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## THE MINORITY QUESTION IN HUNGARIAN – YUGOSLAV DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS\*

**Abstract:** The issue of minorities played a prominent role in the development of Hungarian-Yugoslav diplomatic relations in the interwar period. However, the half a million strong Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia and the South Slav minority in Hungary that, according to official figures, is a fraction of that number (less than 100.000) did not play an equally significant role in shaping diplomatic relations, simply because of their different size. This article describes, based on Hungarian and German sources, how the minority issue influenced the policy of the Hungarian governments towards Yugoslavia between the two World Wars.

**Keywords:** Minorities, Hungary, Yugoslavia, diplomatic relations, foreign policy

Before 1914, half of the population of Central and Eastern Europe, around fifty million people, belonged to

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minorities or were under the rule of other powers. After the reorganization, their number fell to 32 million, or one-third of the population of the whole region.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the decline in the number of minorities, another significant change was the fact that after 1918, millions of Hungarians, Russians, and Germans, members of nations that had previously been part of the state-forming majority, became minorities. Partly for this reason, too, the protection of minorities and the treatment of minorities received greater attention than ever before in the period between the two wars. Minority issues were no longer just a domestic matter for the state in question but also a critical issue for the mother countries, which had to deal with the issue, not least because their own public opinion expected this of their governments. Consequently, the issue of minorities also had an impact on the development of inter-state relations.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Trianon, the Kingdom of Hungary lost nearly 200.000 square kilometers of territory and over three million ethnic Hungarians, of which 20.551 square kilometers (61.000 square kilometers if Croatia is included) and about half a million Hungarians were taken over by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.<sup>2</sup>

Yugoslavia faced the problem of minorities in the conduct of its foreign relations from the moment of its creation when the great powers inserted clauses guarante-

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1 Nicola Girasoli, *A Nemzeti Kisebbségek Fogalmáról*, 1st Hungarian edition, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1995), 11.

2 Ignác Romsics, *A Trianoni Békeszerződés*, (Budapest: Osiris Kiadó, 2001), 230.

eing the protection of minorities in peace treaties with the defeated. The leading political circles in the South Slavic state, driven by domestic and foreign policy considerations, tended to marginalize the minority issue, which meant that it never acquired the importance that the number of minorities would have justified.<sup>3</sup> However, for Belgrade's attitude of partly sweeping this issue under the carpet to be successful, there had to be a general European perception, at least on the part of the beneficiaries of the Versailles system and the great powers, that it was not advisable to highlight the grievances of minorities. Thus, the importance of the minority question, although it was on the agenda of European politics throughout the period, did not reach a level that could have influenced or changed the direction of the process. Nor did it influence Belgrade's policy towards Hungary because as long as the European political order was based on the solid foundations of the Paris Peace Conference, Yugoslavia's policy towards Hungary was determined not by the minority issue but by domestic political interests and the existence of the Little Entente.<sup>4</sup>

The two countries had fundamentally different policies towards their national communities living outside their borders. The issue of the South Slav minorities remaining in Hungary was insignificant for Yugoslavia in shaping its policy towards Hungary, not least because of their relatively small number. The Southern Slav minority in

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3 Zoran Janjetović, *Deca careva, pastorčad kraljeva. Nacionalne manjine u Jugoslaviji 1918-1941*, (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2005), 345-376.

4 Janjetović, *Deca careva, pastorčad kraljeva*, 379.

Hungary played a very marginal role in Yugoslav politics, and their very existence was little known to the wider Yugoslav public. However, it showed no such disinterest in the Hungarian minority living in its territory, nor could it have done so. The Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia and their attitude towards the South Slav state and the motherland were of great interest to the Yugoslav political leadership. In addition to regular reports from various authorities, dozens of reports and other documents in government offices attest to the importance of this aspect of the minority question for the Belgrade-controlled state.

For the Yugoslav government, the Hungarian minority, apart from the obvious security risks, was also a good excuse to reject the proposals to improve relations, usually advocated by the Hungarian side. Every time the leadership of the South Slav state was approached by Budapest with the intention of improving relations, the first condition for which was a positive change in the situation of the Hungarian minority, it always replied that it could not do so because it had to be careful of the sensitivities of the other two Little Entente states, which would have seen any such move as a dilution and betrayal of the organization. It is true that in Yugoslav politics, which was fraught with internal ethnic strife, conditions were rarely favorable for 'spontaneous' concessions to the Hungarian minority. From the end of the 1920s onwards, this was compounded by the growing voice of Hungarian revisionism, which clearly irritated Yugoslav public opinion and set it against the policy of concessions to the Hungarians and *de facto* concessions to Hungary. However, it is important to note that the means to influence public opinion were available in Yugoslavia as

well as in the other Central and Eastern European states, including Hungary. Thus, whether or not the government in Belgrade took steps towards rapprochement depended primarily on the lack of political will.<sup>5</sup>

The situation with Hungary was different, as after the Trianon borders were drawn, some half a million of its population were annexed to Yugoslavia.<sup>6</sup> The Hungarian government had always stressed that one of the priorities of its foreign policy was to improve the situation of Hungarians living in the annexed territories (including those in the South). In reality, however, this policy towards the successor states, including Yugoslavia, was rarely implemented. This was because the minority issue was of mostly secondary importance for Hungarian foreign policy throughout the period, at least in the case of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations. The minority was largely only an instrument, and the demand for preferential treatment was only one element of a Hungarian foreign policy that had always focused on the disintegration of the Little Entente and revision, or more precisely, on revisi-

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5 Despite this, Yugoslavia's excuses for not taking these steps, citing domestic and/or foreign policy difficulties, were mostly accepted in Hungary.

6 Hungary, like Yugoslavia, was distrustful of its nationalities partly because at the end of the war, national minorities (Romanians, Serbs, Croats, Slovaks, but also parts of the Germanic peoples) living on the periphery of central Hungary declared their loyalty and desire to join the neighbouring states. This led Hungarian government circles to conclude that the sense of belonging to the nation was much stronger in the region than the imperative of civic loyalty. Ferenc Eiler, "Magyarország Nemzetiségpolitikája a Két Világháború Között 1918-1938," *Kisebbségkutatás* 2-3/2018, 45.

on and, in this context, the disintegration of the Little Entente. An important, but not the most important, step on the way to this was the settlement of the minority question.<sup>7</sup>

The improvement of the fate of Hungarians outside the borders could be used to demonstrate the intention of approaching the state in question. The primary purpose of this was to improve Hungary's foreign policy position since it was assumed that relations with one of the Little Entente states had been settled at some level. With regard to Yugoslavia and the other two states, Hungarian foreign policy from the very beginning, but especially in the second half of the 1930s, had always stressed that the settlement of the situation of the Hungarian minority in the successor states was a precondition for any further progress in relations. The reason for this had always been that Hungarian public opinion would not tolerate any rapprochement of the government with one or another state in which this issue had not been satisfactorily resolved. However, based on the documents available to us, it seems that Budapest would have been willing to waive this in the case of Yugoslavia, provided that there was a serious willingness on the other side to put relations on a genuinely

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7 It is important to note that there was an order of importance for Hungarian foreign policy with regard to the various Hungarian minorities. The number of the population of the Hungarian ethnic groups that had been torn away was of crucial importance in its determination. However, intricately linked to the quantitative indicators, there were also emotional and very rational social and economic reasons, which together ensured the third, penultimate, place in the imaginary ranking for the Hungarians in Yugoslavia.

amicable (or more amicable) footing.<sup>8</sup> However, Belgrade seldom showed any willingness to do so.

At first sight, it may seem astonishing to learn that for Hungarian governments, improving the situation of Hungarian minorities was of secondary importance. However, the fact that in only two cases did Budapest make the settlement of the minority issue a condition for improving relations seems to sufficiently support this view. Such a situation arose when Hungary did not really consider a political settlement with Yugoslavia or when its favorable foreign policy position enhanced its standing in Yugoslavia's eyes, and it had a realistic chance of success.

