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## Foreign policy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes toward the Albanian government of prime minister Noli

### *Abstract*

The paper analyses the interest and factors that influenced the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes' attitude toward the Albanian government under Fan Noli. Initially the SCS Government opposed international recognition and endorsement, later actively supporting the overthrow of Noli's government. Diplomatic and military means were used to reach those objectives. A new regime led by Ahmet Zogu came back to power in Albania. Consequently, a new era in bilateral relations was opened in the Balkans. The newly installed regime led by Ahmet Zogu resulted in a calmer nationalist movement of Albanians in the Kingdom of SCS, but at the same time, Albania became the centre of rivalry between Italy and the Kingdom of SCS in the Balkans, with both powers competing for control over Albania. This article was composed using a comparative and chronological approach based on archival sources and relevant literature. While previous studies explored this subject using Yugoslav and Albanian sources, this paper uses foreign literature, aiming thus to unveil new insights and neutral perspectives, shedding light on both specific facts and broader international relations.

**Key words:** Fan Noli, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, Ahmet Zogu, Italy.

### **Introduction**

Following World War I, Albania faced challenging economic, political, and social circumstances. Despite its neutrality, both the Central Block and the Entente Powers utilized its territory for military operations. As a result, Albania suffered widespread destruction, with villages and settlements looted and burned. Moreover, 70 thousand people died of war, famine, epidemic diseases, and the Spanish flu (*Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, 2002: 98).

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In addition to economic and social issues, Albania also encountered serious problems with foreign and domestic policy. In terms of foreign policy, the Entente Powers, bound by their World War I commitments,<sup>1</sup> did not recognize Albania's independence and territorial integrity despite the assurances provided by the Conference of Ambassadors in 1913. In this way, the question of independence and borders of Albania became one of the main topics of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919-1920, known as the "Adriatic question". France and Great Britain attempted to fulfil the claims made by Italy, Serbia, and Greece by breaking up Albania, offering a draft compromise in January 1920. But the US insisted that the "Adriatic question" be resolved by direct talks between Italy and Yugoslavia, excluding Albania. As a result, after many rounds of discussions and negotiations, in November 1921 the Conference of Ambassadors recognized Albania's independence and territorial integrity (*Historia e shqiptarëve gjatë shekullit XX*, 2019: 63, 153).

Also, Albania was run into internal conflict and instability. Sustainable development of the Albanian state, through the establishment and consolidation of national institutions, was the main task and challenge of the political elite. But such a journey was accompanied by internal rivalry. This rivalry was partly associated with a struggle for interests, the control of key positions and political advantages (Austin, 2003: 54). In addition, a serious financial crisis prevailed over Albania; the state administration officers had not been paid for several months. As a result, the army and the gendarmerie began to get out of state control. The political struggle of 1921-1924, which took place both within parliament and outside of it through media, was not just a simple struggle for power. Albanian historiographers describe it as a clash of different viewpoints. This clash gradually took its shape and two political fractions emerged. The democratic forces considered it essential to implement anti-feudal reforms aimed at relieving the working masses from their burdens and enhancing their livelihoods. The other side, the conservative faction, aimed to preserve the remnants of the feudal order inherited from the Ottoman Empire (Çami, 2007: 337-338).

The core of the conservative faction consisted of feudal lords and landowners, who sought to maintain their privileged positions and political power, with Ahmet Zogu at its helm. On the opposing front were the intellectual forces within Albanian society, aligning their actions with the country's developmental needs and the interests of the majority of the Albanian people, led by Fan Noli (Çami, 2007: 338).

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<sup>1</sup> Treaty of London (April 26, 1915) was a secret treaty between Italy, Great Britain, France, and Russia. It aimed to bring Italy into World War I on the side of the Entente. Its content included territorial promises to Italy on the Adriatic coast. In the case of Albania, Italy was promised the city of Valona and its bay. To provide an easier implementation of this agreement, Italy shall not oppose the division of Northern and Southern Albania between Montenegro, Serbia and Greece, should France, Great Britain and Russia so desire (*Agreement between France, Russia, Great Britain and Italy*, 1920: 2-8).

