” who were subject to a process of assimilation, characteristic of modern times. At the beginning of the 20th century, the nationalism promoted by the political power holders, the expansionist projects, the influence of the Great Powers, which were interested in the area, transformed the Balkans into a field of ethnic conflicts.

Romania, the only state that did not have a common border with the Ottoman Empire, proposed a policy of intervention in the region, which was aimed at the protection and the cultural and spiritual preservation of the Aromanian communities, known at the time as Macedo-Romanians. During the reign of Carol I the interest of the Romanian Kingdom in the Balkan Romanity witnessed its peak. There are historical interpretations arguing that the attention the Romanian authorities granted the Aromanian populations had been strategically directed and encouraged by Austria-Hungary, which was keen to redirect the Romanian foreign policy and public opinion away from the increasingly uncomfortable Transylvanian “irredenta” and towards the much farther and utopian horizon, in the view of some, of Balkan

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Romanianism.<sup>2</sup> Others explained Romania's intervention through the territorial advantages it would have benefited from thanks to its involvement (Silistra), while yet others noted that the young kingdom north of Danube wanted to dominate the Balkans by capitalising on the Aromanian issue.<sup>3</sup> Even if this assumption is justified as regards a section of the political elite in Bucharest, there prevailed a disinterested perspective at this political level which sought to ensure, at the height of a romantic age, the cultural-national renaissance of the "brothers south of the Danube." The Romanian cultural effort in the Balkans was eventually initiated by a number of personalities of Aromanian origin, who had immigrated to the space north of the Danube and who had managed, in the course of time, to hold key positions both in the state apparatus (Anastasiu Panu, Alexandru Diamandi, Eugeniu Carada, Tache Ionescu, Gheorghe Manu) and in the cultural and economic life (Ioan Kalinderu, Ioan Caragiani, Dimitrie Cozacovici, Menelau Ghermani, Pericle Papahagi). When, in 1880, the Macedo-Romanian Cultural Society was set up as the ultimate representative authority for the Aromanian aspirations before the Romanian State and the national and European public opinion, the national movement south of the Danube began to coagulate and to issue, in ever more articulate manner, its desiderata of a particularly cultural-religious nature, weakening, in effect, the philhellene position of many Aromanians in Romania and in the Balkans. On this occasion, two divergent discourses – Romanian and Greek – were born within the same Macedo-Romanian community, regarding the issue of the South-Danubian Vlachs. It was the first time the Balkan Aromanian entity had found an alternative to the Hellenising process that had already been underway for centuries. The Romanian State did nothing more than provide a number of tools and means of opposition that, in the beginning, would cause a backlash among the rural Aromanian population, less affected by Hellenisation, which had caused major changes in their mindset and in the perception of their own Romance identity throughout history, profoundly changing the texture of their Greek national conscience, which had already developed sufficiently deep roots. However, there still existed an ethnic consciousness of the otherness of the Greek element, which was nonetheless blurred given its extraordinary ability to assimilate the Aromanian elite, a process that was beginning to climb down to the foundations of the social pyramid. Just when the Hellenising assimilationist process, fuelled along the confessional channel and reinforced by modern educational means, was about to level, once and for all, the ethnic composition of Northern Greece, Romania intervened with its "disturbing" action in the territory. After the proclamation of the kingdom, the Romanian cultural action south of the Danube increased in intensity year by year, through the opening of new schools in the localities inhabited by Aromanians. There were also recorded a series of diplomatic attempts for the recognition of an autonomous episcopate in the Ottoman area. Romania, which had joined the Triple Alliance after 1883, focused its

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<sup>2</sup> Teodor Pavel, *Mișcarea românilor pentru unitate națională și diplomația Puterilor Centrale*, Facla, Timișoara, 1982, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolae Ciachir, *Istoria popoarelor din Sud-Estul Europei în Epoca Modernă (1789-1923)*, Cetatea de Scaun, Târgoviște, 2011, p. 226.

diplomatic efforts mainly towards preserving and protecting “the Macedonian Romanians,” managing, in 1905, to obtain their official recognition as a nation (millet) within the Ottoman State. The irade regulating the new state of affairs was the result of the intense diplomatic pressures the Bucharest officials placed on the Great Powers, especially on Russia and Germany.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the question of accepting an autonomous Aromanian bishopric in the Ottoman area remained unsolved, a request that clashed against the unyielding opposition of the Ecumenical Patriarchate from Constantinople.