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8 On several occasions, the Hungarian side was prepared to settle for gestures rather than real concessions in order to move forward. Gyula Gömbös explicitly confirmed this before the German Foreign Minister von Neurath on 29 September 1935. He stressed that, as Prime Minister, it was necessary for domestic political reasons for him to keep the question of revision constantly at the forefront. On the other hand, he was convinced that Hungary could not assert or achieve all its claims at once. The territorial cessions in favour of Serbia were the smallest, and therefore the easiest to overcome (or, if necessary, to renounce - Á.H.). It would therefore be in line with both his and the governor's political line to achieve reconciliation with Yugoslavia. (*A Wilhelmstrasse és Magyarország. Német diplomáciai iratok Magyarországról 1933-1944*, edited by György Ránki, Ervin Pamlényi, Loránt Tilkovszky and Gyula Juhász (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1968), 109-110). The head of Kánya's cabinet office, István Csáky, stated that the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia was rather scattered and not so excessively important. Moreover, Hungary had no prospect of regaining these territories for a decade and was therefore prepared to renounce any claim to them for reasons of realpolitik. (Documents on German Foreign Policy. London, HMSO, 1953. D/V (hereafter *DGFP*), 241; Report of the German State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Ernst Bohle on his talks with Csáky between 23 and 27 January 1938).

An example of the former is the period from Horthy's 1926 Mohács speech<sup>9</sup> to April 1927, when the Hungarian government was able to push the minority issue to the forefront, knowing for certain that, having chosen a settlement with Italy instead of Yugoslavia, it had little to lose by not jeopardizing the possibility of a political settlement with Belgrade since it no longer wished to reach an agreement.<sup>10</sup> An example of the latter is the period from the spring of 1938 (or arguably even from 1937) when the disintegration of the Little Entente was almost certain. It was then that Budapest had the "luxury" of demanding substantial concessions from Yugoslavia for the Hungarian minority before proceeding further to improve relations.

It is important to note here that the two states also had quite different views on the possibility of resolving the minority issue. In general, the Hungarian government saw two possible ways of settling the minority question: either

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9 In his speech on the 400th anniversary of the Battle of Mohács, Miklós Horthy, the Regent of Hungary, spoke of the common fight against the Turks and of Hungarian-Serbian cooperation, which clearly indicated his intention to raise Hungarian-Yugoslav rapprochement to the highest level.

10 Meanwhile, both the Yugoslav and the Hungarian sides spoke publicly about a political settlement in the near future and that relations between the two countries were more cordial than ever. In the mid-1920s, the Hungarian government tried to break out of the Little Entente ring by approaching Yugoslavia, and this had some reality in the summer of 1926. However, Budapest, seeing the Italian government's growing interest in its direction, 'dropped' Belgrade and used the rapprochement with Yugoslavia from the autumn of 1926 to make itself even more attractive to Italy.



the states concerned reach an agreement with the representatives of the minorities living on their territory to their satisfaction, and then another state guarantees compliance with the agreement, or Hungary concludes a minority treaty with the neighboring states, which are included in the arbitration convention and fall under its jurisdiction. Perhaps not surprisingly, neither option was acceptable to Yugoslavia. In Belgrade's view, both would have constituted an interference in its internal affairs.<sup>11</sup> Until 1938, the Yugoslav position was that minority preferences could only be guaranteed unilaterally since the states belonging to the Little Entente had no direct treaty relations with Hungary on this issue.<sup>12</sup> This was changed by the Bled Agreement of August 1938, when Belgrade (and Bucharest) accepted that Hungary had and could have a role in shaping its policy towards the Hungarian minorities.

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In the following, notable events in the relations between the two states, where the issue of minorities was raised and which had an impact on the situation of minorities, will be discussed. Since, as has been shown so far, the situation of the South Slav population in Hungary was of little importance to the Yugoslav state in shaping its foreign policy, this overview will focus mainly on the Hungarian approach.

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11 Hungarian political opinion on issues concerning its own minorities was similar.

12 For more on the minority policy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in general, see Janjetović, *Deca careva, pastorčad kraljeva*.

The introduction of dictatorship and the abandonment of parliamentarism in 1929 was a defining event in the history of the South Slav state. On 6 January, King Alexander dissolved the parliament elected on 11 November 1927. He abolished the 1921 Vidovdan Constitution and introduced a royal dictatorship. Two weeks later, on 18 January, the Živković government suspended the activities of parties organized on 'sectarian or racial grounds' citing the Law on State Protection. The Hungarian Party was also dissolved, and its archives were handed over to the police. The provincial assemblies and even the municipal councils were dissolved since they had been formed during the parliamentary period, and their members were representatives of the dissolved parties.

In view of this, the Hungarian government's attitude to the introduction of dictatorship is surprising, to say the least. On 31 January 1929, the Hungarian minister in Belgrade, acting on instructions from the Hungarian government, stated to the Yugoslav Foreign Minister, Kosta Kumanudi, that Hungary, regardless of the 'regime change', wished to maintain and further improve the good relations which had recently developed.<sup>13</sup> The Foreign Minister, of course, was pleased with the Hungarian government's position and asked the Hungarian minister, Pál Forster, if he learned of any offense against the Hungarians in Yugoslavia, to inform him so that he could see to it that it was dealt with. The Prime Minister, General Petar Živković, made a similar statement.<sup>14</sup>

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13 Hungarian National Archives Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter MOL K), 63-118-1928-16/7-382/pol. 1928.

14 Like his Minister for Foreign Affairs, he assured Forster that if he became aware of any abuses, he would deal with them in the strictest conceivable way. MOL K. 63-118-16/7 44/1929 pol.

From all this, it could be concluded that the Yugoslav government, in order to improve its foreign policy position, wished to maintain friendly relations with Hungary and to eliminate all differences as far as possible.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fine promises made at the beginning of 1929, not only was there no real improvement in the situation of the Hungarian minority, but the local authorities took a series of measures contrary to the government's pro-minority policy as stated above.<sup>16</sup> In November 1929, the Yugoslav foreign minister complained to the Hungarian minister about his difficult situation: he had to overcome serious prejudices, a struggle for which he had only a few friends who sincerely wished to understand. He expressed his determination, however, to continue to fight for a fair settlement of the minority question within the government, and his arguments would hopefully lead to success eventually.<sup>17</sup> But this did not impress the Hungarian government. On 20 November 1929, the first Hungarian petition submitted by Imre Prokopy,<sup>18</sup> the

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15 MOL K. 63-118-1929-16/7 382/pol.

16 The Yugoslav foreign leadership explained this by the fact that the Hungarian revisionist movement in the countryside had triggered such counter-regulations, which would be abolished as soon as the agitation subsided MOL K. 63-118-1929-16/7-2315/1929. Forster's conversation with Marinković 18 June 1929.

17 During the conversation, Forster asked Marinković to urgently remedy the situation of Hungarian-language education. (*Iratok az ellenforradalom történetéhez. 1919-1945. IV. A magyar ellenforradalmi rendszer külpolitikája 1927. január 1-1931. augusztus 24.* The source material of the volume was compiled and annotated by Elek Karsai, (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1967), 70. (hereafter: *Iratok IV*), 352-353).

18 Imre Prokopy was the head of the Hungarian Party, founded in 1922, who moved to Hungary in 1927.

last Hungarian prefect of Bács-Bodrog County, was filed with the League of Nations, and after that, the Geneva-based organization was flooded with Hungarian petitions.<sup>19</sup> It is true, however, that the Hungarian government did not decide to turn to the international organization out of a sudden impulse; it had already decided to do so in 1928, before the dictatorship was introduced, as part of a well-thought-out long-term plan.<sup>20</sup>

The issue of minorities in the relations between the two states did not only play a role in the form of the Hungarian minority in the South. It also arose in such a way that the Hungarian government contributed to the disintegration of the South Slav state by supporting disaffected elements within Yugoslavia, thus helping to fulfil Hungarian national goals. This was obviously achieved primarily by establishing and improving relations with Croatia. In this direction, after a break of a few years after 1924/25, substantial steps were taken from 1928. One of the main initiators was a young Hungarian from Vojvodina, a certa-

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19 Between November 1929 and February 1933, Prokopy, as a private citizen, but with the knowledge and under the instructions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, submitted twenty petitions and three amendments to the League of Nations, mostly concerning school, language, cultural grievances, and the dismissal of civil servants. For more on this issue, see Enikő Sajti, *Impériumváltások, revízió, kisebbség. Magyarok a Délvidéken 1918-1947*, (Budapest: Napvilág Kiadó, 2004), 108-119.