The establishment of the three Romanian consulates in Thessaloniki, Bitolia and Ioannina, on the territories inhabited by Aromanians, with the purpose of organizing the school and church networks, was yet another illustration of the Romanian political interest in question. Amid this involvement of Romania in the Balkans, there appeared a series of conflicts with the Greek State, which went as far as to the severance of diplomatic relations between 1905 and 1911, as well as with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which, on many occasions, had proven an efficient instrument of the Athenian diplomacy in the area. The campaign of the paramilitaries (the so called „antarts”) backed by Athens against the Aromanian leaders in Macedonia inflamed the Bucharest diplomacy so much that after the issuance of the 1905 irade, there was a new rupture of diplomatic relations in the Balkans, causing a war with the Ottoman Empire and imposing major strains on the situation from Macedonia and Epirus, the latter representing yet another region that it claimed in full, without a numerical representation of the Greek element there.<sup>5</sup>

National Revival in the Balkans also meant involving a part of the Orthodox clergy in political and ideological projects of the circles of influence that will later form the ground of new entities in the state. Nationalism promoted by political power in an expansionist purpose, led to disputes between the Bulgarian, Greek, Serbian or Romanian Orthodox people, transforming the church into a field of ethnic conflicts<sup>6</sup>.

Immediately after the deployment of the Ottoman Empire, the Greek state was to recover territories in which culture and education were invested and put into operation the mirage of Hellenization. The non-Greeks (Orthodox populations speaking vernacular languages other than Greek, but using Greek in economical activities) became favorite targets of these campaigns<sup>7</sup>.

In his diplomatic reports to the Greek minister of external affairs, Ion Dragoumis, diplomat and strategist of the Greek propaganda campaign, suggests that the first concern of Athens’ foreign politics in the claimed regions (which belonged to the Ottoman Empire before 1913) had to be the Hellenization of speakers of other languages than the Greek, through the dissemination of the Greek language and by

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<sup>4</sup> Teodor Pavel, *Românii și rivalitatea germano-rusă*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj Napoca, 2000, passim.

<sup>5</sup> Peyfuss Max Demeter, *Chestiunea Aromână*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 1994, passim.

<sup>6</sup> A rigorous demonstration of the reaction of the Orthodox Church in the Balkans as opposed to the wave of nationalisms of the 19th century is offered by Cotan Claudiu, *Ortodoxia și mișcările de emancipare națională din sud-estul Europei în secolul al XIX-lea*, Editura Bizantină, București, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Trifon Nicolas, *Aromânii, pretutindenii, nicăieri*, Cartier, Chișinău, 2012, p. 245.

transmitting within them a Greek conscience. This task was given to traditional agents of the Greek propaganda: teachers, school inspectors, priests, armed groups / paramilitary troops, trustworthy people initiated in the secret organization Άμυνα (the Defense), chosen from influential and respected figures in different settlements; all these factors were going to be placed under the general command and leadership of the Greek consulates in the region.<sup>8</sup> Statistical data regarding ethnicity, which were unfavorable for Athens, were going to be “cleverly” falsified, as there was nothing forcing the Greek to be truthful with foreigners, especially regarding matters of national importance. Quite the opposite, the Greek official considered that Europe's democratic sensibilities had to be manipulated, by presenting to the Western public opinion falsified ethnical maps and statistics, over-estimations of the Greek speaking population, etc.<sup>9</sup> In Dragoumiss's mind, the religious affiliation of the Macedonian population, more precisely the Greek-Orthodox faith of speakers of Slavic, Vlahian (n. n. Aromanian) or Albanian, continued to be the supreme proof and the main cultural indicative showing their Greek status / Hellenism.<sup>10</sup>