20 As early as December 1928, Bethlen had forewarned the German Deputy Foreign Minister, Schuman, that in the following year more petitions on the minority issue would be submitted to the League of Nations by Hungarians. (*Iratok. IV*, 242. Bethlen's note of his conversation with Gustav Stresemann, 13 December 1928).

in Iván Nagy, president of the Hungarian Students' Association in Vojvodina and member of the executive committee of the Croatian National Students' Union. In early September 1928, Nagy prepared and submitted a relatively lengthy memo to the Hungarian government. The gist of this was that the Croatian students needed to be won over to a political concept, and there was a good chance of this. The reason for this is the good relationship of the Association of Hungarian University Students in Vojvodina with Croatian students, who, according to the association, have Croatian students almost entirely in their hands (under their influence - Á.H.) in foreign policy. He believed that the Croatian youth had become Hungarophiles through various forms of cooperation and visits to Hungary, including the Hungarian-Croatian Student Compromise in April 1928. He considered it important to develop this further, to promote their study opportunities and excursions to Hungary, to revolutionize this youth, to provide them with institutional political shelter, and to promote the activities of certain "irresponsible elements which are nationalist but anti-Serb". In this way, Nagy believed, it would be easy to repeat the riots that took place after the murder in Skupstina. After all, a bloody political demonstration or a political assassination is a more successful piece of international propaganda than the best-managed legal propaganda. Knowing the Serbian mentality, it is safe to assume that they would launch a similar kind of counteraction using violent means. And this is the surest way to escalate the Serb-Croat conflict. How would this benefit the Hungarian minority? First of all, Yugoslavia would be weakened internationally. By solving the Croatian question

by force or by keeping it on the agenda, the Vojvodina question could be solved, or at least the situation of the population could be substantially improved without major sacrifices because this people would be only bystanders to events, while the material and blood toll would be borne in large part by the Croatian people.<sup>21</sup>

An even more important development was that, after a long pause, Hungarian authorities contacted the Croatian Peasant Party. More specifically, the new leader of the party, Vladimir Maček, visited Dísz Square (the building of the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs). As a result of the meeting, they agreed to further close and most secret cooperation and exchange of ideas. According to Maček, he was determined to leave Yugoslavia, and to this end, he began to organize himself and, through Hungary, to contact Italy. The Hungarians, however, asked him not to involve the Hungarians of Vojvodina in the organization, as this would aggravate their situation; it would give a bad impression to the Hungarian public, and it would also improve his own situation by giving him a reputation as a “Hungarophile”.<sup>22</sup> Budapest, together with Rome, then became actively involved in supporting the Croatian separatist movement, the most spectacular and embarrassing result of which for Hungary was the establishment of the Jankapuszta Ustasha camp in the autumn of 1931.<sup>23</sup>

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21 MOL K. 63–116–1928–16/42 3965/1928, Iván Nagy’s memorandum 11 September 1928.

22 *Iratok IV*, 224. Apor’s notes on his meeting with Maček 15 October 1928.

23 Of course, the Hungarian government never officially acknowledged its relations with the Croatian separatists, by whom we must

The Hungarian government considered it important to prepare the ground with the League of Nations before launching the Prokopy "petition action" detailed above. To this end, Prime Minister István Bethlen wanted to change the procedure for minority complaints in the League of Nations. The Hungarian Prime Minister considered it essential to implement three principles: that minority complaints should be dealt with by a standing committee which would not be composed of representatives of individual states but would be set up on the model of financial and technical committees, i.e., that the investigation of complaints should be the responsibility of a committee of experts; that an adversarial procedure should be established in minority cases or, if this was not possible, that petitioners should at least have the opportunity to present their cases a second time; and finally, that the publicity of the minority complaints procedure should be guaranteed.<sup>24</sup>

The "petition action" in the League of Nations, launched at the end of 1929, was, of course not well received in Belgrade. Although it brought the minority issue seemingly to the forefront of relations between the two states, in reality, other issues, mainly economic ones, determined

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understand the Ustasha from 1929 onwards, although Bethlen, for his part, in conversation with Austen Chamberlain, the British Foreign Minister, thought it permissible to say that if there were bloody disturbances, i.e. fighting, in Croatia, Budapest could not say that the Ministry of the Interior and Hungary were not interested in this fighting. (*Iratok IV*, 244. Bethlen's note of his conversation with Chamberlain, 13 December 1928).

24 *Iratok IV*, 289. Bethlen's draft of the meeting with Briand, 28 May 1929.

the development of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations. As the global economic crisis in Central Europe deepened, the economic cooperation between Hungary and Yugoslavia, which had been stagnating until then, also began to take off. The harmonization of wheat and maize exports so that they would not compete with each other in sales but would try to secure the world parity price for each other proved to be a more prominent issue than the situation of the Hungarian minority. This was partly the reason why, in the spring of 1931, the Hungarian side of the otherwise increasingly cool Hungarian-Yugoslav relations stated that, although they were in a fierce press dispute with their southern neighbors over the authorship of various assassinations and murders, the relationship that had existed between the two governments for years was otherwise unchanged.<sup>25</sup>

A notable change in this Hungarian attitude occurred only after May 1932, partly for economic reasons, partly for reasons related to the minority issue, but mostly for political reasons. In May 1932, the trade agreement concluded in 1926 expired. Under one of its annexes, dual-owners were free to cross the border and bring their produce across without any restrictions.<sup>26</sup> Despite all its efforts, the Hungarian government failed to obtain an extension of the agreement in Belgrade. The Yugoslav government-imposed customs duties on agricultural products. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that very

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25 *Iratok IV*, 516.

26 A total of 2.690 Hungarian farmers owned land in Yugoslavia (26.086 acres), while 7.122 Yugoslav citizens owned 14.506 acres in Hungary (MOL K. 69-135-1934-I-O-10).



few border crossings were also customs roads, forcing dual landowners to take large detours.<sup>27</sup>

This has contributed to an increase in the number of border incidents. In addition, the South Slavic authorities imposed heavy taxes on land in their territory and, in the event of non-payment, auctioned off any remaining crops in Yugoslav territory on short notice. From all this, the Hungarian foreign policy leadership correctly concluded that Belgrade's aim was to abolish the dual-ownership institution. The Hungarian government, seeing the Yugoslavs' intransigence, took countermeasures: it refused to extend the Hungarian-Yugoslav bathing agreements (which caused a serious loss of income for the Yugoslavs, as thousands of Hungarian citizens preferred to stay at home) and stopped the border-crossing concession for Yugoslav options. However, these measures did not have the desired effect.

During a conversation with the Yugoslav Deputy Foreign Minister Božidar Purić on 9 May 1934, he admitted to the Hungarian minister Valdemar Alth that Yugoslavia envisaged the settlement of the dual-ownership issues in a comparable way to Bulgaria, i.e., their abolition. He did not consider the constant border crossings by dual landlords to be desirable, because, according to his data, about 100.000 people, some of them Hungarians and some Yugoslav citizens (but mostly of Hungarian nationality – Á. H.), are constantly crossing the border back and forth,

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27 There were seventeen first-rate customs roads along the entire Hungarian-Yugoslavian border. Of these, 1 river way, seven railways and nine roads. Note by an unknown author on the institution of dual ownership. (MOL K. 69-135-1934-I-O-10).

which naturally leads to incidents. It also creates the fiction that the border has not been definitively established. He did not deny that the frequent harassments (*'vexations'*) were intended to induce dual owners to sell their properties. According to Purić's information, Hungarian dual owners hold 9.000 hectares of land, while Yugoslavs hold 7.000 hectares. These lands can easily be exchanged, or the owners can be compensated. Thus, even if the double holdings were not completely abolished, their number could be reduced to such an extent that the remaining ones would no longer count. Finally, he noted that his government is working on a plan to propose to the Hungarian government to send joint committees to liquidate dual holdings and to regulate the exchange of dual holdings and the compensation of owners.<sup>28</sup> Presumably, this was the last straw that made the Hungarian government seek justice in Geneva. On 12 May 1934, the Hungarian government asked the League of Nations for help in combating the Yugoslav excesses on the Hungarian-Yugoslav border.