Early twentieth century brought about an enhancement of anti-Aromanian feeling among some priests and bishops belonging to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. If the mid-nineteenth century introduction of Romanian language in worship found understanding from the hierarchy (the case Ghenadios Metropolitan of Grebeni who thanked the Ministry of Education in Bucharest for their efforts to ‘cultural advancement’ of an Aromanian majority in his area<sup>11</sup> as the Romanian state's intervention in the area became more consistent, the reaction of the ecclesiastical authorities would also change too, under political pressure<sup>12</sup>. In 1893 steps are being taken to establish an Aromanian episcopacy. In this respect, several petitions were submitted by the Aromanian to the Ecumenical Patriarchate demanding the introduction of Romanian language in church ceremonial, matter successively denied by upper and lower clergy throughout Macedonia<sup>13</sup>. Although in January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1914, The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church under the leadership of Metropolitan Primate Konon Arănescu decides setting up the *Episcopate of the Upper Danube and Macedonia* with the attribution of supervising and leading the churches and schools of all Romanians Orthodox all over the Danube<sup>14</sup>, idea that will never be put into practice, due to the outbreak of war. The violent death of Archimandrite

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<sup>8</sup> Michalis Kaliakatsos, *Ion Dragoumis and “Machiavelli”: Armed struggle, Propaganda, and Hellenization in Macedonia and Thrace (1903–1908)* in *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, Volume 31, Tom 1, Mai 2013, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> Papacostea Victor, Regleanu M., *Documentele redeșteptării macedoromâne*, Predania, București, 2012, p. 46-50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 119.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 214-216.

<sup>14</sup> The Archives of Romanian Foreign Ministry (A. R. F. M.), Fund 71 B, vol. 29, 16.

Haralambos Balamace<sup>15</sup>, the person concerned to fill a Romanian bishop's chair in the Balkans will indefinitely postpone finding a consensual solution to this dispute within the Orthodox Church. Appropriate time is missed in the interwar period when there were also made some attempts, but in the new international context they could not be carried out successfully.

During the Balkan Wars, Romania tried to avoid - even though the international situation would have allowed otherwise - the score of an annexationist actor, preferring to leave the fate of the Aromanian communities to the provisions of some treaties signed with Greece. One of the solutions envisaged by Bucharest even during the London Conference was the incorporation of the land massively populated by Aromanians, the Pindus mountains, between the borders of the newly formed Albanian State, the Romanian-Albanian cooperation having been well-rooted.<sup>16</sup> The Peace Treaty from Bucharest signed in August 1913 divides the Aromanian communities between the Ottoman Empire's successor states, which would determine negative implications both economic and especially cultural-identity ones.

Greek historian Dimitris Michalopoulos considers that official Romanian-Greek documents signed after the Balkan wars referred to school and ecclesiastic rights of Aromanian communities: "they have been overlooked by the Greek party almost immediately after signing them."<sup>17</sup> The above statement confirms, in diplomatic language, a state of facts, meaning a violation from the Greek side of the Treaty in Bucharest.

The outburst of World War I finds the Aromanian communities in a permanent search of an ally, in close geographical proximity, who could provide guarantees of security and respect of their rights as a minority. The Albanian state, seen as a protecting option for Aromanians facing the Hellenization pressure, proved its inability to resist, from an administrative-political point of view. The reign of Prince Wilhelm of Wied ends up in bankruptcy and the Albanian state, as imagined through the decisions of the London Conference<sup>18</sup> and the provisions of the Florence Protocol<sup>19</sup>, fell prey to external interests.

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<sup>15</sup> Haralambos Balamaci is assassinated by March 1914, by a band of Greek antarts, immediately arrested for crime, but which later evade and reside in Greece, for the rest of their lives, never having served the penalties in question.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolae Șerban Tanașoca, *Idealism și realism în „Chestiune Aromânească”*. *Un episod diplomatic din viața lui George Murnu în lumina corespondenței sale inedite (1913)* in Anca Tanașoca and Nicolae Șerban Tanașoca, *Unitate romanică și diversitate balcanică. Contribuții la istoria romanității balcanice*, Fundația Pro, București, 2004, p. 233-254.