Under pressure from the Great Powers, a delegation of the two states began negotiations in Belgrade on 20 June 1934 to clarify the disputed issues, and a month later, on 21 July, an agreement was reached consisting of three documents reflecting the success of Hungarian diplomacy.<sup>29</sup>

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28 MOL K. 69-671-1934-I-O-10.1481/pol. Alth's report 9 May 1934.

29 The Yugoslavs undertook to grant various facilities to border landowners; they mutually agreed that in the event of incidents resulting in injury or death, officials could enter the other country's territory within 500 metres of the border for on-the-spot investigati-

### *The Marseille Assassination*

The Belgrade Agreement laid the foundations for a more friendly Hungarian-Yugoslav relationship. Six months later, however, the assassination in Marseille completely upset this calm, and Budapest found itself in an extremely uncomfortable position. Since the Hungarian government and Hungary had been involved to some extent in the preparation of the Marseille assassination, and since the blame of the great powers (mainly France and Britain) for the attack was incompatible with the great powers' plans to maintain peace and stability in Europe, the obvious solution was to make Hungary the scapegoat. The Hungarian government accepted this role, provided that it was not overly disciplined. However, this scenario has not been fully adhered to. Although the Yugoslav government also accepted the scenario, which also required restraint on its part, it nevertheless, in response to growing public opinion demanding tough action, lodged a complaint with the League of Nations on 22 November, asking for an investigation into Hungary's responsibility.

The expulsion of Hungarian citizens and non-citizens working in Yugoslavia began at the same time as the

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ons; in a confidential protocol, the Hungarian side left it to the Yugoslavs to take the necessary measures to avoid fatal border conflicts, while the Yugoslavs left it to the Hungarians to take the necessary measures to limit Croatian emigration. (MOL. K 63-1934-16/7 2536/pol/1934 Information note from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the embassies on the results of the steps taken in the matter of Hungarian-Yugoslav border incidents).

complaint was lodged. More than three thousand people were expelled. This was a rather clumsy move on the part of the Yugoslav government, as it succeeded in antagonizing international public opinion. In sporting terms, the ball was put into the Hungarian court and the initiative into the hands of the Hungarian Government. Budapest did not hesitate to seize the opportunity. It asked for the help of the great powers, who did indeed intervene on its behalf in Belgrade. And on 10 December the Council of the League of Nations decided on the matter: it adopted a resolution condemning terrorism in general but left it to the Hungarian government to investigate the responsibility of the Hungarian bodies involved.<sup>30</sup>

Both Belgrade and Budapest took a wait-and-see approach to their relations for a while. A change in the situation was brought about by Milan Stojadinović's accession to the government. On 19 July 1935, Aleksander Vukčević, the Yugoslav minister to Budapest, raised the possibility of improving Hungarian-Yugoslav relations on behalf of the prime minister.<sup>31</sup> Kánya was reluctant to accept the proposal. In his view, Yugoslavia could not expect sympathy from Hungary after what had happened. For his part, however, he is ready to work on the establishment of a *modus vivendi*, the biggest obstacle to which is the prevention of the re-

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30 Mária Ormos, *Merényilet Marseilleben*, (Budapest: Kossuth Kiadó, 1984), 197-198.

31 He informed Kánya that the mood in Yugoslavia towards Hungary had improved significantly and admitted that not only Hungarian politicians and the Hungarian press, but also Yugoslav political and press figures had exaggerated the Marseille affair. (MOL K. 63-137-1935-16/7 No 2345).

turn of Hungarians expelled in 1934. However, the Yugoslav envoy had encouraging news in this regard: former Prime Minister Bogoljub Jevtić had already ordered that the expelled Hungarians be returned to Yugoslavia through legal channels, within the limits of possibility. Based on this decree, some 1.600 Hungarian expellees had indeed been returned to Yugoslavia by June 1935.<sup>32</sup>

Although a willingness to improve relations was evident on both sides, both states waited to take concrete steps towards rapprochement until the Aix-en-Provence trial had been concluded and the Marseille assassination had been definitively stitched up. Stojadinović took the first step by promising to develop the rapprochement between the two countries “par étapes” after the conclusion of the Marseille case; as a first step, he would make the objections raised by the Hungarian minister concerning the disadvantaged position of the Yugoslav Hungarians the subject of unbiased study.<sup>33</sup>

### *The German Mediation*

Of course, the attempt to improve Hungarian-Yugoslav relations could not be a “private affair” of the two states alone. Behind the gestures aimed at improving Hungarian-Yugoslav relations, as in the 1920s, there was a great power. Or rather, it was not really hiding. Whereas in 1924/25 Italy was trying to bring the two neighbors closer

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32 MOL K. 63-135-1935-16/7. Daily report on the conversation between Kánya and Vukčević, 31 October 1935.

33 MOL K. 63-137-1936-16/7. 42/pol.-1936. Alth's conversation with Stojadinović on 28 February 1936.

together in order to achieve its foreign policy goals, in the mid-1930s the German government was trying to bring the two governments closer together.

Victor von Heeren, the German minister in Belgrade, in his political report of 3 December 1935, discussed this question, as seen from Belgrade. On the basis of reports from Budapest, he noted that the idea of breaking up the Little Entente by rapprochement or even agreement with Yugoslavia was becoming increasingly popular among Hungarian foreign policy-makers. There are also high hopes for the personal conduct of the new Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Stojadinović. The basic question, in Heeren's view, was what was meant by the term rapprochement. If rapprochement means a general improvement in the atmosphere, avoidance of unnecessary friction, minor concessions on both sides on border trade and the minority issue, in short, a normalization of relations that does not affect Yugoslavia's international commitments and the principles of its domestic policy, then, in his view, Hungarian policy has a good chance of success, at least as long as Stojadinović is in government. However, if the Hungarian policy of rapprochement is aimed at disintegrating or even visibly loosening the Little Entente, it is doomed to failure, not only now but for the near future. After all, what could induce any Yugoslav statesman to embark on a path that would lead to the weakening of the guarantee of the Little Entente and the strengthening of Hungary for the sake of Hungary's wishes? Simply putting Yugoslavia third on the Hungarian revisionist list is obviously not considered sufficient compensation in Belgrade. No one would believe Hungarian assurances that Buda-

pest has finally given up its claims on Yugoslavia. Only intense pressure from a third party could force Yugoslavia down that path. The question is, who would that power be? Heeren considered the Hungarian threat to be timely if Italy were to throw its full weight behind Hungary. But at the end of 1935, in the middle of the Abyssinian war, Yugoslavia had less to fear than ever before. In this way, Heeren believed that Germany alone could, in a hypothetical case, exert sufficient pressure on Belgrade.<sup>34</sup> This view was shared in Budapest.

At the beginning of 1936, the Berlin leadership saw the time as ripe to take further steps to improve relations between Belgrade and Budapest.<sup>35</sup> The Hungarian government welcomed German involvement but did not want direct German government mediation. Rather, it wanted Germany to exert its influence on the Yugoslav government in such a way that it would be more sympathetic to Hungarian wishes, especially on minority issues.<sup>36</sup> To do this, however, Germany would have had to be aware of Hungarian requests, and Göring therefore, called on the

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34 *DGFP. C/4.* 878-880. report by Heeren, 3 December 1935.

35 See the record of the conversation between Göring and Sztójay on 27 January 1936. (MOL K. 63-137-1936-16/7 400/pol.-1936).