<sup>17</sup> Dimitris Michalopoulos, *Aromanians and Tsakonians: similarities and differences* in *The Politics of Culture, Perspectives of stateless nationalities ethnic groups*, Ewa Nowicka (coord.), Varșovia, Warsaw University Press, 2012, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Richard C. Hall, *The Balkan Wars 1912-1913. Prelude to the First World War*, Routledge, 2000, p. 72-74

<sup>19</sup> Edith Pierpont Stickney, *Southern Albania or Northern Epirus in European International Affairs, 1912-1913*, Stanford University Press, 1926, p. 40.

One month after Prince of Wied's departure in September 1914<sup>20</sup>, Essad Paşa<sup>21</sup> returns to Durazzo, forming a so-called government of Central Albania, with the support of Serbia, providing financial support, but also the necessary military equipment<sup>22</sup>. Before Essad's return to Durazzo, Greece was the first to officially violate Albania's independence at the beginning of October 1914, occupying North Epir with its army, controlled up to that time by zoographians<sup>23</sup>; almost at the same time, Italy occupies the island of Saseno, and in December, Valona and the surrounding regions<sup>24</sup>. On October 31<sup>st</sup>, the Greek army enters Korcea, thus ending the existence of the so-called Autonomous Epir, which had been functioning from March 2<sup>nd</sup> to October 31<sup>st</sup> 1914, a period of time of exactly 244 days<sup>25</sup>. Even though, officially, Venizelos declared that the Greek Kingdom only temporarily occupied Vorio (Northern) Epir, for security reasons, the new Greek government officially declares in 1915 that they are totally incorporating that region, and even parliamentary elections are held, and Northern Epir sent MPs in the Greek Chamber<sup>26</sup>. At the beginning of 1915, Serbia and Montenegro invade the Northern and Center part of Albania, even though Antanta protests against the actions of the governments in Nish and Cetinje, that they shouldn't waste their resources and use them in the war against the Central Powers<sup>27</sup>.

At the end of 1915 and beginning of 1916, the German-Austrian-Bulgarian military offensive determines the retreat of Serbia and Montenegro from Albania. The defeated Serbians retreat towards the Adriatic Sea, and with them, Essad Paşa retreats to Rome. Austria-Hungary occupies the North and Center part of Albania<sup>28</sup>. During the summer of 1916, Italian expeditionary forces continue their march to the South, and gradually chase away the troops of king Constantin from the South of Albania, process which ended in December 1916<sup>29</sup>. The South-Eastern part of Albania, the Korcea region, also fell under the control of Greece, and was occupied by the French starting with December 10<sup>th</sup> 1916. It was then proclaimed Republic of Koritsa under a

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<sup>20</sup> Basil Kondis, *The Northern Epirus question during the First World War* in *Balkan Studies*, Volume 30, Number Two, Salonik, 1989, p. 333.

<sup>21</sup> Important figure, close to the interests of Serbia and Greece, alike, to control and weaken the new Albanian state for their own interest, both territorially and politically, according to the facts and situations described by Dusan Batakovic, *Serbian Government and Essad Pasha Toptani in Serbs and the Albanians in the 20th century*, Academic Conferences, vol. LXI, The Department of historical sciences no. 20, Editor Andrej Mitrovic, Belgrad, 1991, p. 58-78.

<sup>22</sup> Constantine Chekrezi, *Albania Past and Present*, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1919, p. 156.

<sup>23</sup> Partisans of the selfproclaimed Republic of North Epir, led by Gheorghios Zoografos, priorly and later minister of external affairs in Greece.