36 The Hungarian government (Gömbös) had explained years earlier to a staff member of the German embassy in Budapest that Yugoslavia had the smallest differences with Hungary among the Little Entente states. Only a relatively narrow border area in the northern part of Vojvodina, with a Hungarian population, is to be reclaimed. If this were to happen, there would be no point of contention between the two states, as Hungary has no claim on Croatia. (*Wilhelmstrasse.* p.87. note by Karl Schnurre, embassy counsellor, on a discussion with Gömbös. 2 November 1934).

Hungarian government to communicate to him its wishes for the Yugoslavs, in point form, reduced to a level of probability, and he would try to influence the Yugoslavs in this way.<sup>37</sup>

The “announcement” of the intention to improve relations on the Yugoslav side was set by Stojadinović’s parliamentary speech on 8 March 1936. In it, he declared his willingness to cooperate with Hungary in the economic consolidation of the Danube Basin, and his wish to remove the causes of mutual distrust and disagreement on this side as well.<sup>38</sup> The statement was, of course, recei-

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37 MOL K. 63-137-1936-16/7 400/pol.-1936. On 6 March, Sztójay gave Göring the compilation he had requested earlier, in which he listed all the points that “form a friction surface” between Hungary and Yugoslavia. According to a German note, these demands related mainly to minority, passport, and border (crossing) issues, and Sztójay did not mention any territorial questions. (*DGFP. C/4.* pp. 1167-1168. Bülow’s memorandum of 21 February 1936; Sztójay on 16 March 1936). In his memorandum of his conversation with Sztójay on 16 March 1936, Cecil Renthe-Fink, Deputy Head of the Second Department of the German Foreign Ministry, reports Sztójay’s remark that: Prime Minister Göring expected Stojadinović to draw up, like the Hungarian side, the points which he considered important to settle. Sztójay stated that Hungary was ready to comply with Yugoslav wishes, provided Yugoslavia complied with Hungarian requests. (*DGFP. C/5, 172*).

38 *Diplomáciai Iratok Magyarország Külpolitikájához 1936-1945. II. A müncheni egyezmény létrejötte és Magyarország külpolitikája 1936-1938*, Edited by Ádám Magda, (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1965), 184 (Hereinafter referred to as DIMK. II.). On 10 March 1936, the Yugoslav minister in Berlin, Cincar-Marković, stated that the main obstacle to a Hungarian-Yugoslav agreement was that the Hungarian government had still not prevented agitation among Yugoslav refugees. Nevertheless, Belgrade was ready to discuss the



ved positively, albeit with some suspicion, on the Hungarian side. Budapest would have been pleased if the Yugoslav government had shown its willingness to make a rapprochement to remedy the grievances of the Hungarian minority and to eliminate the discrimination that the Hungarians suffer in comparison with the German and Romanian minorities.<sup>39</sup>

Despite the willingness of both sides to move closer, the Yugoslav side considered it important to warn Hungary once again that the policy of rapprochement, which Stojadinović sincerely wished for, could not bring a complete change in relations between the two states overnight. Relations must improve gradually, and Hungary will have to be content with small results at first. "Hungary and Yugoslavia are bound together by countless ties, they are economically interdependent, and they are also threatened by a common danger (Bolshevism), so rapprochement is not only possible but also necessary. But Hungarians must understand the spirit of the Yugoslav people. They are primitive people; their vivacious temperament often gets the better of them and not infrequently manifests itself brutally. They must not be caught up in such things. They (the State Department) will always be working to elimina-

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possibility of rapprochement with Hungary. (*DGFP. C/5*, 79 von Neurath's note of 10 March 1936).

39 For this, he considered the conclusion of a minority treaty to be the most appropriate. However, Stojadinović dismissed this with a joking remark on 24 July: "Why a treaty, we are on good terms with the Germans, we have no treaty with them either." (*DIMK II* pp. 185-186. Foreign Ministry memorandum on the Yugoslav-Hungarian rapprochement. January 1937).

te these disturbances.”<sup>40</sup> The deterioration in relations between the two countries has led to “all kinds of weeds running rampant”, authorities distrustful, and the executive malignant. As a result, Hungarian citizens in Yugoslavia are suffering unjustified harm. But all this will disappear on its own once relations between the two countries are friendly. This applies not only to the deepening of Hungarian-Yugoslav economic relations and the revival of trade but also to the situation of the Hungarian minority.<sup>41</sup>

In mid-June, Stojadinović again stated, this time to Polish Foreign Minister Jozef Beck, that they were willing to contribute to improving relations if Hungary could find a formula that would “nuance” its claims against Yugoslavia, Romania and Czechoslovakia.<sup>42</sup> It would have been difficult to find such a formula, but Kánya spoke of the possibility of cooperation with the Little Entente in his November speech to the Foreign Affairs Committee. However, Belgrade was in no hurry to follow the Hungarian foreign minister’s example. Despite this, in response to the Hungarian sugge-

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40 Alth’s report of 22 August 1936 on a conversation between Ivo Andrić, head of the political department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and an official of the Hungarian Embassy (MOL K 63-141-1938-16/7 178/pol.-1936. Bled, 22 August 1936).

41 *Ibid.*

42 A month later, Kobylanski, the head of the political department of the Polish Foreign Ministry, told Hory - presumably on a whisper from Belgrade - that since any facilitation for minorities would be a quasi “denunciation” of Yugoslavia to the other two Little Entente states, negotiations on the “formula” and the minorities should be conducted simultaneously. (*DIMK. II* p. 185. Foreign Ministry memorandum on the Yugoslav-Hungarian rapprochement, January 1937).

stion that they would be pleased if Stojadinović were to take the step he had envisaged in order to give a positive sign of his willingness to move closer to Hungary, Belgrade continued to stress the importance of cautious, step-by-step progress, because the other two Little Entente states already had a great deal of mistrust in him.<sup>43</sup>

### *The Minority Issue as an Official Agenda Item*

From 1937, Hungary was in a relatively favorable foreign policy position. Even if posterity, and to some extent some contemporaries, were aware of the risks of the looming shadow of the German Reich. It is an undeniable fact that Berlin, like Hungary, was working to break up the Little Entente and, in at least one direction, was supporting the Hungarian revisionist cause against Czechoslovakia. As for the other two states, it was pushing Budapest to reach an agreement. He also encouraged Belgrade and Bucharest to do the same. The Italian government took a similar position to the German government on Hungary's 'neighborhood policy', with the difference that

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43 He pointed out, however, that a significant step had been taken in fulfilling the wishes of the Hungarian minority, as the two associations that had been banned in the past, the Nagybecskerek Public Cultural Association, and the Szabadka Folk Circle, were allowed to operate. Alth acknowledged this but noted that this measure would be useful primarily from a Yugoslav domestic political point of view, because the Hungarians, having left their passivity, would strengthen the ranks of the ruling party. This is indeed what happened. At their meeting on 29 November, the leaders of the banned Hungarian Party decided to vote for the government in the municipal elections in *Ibid*, 188.

Mussolini considered reconciliation between Bucharest and Budapest more important than reconciliation with Belgrade. A significant factor was also Britain, which, making no distinction between the Little Entente states, encouraged Hungary to reconcile and establish friendly relations with all three neighbors, and vice versa. London's goodwill was particularly important to each of these states. The fact that Hungary had serious territorial claims, even if revision and restitution could not be the subject of these negotiations, put Budapest in, if not an advantageous, certainly a better position than before. It only had to be careful not to appear as someone with whom it was impossible to reach an agreement because of its excessive demands.

At the beginning of 1937, the representatives of the Little Entente states separately approached the Hungarian Foreign Minister and called on Hungary to negotiate with their states.<sup>44</sup> On 21 January, the Yugoslav envoy in Budapest, Vukčević, suggested, hypothetically, that Hungary should conclude with Yugoslavia a treaty of friendship similar to the one it had signed with Bulgaria.<sup>45</sup> After Kánya had asked him if this proposal also applied to the other two Little Entente, the Hungarian Foreign Minister replied very diplomatically and politely that he saw difficulties in this, at least for the ti-

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44 The Hungarian government initially replied to some of the requests with similar content negatively. Then, after some reflection and information, it showed a willingness to negotiate to the extent that it had Germany's support for its revisionist ambitions vis-à-vis the offering country. (*DIMK. II*, 183-209; Gyula Juhász, *Magyarország külpolitikája 1919-1945*. (Budapest: Kossuth Könyvkiadó, 1988),164-167.

45 On 25 January 1937, Yugoslavia signed a treaty of perpetual friendship with Bulgaria.

me being.<sup>46</sup> Later, however, at the urging of Germany and Italy, he did show a willingness to reach an agreement with Belgrade. Finally, he entered into negotiations with Yugoslavia, the only one of the Little Entente states to do so.<sup>47</sup>

The issue of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia was also discussed during the talks. It was suggested that the Hungarian government issue a declaration to create the basis for Stojadinović to make a gesture towards the Hungarian minority. The Hungarian government prepared a summary note of the minority's wishes,<sup>48</sup> and on 23 March, Alth presented the text of the declaration to be issued by the Foreign Ministry to Stojadinović, "which he received with sincere satisfaction and saw as a great step towards rapprochement between the two countries".<sup>49</sup>

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46 *DIMK. II*, 195. Daily report on the conversation between Kánya and Vukčević, 21 January 1937.

47 On the Hungarian side, the point of contact between the two states was often the defence and action against communism, while the Yugoslavs saw the possibility of cooperation mainly in the prevention of the Habsburg restoration. This was accompanied by the 'German friendship' of both states from the second half of the 1930s, and from 1937 onwards by 'Italian friendship'.

48 The memorandum included the settlement of the Hungarian school issue, and the representation of Hungarians in the municipal and city councils in proportion to their numbers. In addition, agricultural servants and labourers who had been left without work and earnings as a result of the division of large estates should be given 3 to 5 hectares of land from the land still available. The latter, in the view of the Hungarian government, was also in the interest of the Yugoslav government, because it could avoid "these unfortunate people falling prey to communist or extreme peasant agitation, while a small allowance would ensure their existence and thus make them good citizens". (*DIMK II*, 215-216).

49 MOL K. 74-5-I. incoming-1937 Belgrade, 23 March 1937. The text of the declaration was as follows: 'In the spirit of the peaceful objec-

The Yugoslav prime minister was ready to make a gesture towards the Hungarian minority in accordance with Hungarian wishes, provided that it was not associated with the Hungarian government's statement. Accordingly, he rejected the junction between the two steps and considered it more appropriate that the Yugoslav gesture should precede the Hungarian declaration. Belgrade's gesture towards minorities, however, was limited to welcoming Hungarian politicians from Vojvodina.<sup>50</sup> After that, Yugoslavia took no concrete steps in favour of the Hungarian minority. Foreign Minister Kánya's positive comments on Yugoslavia also went unheeded in Belgrade. Stojadinović justified his reticence by saying that what could be said in Budapest could not be said in Belgrade and that he had to be constantly careful not to increase the mistrust of his allies, which was already being expressed at every turn.<sup>51</sup> Despite all this, Stojadinović claimed that he was ready to alleviate the issues of the Hungarian minority step-by-step, but he firmly refused to give the Hungarian government a say in the minority issue. He insisted on this. It was in vain that the German Foreign Minister, von Neurath, also drew Stojadinović's attention to the fact that there was room for talks between states on minority issues

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tives of Hungarian foreign policy, Hungary does not wish to resort to the use of force as an instrument of national policy in the relations between the two countries, and will refrain in the future from any action which would be likely to disturb the good relations which are being established between Hungary and Yugoslavia'. (*DIMK II*, 215).

50 MOL K. Telegraph Department K74-5-I. incoming-1937 Belgrade. 01.04.1937.

51 MOL K. 74-5-I. incoming-1937 Belgrade. 16/04/1937.

and that such talks also had degrees and nuances. Yugoslav policy has always rejected any suggestion of interference by outside powers in a minority issue that was considered an internal affair. Subsequently, the Hungarian government, for its part, considered the initiative closed and adopted a wait-and-see attitude.<sup>52</sup>

### *Hungarian-Croatian negotiations*

In the summer of 1937, however, Hungary was negotiating not only with Yugoslavia but also, partly out of necessity, with the other two Little Entente states. In the background, according to Foreign Minister Kánya Kálmán Kánya, the Hungarian government wanted to alleviate the worsening situation of the Hungarian minority, especially in Romania. The other reason (which in my view was at least as compelling, Á. H.) was that the states with friendly relations with Hungary, on whose support Hungarian diplomacy could count most, Germany, Italy, and Poland, were also increasingly urging Hungary not only to try to improve rela-

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52 MOL K. 74-5-I. incoming-1937 Belgrade. 09/04/1937 Kánya's telegram to Belgrade, 2 April 1937. "I see from Stojadinović's reply that my intention to take a strong step forward in the Yugoslav-Hungarian rapprochement was premature. Therefore, my plan is to continue our current policy of friendship towards Belgrade and wait until the time is ripe to conclude an agreement in the spirit of the proposal. Should Stojadinović himself consider it opportune to return to the matter at some time, we shall be at his disposal. Make a statement to that effect to Stojadinović and thank him for his statement that he will continue to be understanding towards the Hungarian minority in accordance with the principles of his domestic policy." (MOL K. 74-1937-18-Berlin, outgoing telegrams. 205/res.pol).

ons with Belgrade but also to try to find a *modus vivendi* with Bucharest.<sup>53</sup> Such a decision by Hungarian foreign policy was facilitated by the fact that, as we have seen, Yugoslavia, the original “target country” of the friendship, was not willing to negotiate without its Little Entente allies.<sup>54</sup> As a result, Budapest also entered into negotiations with the other two Little Entente states.

The agenda continued to be the recognition of the right to rearmament and, as a novel item raised by Hungary, the resolution of the situation of the Hungarian minority. While the Little Entente officially considered the recognition or non-recognition of the right to rearmament to be the main issue, the Hungarian government considered it to be overdue. The reality was, and the Little Entente was well aware of this, that there was no longer anything to argue about because there was practically no one and nothing to control Hungary’s rearmament.<sup>55</sup>

Accordingly, the negotiations focused on the minority issue. Budapest tried to convince the opposite side

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53 *DIMK. II*, 254-255. Daily report on the conversation between Kánya and Erdmannsdorf, the German minister in Budapest, 27 September 1937. Not to mention the fact that London would have been increasingly happy if the Central European states had finally managed to find a formula for peaceful coexistence.

54 Some believe that this was due to the Little Entente decision, adopted in Belgrade in April 1937 under Czech and Romanian pressure. In it the member states undertook to negotiate with Hungary only jointly. But the reality is that Hungarian fears were confirmed, and Belgrade, with the treaty with Italy in its pocket, no longer felt the need to develop closer relations with Hungary.

55 *DIMK. II*, 234. Bárdossy’s report on his conversation with Antonescu, 31 August 1937.



that recognition of the right to rearmament and a declaration by the Hungarian government of the renunciation of aggression towards its neighbors were not enough to improve relations. Their relationship would remain strained since it is well known that the tension is not over the issue of rearmament but mainly over the treatment of minorities in the successor states. Consequently, until this treatment is radically changed or the Hungarian government is given guarantees that the grievances of the minority will be addressed, Hungarian public opinion would not tolerate any gesture by the government towards the successor states.<sup>56</sup> The Romanian response to this, which could be understood as the opinion of the Little Entente, was that to settle the minority question, their public opinion must first be reassured. This, in turn, requires the creation of a friendly atmosphere.<sup>57</sup> In other words, a situation similar to 'Catch-22' had developed. Who should take the first step?