<sup>24</sup> Stefanaq Pollo și Arben Puto, *The History of Albania from its origin to the present day*, Routledge, London, 1981, p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> B. Papadakis, *Histoire diplomatique de la question Nord – Epirote (1912-1957)*, Imprimerie J. Alevropoulos, 1958, p.45.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Sigalos, *The Greek Claims on Northern Epirus*, Argonaut Inc., Chicago, 1963, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Constantine Chekrezi, *Albania Past and Present...* p. 158.

<sup>28</sup> N. Petsalis Diomidis, *Greece at the Paris Peace Conference(1919)*, Institut for Balkan Studies, Salonic, 1978, p. 42.

<sup>29</sup> Constantine Chekrezi, *Albania Past and Present...*, p. 159.

French protectorate<sup>30</sup>. Through these simultaneous advancements of French-Italian troops, they managed to close the channels of communication between Austrian-German troops in Albania and the Austrian-German friendly troops in Greece. These channels were the means through which great amounts of money got to Greece, which was used to buy a good part of the Greek media, in order to sustain the propaganda regarding the filo German political option<sup>31</sup>.

The advancements of the Italian army in the Southern part of Albania and its foreseen advancement in the Pind region determined the plenipotentiary Romanian minister in Athens, Nicolae Filodor, on March 13<sup>th</sup> 1917, to make a request to the Romanian minister of external affairs to intervene with the Italian government. The Romanian diplomacy was interested in obtaining, from the Italian ally, protection and support for the Aromanian population in the Pind region, which was at that time suffering major food supply problems. Minister Filodor confesses to have already intervened with the Italian minister in Athens regarding the above-mentioned issue<sup>32</sup>.

The Romanian consul from Ianina, Dimitrie Mincu, was preoccupied with the fate of Aromanian communities in the area affected by the Antanta blockade over the Greek coastline, which had been going on for more than six months. On May 5<sup>th</sup> 1917, he was reporting to his superiors in Iasi that all around Epir, there is a total lack of basic food supplies, such as wheat, the extremely high prices have led to starvation, which is starting to become general. His decisive interventions during previous months with the Italian consul in Ianina, Domenico Nuvolari, showed concrete results. A series of concessions were made for the Aromanian settlements in Epir, by the Italian administration in the region. They were saved from starvation<sup>33</sup> by facilitating the supply of grains from Konița, Arghirocastro and Santi Quaranta, at very low prices. Consul Mincu also tried to sensibelize certain Italian officials by bringing out the importance of the Aromanian element in the Pindu region and requesting a military advancement which would comprise of several Aromanian settlements in Epir. Ther spectrum of forming an extremely compact cantoon inhabited by Aromanians under Italian protection, where education in schools would only be conducted in the mother tongue of the local population, as in the case of the model adopted by Albania in regions already under Italian administration, raised the interest of Aromanians for such desideratum<sup>34</sup>. When he was analysing the situation in the field, D. Mincu, Romania's consul at Ianina, during World War I, considered that "Aromanians prefer to live together with the Albanians, may them be Christians of Muslims, and do not wish to be integrated in the Greek state, which has never had any other goal than to de-nationalize them. Truly, the Greek neglect in their own country a lot of villages and communes, making sacrifices in order to create schools and Greek churches for the Romanian and Albanian villages and towns in Macedonia, Epir and Albania. They do this not out of love for Romanians, to educate

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<sup>30</sup> Basil Kondis, *The Northern Epirus question during the First World War in Balkan Studies...*, p. 348.

<sup>31</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E.2, vol. 81, 15.

<sup>32</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E2, II, vol. 25, 273.

<sup>33</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E.2, vol. 81, 23-24.

<sup>34</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E.2, vol. 19, 33.

them, but only to Hellenize them, making them feel, think, aspire, work and speak Greek and in a Greek way. Only behaving like this does Greece think it can pretend to be on Europe's side with more success, and obtain the annexation of Epir to the Greek state"<sup>35</sup>.

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During the First World War in the context of the internal fighting in Greece between the Venizelists and Royalists, as well as due to strategic reasons, the Italian army, already found on Albanian ground<sup>38</sup> for some time, decides to occupy Chameria (the coastal region), as well as Zagori-Pindus, upon the order issued on May 30, 1917 by the Chief of Staff of the Italian Army, General Cadorna.<sup>39</sup> In the first few days of June, the Italians occupy the city of Ioannina by surprise, afterwards sending light cavalry to occupy their area of influence Mezzova-Amer-Turia-Kyprios, at the old Greek-Turkish border from 1912.<sup>40</sup> In July, the Italian troops clear the Pindus area, being welcomed with quite a lot of sympathy by the Aromanians. In Băiasa or Perivole, for instance, special welcoming preparations were made with the schools' pupils. The headmaster of the Romanian school from Turia, N.Nibi, noted:

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<sup>35</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E.2, vol. 81, 34.

<sup>36</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E.2, vol. 81, 23-24.

<sup>37</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E.2, vol.19, 33.

<sup>38</sup> For the Mediterranean state, the Albanian hinterland represented what it considered an easy prey, quite accesible in geographical terms, and the occupation of the Albanian shore would have led Italy to become the queen of the Adriatic Sea.

<sup>39</sup> *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, Ministero Degli Affari Esteri, Quinta Serie: 1914-1918, Volume IX, Libreria dello stat, Roma, 1983, p. 107.

<sup>40</sup> Stoica Lascu, „Evenimentele din lunile iulie-august 1917 în regiunea Munților Pind-încercare de creare a unei statalități a aromânilor. Documente inedite și mărturii. Studiu istoriografic și arhivistic”, în *Revista Română de Studii Eurasiatice*, Anul III, Nr. 1-2/2007, p. 112.



'Since the Italians came, we've tasted some freedom for ourselves'.<sup>41</sup> On this occasion, the leaders of several villages convene a national congress at Samarina on July 27. Samarina was an Aromanian centre, renowned for the resistance movement of Christian origin organised against the Ottoman occupation. A timely opportunity was found here to declare the autonomy of the areas inhabited by Aromanians under the protection of the armies considered friendly, the Italian ones. Shortly after, telegrams are sent to the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Italy, USA, Italy, England, France, announcing the new *status quo*. In continuation we present the telegram sent to the Romanian Prime Minister, Ionel Brătianu: 'In this supreme hour, the population of Pindus and Zagori, filled with the joy of having been freed from tyranny through the glorious action of the Italian army, gathers as a single voice to request from the civilised world their rights of freedom, language and their own institutions. [...] By the power of the victorious army of our mother, Italy, the chains that held us under the yoke of the foreigner were broken. The Roman eagle rised again in our mountains, gathering the scattered sons under its fatherly wings.[...] In this supreme hour, we wish you from the bottom of our hearts the defeat of the enemies, the victory of the common cause, the realisation of the national ideal, the greatness and prosperity of the country, and for ourselves we wish that your strong voice rises, so that the allied forces, through firm commitments, can guarantee us the freedom and prosperity of our future among the new Latin nations against the unjust threats of our enemies that want to bring us again in bondage so that they can erase the Romanian name from these mountains'.<sup>42</sup>

Beginning with August, given the situation on the Northern Italian front, as well as the negotiations with the new Greek power of Venizelos who put pressure on the Italian headquarters to be handed over the administration of the areas from the Pindus mountains, the Italian troops fall back. In the resulted power vacuum, the local Aromanian personalities declare the independence of Pindus and proclaim Italy's protectorate over the area on August 29, 1917. At the same time, a decision-making committee of 7 persons - Dr. Demetru Diamandi, Ianaculi Dabura, Mihali Teguiani, Tache Nibi, Zicu Araia, Alcibiade Diamandi and Sterie Caragiani- is created, resembling a quasi-government. This temporary committee sends the following words to the General Commissioner of Ioannina, Francesco Fazzi- 'Against the new Greek occupation threatening us, initiated at Abela through misuse of power and retaliation, the Romanian population of Pindus, rebelling as one man, and before impressive meetings, declared its independence under Italy's protectorate'.<sup>43</sup> The fears of the Samarina committee had been anticipated as early as July 7, 1917, when, after the first days of Italian occupation, Consul Nuvolari sends a telegram from Ioannina to Rome, in which he shows the enthusiastic welcoming of the Italians by the Aromanians and the fact that they would suffer from retaliation from the Greeks if the

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<sup>41</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND ATENA, vol. 224, 45.