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56 *Ibid.* The Yugoslav view on minorities was that it would not negotiate with the Hungarian government on minorities, as it was not entitled to represent the interests of the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia. Von Neurath tried to convince Stojadinović that it was possible to defend the interests of members of one race who lived in other countries without an explicit international legal mandate. However, despite invoking the Serbian position on the issue before the world war, Stojadinović remained adamant. (*DGFP. C/6*, 834. Von Neurath's note on negotiations with Stojadinović. 07/06/1937).

57 Stojadinović himself was of the opinion that there was little point in bothering with loud minority statements. Accept whatever settlement is available, and then the positive effect of the settlement will be a change in the way minorities are treated. (*DIMK. II*, 356. Bárdossy's report to Kánya. 05/05/1938).

The Hungarian government produced a quite simple and pithy proposal to resolve the issue: if the Little Entente really intends to change its policy towards the Hungarian minority substantially, they could set out in a confidential protocol in advance the steps they intend to take to improve relations. With the *modus procedendi* thus established, the Hungarian government could also refrain from waiting for the implementation of the actual measures to be taken against the Hungarian minorities and could make a declaration of non-aggression towards neighboring states.<sup>58</sup> Although Antonescu was ready to discuss the plan, and Stojadinović, like his Romanian counterpart, also accepted the draft as a basis for negotiations, the talks nevertheless stalled.<sup>59</sup>

*The Question of (Germany) Guaranteeing  
the Hungarian-Yugoslav Border*

At the end of the year, the possibility also arose that Hungary would recognize the borders with regard to,

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58 A protocol with each state would be drawn up separately, with the same four points. In the first point, the successor states would voluntarily recognise Hungary's right to rearmament. In the second point, also on their own initiative, they would provide for the implementation of certain administrative measures, which would be detailed in a confidential appendix attached to the point (on the basis of prior agreement). In the third point, Hungary would also of its own accord make a declaration of non-aggression against the neighbouring states, which would be reciprocated by them. Finally, in the fourth point, it would be stated that the individual Little Entente states would contact the leaders of the Hungarian minorities living in their countries and negotiate with them a radical settlement of the minority question. (*DIMK II*, 236-237).

59 *DIMK. II*, 241-242. Bárdossy's report of 1 September 1937.

uniquely among the Little Entente states, Yugoslavia.<sup>60</sup> Why the Hungarian government should have recognized these borders can only partly be explained by the fact that Belgrade governed the smallest number of secessionist territories and the fewest number of Hungarians. Presumably, the information obtained through German mediation that Stojadinović had identified protection against Hungary as the sole purpose of the existence of the Little Entente played a key role in this decision. He had already stated to von Neurath at the beginning of June that if Hungary gave up its claims to revision in all directions, the Little Entente would cease to exist. As soon as Hungary reached a settlement with Yugoslavia, Stojadinović would have no further interest in the Little Entente, Neurath told reporters in Budapest.<sup>61</sup> In other words, the Hungarian Foreign Ministry was right to think that they were on the right track when, almost from the very beginning, they wanted to disrupt the unity of the Little Entente through the Yugoslavs.

Kánya also told Neurath, who had arrived in Budapest from Belgrade, that if the wishes of the Hungarian minorities in Yugoslavia could be satisfied through autonomous regulation, he would be happy to conclude an agreement with Yugoslavia along the lines of the Kellogg Pact.<sup>62</sup> After the

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60 *Wilhelmstrasse*, 243. Memorandum of Weizsäcker, Head of the German Foreign Ministry Department, on his meeting with the Embassy Counsellor Bakach-Bessenyei, 24 November 1937.

61 *DGFP. C/6*, 834-835. Von Neurath's note of 7 June 1937; Göring had already informed Kánya in October 1936 that Stojadinović intended to leave the Little Entente at the right time. (*DIMK. I*, 280. Daily report of a conversation between Kánya and Göring on 11 October 1936).

62 *Wilhelmstrasse*, 230. Von Neurath's note 12/06/1937.

break-off of the negotiations with Little Entente, Budapest wanted to focus on Yugoslavia in the late autumn of 1937, with German assistance. Kánya was also prepared to make a concession to Yugoslavia that he would not make his territorial wishes the object of acts of war, provided that Yugoslavia granted cultural autonomy to the Hungarian minority.<sup>63</sup> His Chief of Staff, István Csáky explained the Hungarian proposal in more detail in a conversation with German Foreign Minister Bohle: Hungary can only follow Germany's example in marching into Czechoslovakia if it has an absolute guarantee that Yugoslavia will not attack it. Since Germany would also benefit from a simultaneous Hungarian attack, the Hungarian Government would prefer that "Germany should guarantee the *present* Hungarian-Yugoslav frontier militarily (italics from original – Á.H.). In the event of such a German guarantee, Hungary is prepared to give up *forever* (italics from original – Á.H.) the territory which Yugoslavia received from Hungary".<sup>64</sup>

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63 In conversation with Weizsäcker, Bakach-Besseney said that it was conceivable that the Hungarian government would make a border recognition promise to Yugoslavia, which was out of the question with Romania (*Wilhelmstrasse*, 243); Kálmán Kánya described the border recognition proposal in a later instruction sent to the Hungarian Embassy in Warsaw as a request for Yugoslavia's neutrality in the event of a conflict with another neighbour in return for final recognition of the Yugoslav-Hungarian border, and also for certain concessions for the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia. (*DIMK. II*, 519. Kánya's instructions to the Hungarian temporary representative in Warsaw, 4 August 1938).

64 *Wilhelmstrasse*, 256. Bohle's report on his meeting with Csáky between 23 and 27 January 1938.

However much Berlin has emphasized the normalization of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations, the Wilhelmstrasse has not been impressed by the Hungarian Foreign Minister's offer. Nevertheless, the Hungarian government was determined to get the German government to guarantee a Hungarian-Yugoslav agreement at all costs. Berlin, however, showed little inclination to do so. When Hitler finally offered Stojadinović on 17 January 1938 that if Yugoslavia wished to establish a clear situation with Hungary by means of a treaty and needed a guarantee, Germany was prepared to assume the role of guarantor, Stojadinović refused Hitler's offer on the grounds of the Little Entente.<sup>65</sup> Hungary then gave up again for the time being, leaving it to Germany to decide when it saw fit to inform Stojadinović of the Hungarian government's far-reaching offer.<sup>66</sup>

### *The Bled Agreement*

After a six-month break in the negotiations, which had been interrupted in the autumn of 1937, the Hungari-

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65 The Yugoslav prime minister and foreign minister said that unfortunately he could not enter into negotiations or conclude an agreement. However, as his situation is much more stable than in the summer, he will do everything possible within his autonomous powers to improve relations further. (MOL K. 74-5-I. incoming-1938 Berlin. Sztójay's report 23/01/1938).

66 *DGFP. D/V*, 246-247. Erdmannsdorff report, 7 March 1938. On 11 April 1938, Sztójay handed over a memorandum to Weizsäcker in private notes, stating that Hungary was willing to recognise the Trianon border with Yugoslavia, provided that Belgrade would guarantee its complete neutrality in case Hungary got into conflict with one of its neighbours. (*DGFP. D/V*, 266 Weizsäcker's note of 11 April 1938).

an-Little Entente negotiations were given renewed impetus in April 1938. The question arises, however, whether Hungary really wanted to reach an agreement with the Lesser Entente states or whether its aim was merely to avert the odium of the failure of the negotiations. Considering that Hungary's foreign policy after the Anschluss was determined by its relations with Germany, the latter view seems justified. Until the German-Czechoslovak relationship was clarified, it was impossible to predict not only the position and fate of Czechoslovakia but also that of the other two Little Entente states, which would have been absolutely essential for the development of the Hungarian position vis-à-vis them. It was probable that the concessions that could be extracted from the Little Entente states would be short-lived, while the commitments undertaken on the Hungarian side could put the Hungarian government in an uncomfortable position in the event of further shifts of power.<sup>67</sup>

The Hungarian government wanted to negotiate and reach an agreement primarily with Romania and Yugoslavia in the new phase of negotiations and wanted to make any agreement entering into force dependent on the subsequent accession of Czechoslovakia.<sup>68</sup> This was a reassuring sign

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67 *DIMK. II*, 346 Letter from the Hungarian minister in Prague, János Wettstein to Bessenyei, 2 May 1938.