<sup>42</sup> *Românii de la Sud de Dunăre-Documente*, Coord. Gheorghe Zbucea, Stelian Brezeanu, Arhivele Naționale ale României, București, 1997, p. 261.

<sup>43</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND ATENA, vol. 224, 42.

area were to be given to the latter, requesting further reassurance.<sup>44</sup> In the same period, the Italian government asks Romania to send persons of Aromanian origin to the occupied area in the support of the anti-Greek propaganda, but the Romanian officials refuse to do so, probably also due to the hard situation on the front.<sup>45</sup> The attitude is adopted with consistency by the Romanian Consul in Ioannina, D. Mincu, no longer solidary with the actions of the Romanians in Pindus, telling Alcibiade Diamandi, one of the leaders, that 'their step was mistaken, inappropriate, as it wasn't approved by anyone and cannot be supported by any party'.<sup>46</sup>

After the retreat of the Italian troops from Southern Epir, the situation of Aromanians involved in the political manifestations in Pind became extremely critical.<sup>47</sup> The Romanian consul in Ianina obtains, with the help of Italian diplomats, formal guarantees from the Greek government that retaliation will not be taken on Aromanians<sup>48</sup>, as Greek authorities would be controlled by Italian diplomatic emmissaries which will be sent in the main Aromanian settlements in Pind. Prime-minister Venizelos himself declared that nobody would be harmed<sup>49</sup>. On September 7<sup>th</sup> 1917, venizelian troops entered Samarina. Very soon, Greek authorities took retaliation, disregarding the general truce that had been promised. Given the persecutions, Aromanian refugees could no longer return to their home towns.<sup>50</sup>

However, the situation did not improve, the Aromanian elites being forced to seek refuge in Albania, some of them at the same time as the Italian army which was falling back or at a later date. Alcibiade Diamandi, together with other notable Aromanians from Pind, decide to stay in Arghirocastro (Albania). After a short while, they decide to form an Albanian-Aromanian delegation which could plead, on an international level, the cause of greater autonomy for the regions inhabited by the descendants of the Oriental Roman civilization around the Pind mountains<sup>51</sup>.

The involvement of Italy in the area in 1917 was planned simultaneously with the support that Romania was supposed to give in Northern Greece, which did not occur given that the government of Iasi was paralysed from any action on international level. The failure of the Samarina Republic can be explained through an extremely inappropriate context for supporting this quasi-State in an area where Greece was very interested to maintain its authority, and the naming of Venizelos' pro-Entente government in the same period weakened even more the potential support from the Italian ally. In any case, this project would not be abandoned and in somewhat similar conditions we would see another attempt to form a Stat-like entity in the Pindus area during the Second World War, whose artisan would be Alcibiade Diamandi, leading member of the Samarina committee from 1917. Even

<sup>44</sup> *I Documenti Diplomatici Italiani...* p. 362-363.

<sup>45</sup> T.J. Winnifrieth, *The Vlachs-The History of a Balkan People*, Gerald Duckworth&Company Limited, London, 1987, p.145.

<sup>46</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND ATENA, vol. 224, 43.

<sup>47</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND 71/1914, E2, II, vol. 25, 459.

<sup>48</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND, ATENA, vol. 15, 146-147.

<sup>49</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND, ATENA, vol. 224, 33.

<sup>50</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND, 71/1914, E2, II, vol. 25, 464-465.

<sup>51</sup> A. R. F. M., FUND ATENA, vol. 235, 328.

if history does not deal with predictabilities, we can imagine that an Italian involvement in the Balkan area would have meant - as it happened in the case of the Istro-Romanians - a breath of fresh air for the Aromanian communities, putting an end to the centuries-long assimilation process.