68 Kánya acknowledged the personal contribution of the Yugoslav Prime Minister to the improvement of relations and the more favourable atmosphere, but expected Belgrade to take further concrete steps (in 1937 there was indeed some improvement in the situation of Hungarians living in Yugoslavia: some 27 public cultural associations were formed, whose statutes were not approved, but they could operate and give lectures without any problems, etc. On 3 Sep-

that first Stojadinović and then Little Entente conference in Sinaia also endorsed the Hungarian government's view that agreement with only Yugoslavia and Romania should be the first step and that the finalization of the agreement should wait until Czechoslovakia's accession.<sup>69</sup> Stojadinović went even further. He offered to enter into negotiations with Hungary independently of the other two states and, if a deal was reached, to sign it. He would, of course, bring the agreement to the attention of the other two Little Entente states with the comment that they should try to reach a similar agreement. But if, after a few months, no such agreement with the other two states had been reached, he would independently implement and publish the agreement with Hungary.<sup>70</sup> The Hungarian government welcomed the Yugoslav

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tember 1937, the Yugoslav Minister of Public Education issued a decree authorising the opening of the Hungarian section of the teacher training college in Belgrade, which had been closed for four years, with 20 students; in the autumn of 1937, four teachers were appointed to the Hungarian sections in Csantavér, Magyarkanizsa and Torontálvásárhely. (*DIMK. II*, 348-350. Kánya's instruction to Bárdossy. 02/05/1938).

- 69 "I hear that the Yugoslav prime minister has been very vocal in this respect and has succeeded in asserting his position by joining the wavering Romanians." (*DIMK. II*, 356. Bárdossy's report to Kánya. 08/05/1938).
- 70 MOL K. 74-6-I. incoming - 1938 Belgrade 23/05/1938. The same was confirmed by the Polish minister in Belgrade, Roman Debicki, who informed his Hungarian counterpart of a conversation with Andrić. The gist of it was that Yugoslavia, according to Andrić, had a completely free hand and was not bound by anything with regard to the agreement with Hungary in relation to the two other Little Entente states. The Polish envoy concluded that Stojadinović was willing to be far more forthcoming on the content of the settlement. In return, he had only two wishes: that with regard to minority issue, the Hungarian government

Prime Minister's proposal and entrusted the new Hungarian minister in Belgrade, Baron György Bakach-Bessenyei, with the leadership of the negotiations for the clarification of Hungarian-Yugoslav relations.<sup>71</sup>

Bessenyei held talks with Stojadinović on 13 July. The first issue to be discussed was the fate of the Hungarian minorities, recalling the memorandum handed over the previous year. He followed this up with another proposal for Belgrade to facilitate the issuing of passports to Hungary. He also drew the Yugoslav Prime Minister's attention to the untenable situation of the substantial number of people of Hungarian origin living in Yugoslavia and who had not been granted citizenship. As far as strictly political questions were concerned, the Hungarian Government also left the initiative and the determination of the pace of rapprochement to the Yugoslav Government. In this way, it shifted the responsibility for any stalemate in the negotiations away from itself.

Stojadinović gave strong answers on the minority issue. He said that he had considered some points of the previous memorandum excessive at the time of its handover; he thought that it was possible to be more accommodating on the issue of passports, but he could not com-

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should not try to "impose" on him certain persons as minority leaders, and that it should not operate with complicated legal formulas ("*avec des formules compliquées juridiques*"). (*DIMK II*, 410).

71 The appointment of the former head of the political department as envoy to Belgrade in June 1938 made it clear that the Hungarian government's intention to engage in bilateral negotiations with Yugoslavia was serious. The gesture was also appreciated in Belgrade, where it was clear that Bessenyei belonged to Kánya's inner circle and would therefore be the most reliable intermediary for the Foreign Minister's ideas and intentions. (*DIMK. II*, 486. Bessenyei's report of 12 July 1938).



ment on the issue of persons living in Yugoslavia who were neither Hungarian nor Yugoslav citizens, which was a serious matter, as it was estimated to affect some 30.000 people. However, when it came to political issues, Stojadinović's "not only words but almost his expression became blurred".<sup>72</sup> He acknowledged that he was expected to take the initiative and set the pace, took a "wait and see" position on the issue of the Little Entente, but wanted to think about the more, strictly speaking, political issues.<sup>73</sup>

In the summer of 1938, it was believed in Budapest that Stojadinović wanted to improve relations with Hungary, in exchange for which he might be willing to make some modest concessions on minority issues. However, it was taken for granted that the Yugoslav prime minister would not want to tie himself down politically and would be content to keep the door to Hungary open for himself with the help of "a few little remarks".<sup>74</sup> It was this imaginary door that his statement to the Hungarian minister on 21 August, after the opening of the Little Entente conference, was intended to open wider. The Yugoslav prime minister told Bessenyey that he had collected all the data on Hungarian minorities and instructed General Secretary Andrić to discuss the whole material in detail with him after the conference had finished and to tell him what concessions could still be made in the minority field.<sup>75</sup>

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72 *DIMK. II*, 489-490. Bessenyey's report of 12 July 1938.

73 *Ibid.*

74 *Ibid.*

75 *DIMK. II*, 546. Report of the minister in Belgrade to the Minister of Foreign Affairs. 21 August 1938. Ivo Andrić prepared a report for the autumn of 1938, which examined and compared the situation

Two days later, on August 23, 1938, the Bled Declaration was signed, in which the Little Entente recognized Hungary's right to rearmament, and the latter undertook an obligation of non-aggression towards them. According to official Yugoslav opinion, this declaration opened up new horizons for good Hungarian-Yugoslav relations. No such enthusiasm was felt on the Hungarian side. The official Hungarian assessment of the declaration is given in the circular telegram sent by Kálmán Kánya to the Hungarian embassies in connection with the Bled Communiqué. The Hungarian Foreign Minister took it for granted that a full agreement had been reached with all three Little Entente states on the question of rearmament and non-aggression. However, in the Hungarian view, the main focus of the negotiations was on the minority question, on which an almost final agreement had been reached with Romania and Yugoslavia in the form of a gentlemen's agreement.<sup>76</sup> This

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of the Southern Slavic minority in Hungary, and the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia. He came to the conclusion that, on the one hand, the Southern Slavs in Hungary were not as insignificant in number as Hungarian statistics claimed, estimating their number at 160-165 thousand, and that the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia was not a particularly significant factor, either in numbers or in unity, and that the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia had greater opportunities and rights for free development in the cultural sphere than their national counterparts in Hungary. (Иво Андрић, *Дипломатски списи*, (Београд: Просвета, 1992), 207-210).

76 However, the finalisation of the whole complex of agreements was put on hold by Czechoslovakia. Due to the special importance of the minority issue in Prague, it was not possible to agree on a suitable declaration text. According to the Hungarian position, the minority issue in Czechoslovakia could only have been settled if the fate of the Hungarian minority there had been settled "internally"

means that in addition to the official declaration, Hungary, Romania, and Yugoslavia signed a separate communiqué. In it, the parties undertook to take all measures of their own accord to remove any obstacles to the further development of friendly relations.<sup>77</sup> The term minority was therefore not included in this declaration. Nevertheless, everyone knew exactly what the main obstacle to the “further development of friendly relations” was.

The Hungarian government was satisfied with the result achieved. It regarded the Bled Agreement as a final agreement for Yugoslavia and intended to shape its policy towards Belgrade accordingly. A similar position was taken by the Yugoslav side.<sup>78</sup> There was therefore no obstacle to making real gestures towards the Hungarian minority in Yugoslavia, which gradually took place in the course of 1939-1940.

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in a reassuring manner, or if a declaration text had been agreed upon that went further than the Romanian and Yugoslav declarations. (*DIMK. II*, 552-553. 23 August 1938).

77 *DIMK. II*, 557.

78 MOL K. 74-6-I. incoming-1938. Belgrade 22/09/1938.

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