The differences between these two factions became clear during the elections of December 1923. Alongside Ahmet Zogu and Fan Noli, several other opposition groups competed in the elections, including the leadership of the country's youth led by Avni Rustemi (Vllamasi, 2012: 334-335). Neither political party won a majority. Among the 102 seats in the Assembly, opposition candidates won 39 seats, while Ahmet Zogu won 44 seats. Due to certain deficiencies in the administrative provisions of the Statute of Lushnja, the Assembly convened on January 21, 1924, to determine the regime's structure, the seat of the capital, and finally to draft the law on the upcoming parliamentary elections (Mema, 2021: 355).

The Constitutional Assembly (as the parliament was then called) was characterized by unprecedented political conflict. There were cases when not only words, but also weapons were used against opponents. On February 23, 1924, an attempt on the life of prime minister Ahmet Zogu occurred, resulting in minor injuries. However, Avni Rustemi, a political opponent of Ahmet Zogu, was assassinated later on (Mema, 2021: 347).

Since the opposition was convinced that Rustemi's murder was a government conspiracy, it imposed a condition on the government to surrender the conspirators within 48 hours. After there was no reaction to the request, the opposition and its followers marched toward the city of Vlora. There a revolutionary committee for South Albania was formed, led by Fan Noli, together with a branch for North Albania led by Luigj Gurakuqi and Xhemal Bushati. The committee opposed the country's legitimate government for a few days. They called for an uprising. Masses of people joined the insurgents, who began their march from the North and the South toward Tirana. They faced no resistance and thus entered Tirana (Këlcyra, 2012: 111-112). The uprising that started on May 24 ended on June 10, 1924, with the insurgents' victory (Çami, 2007: 339).

On June 19, 1924, Fan Noli presented a political program, which involved improving the general social and economic situation, uprooting feudalism and establishing democracy. He introduced radical reforms in state administration and the judicial sector (Stavrianos, 2000: 720). Special attention was paid to the disarmament of the population and the restoration of public peace and order (*Dokumente e materiale historike nga lufta e popullit shqiptar për liri e demokraci 1917-1941*, 1959: 152). His external program aimed to establish amicable diplomatic relations with all states. Shortly after, Fan Noli informed the League of Nations and the delegates from Great Britain, France, Italy, and Greece in Albania about the formation of a new government (Arifi, 1981: 240). A similar note was sent to the Kingdom of SCS. Fan Noli informed the SCS prime minister Nikola Pašić about the formation of a liberal Albanian government that aimed to build a modern and democratic state. Fan Noli declared his intent to open a fresh chapter and establish friendly relations with the Kingdom of SCS (AQSH, 1924, F: 251).

## Reaction of SCS government

The developments in Albania and the formation of a government under Fan Noli stirred significant interest in Belgrade. Political circles in the Kingdom of SCS speculated that Italy might have stood behind Noli. Regarding the events in Albania as an internal matter, the SCS Government declared in May 1924 that foreign intervention in Albania to reinstate peace and order was unnecessary (AK, 1924, F: AIHU). This assertion, of course, specifically concerned Italy, taking into consideration the Resolution of November 1921. Italy was also interested in the events in Albania. Both countries initiated talks over potential solutions for the situation in Albania. As a result, on June 9, 1924, an agreement between the Kingdom of SCS and Italy was reached, considering the events as an internal matter of Albania (Vinaver, 1985: 76). Undoubtedly, both countries aimed to deter each other from getting involved in Albanian affairs.

The diplomats of the Kingdom of SCS did not rush to answer Noli's note. According to Branko Lazarević, head of the Albania section at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of SCS, the wording of a response would reflect the stance of the SCS Government. Lazarević had been informed by his diplomatic counterpart in Tirana that Sir Harry Eyres, the British minister stationed there,<sup>2</sup> was unsure if a government that emerged from the insurrection should be recognized (TNA, 1924, F: FO371/963). According to Robert Parr, the British consul in Albania, Noli's government did not intend to convene the Parliament. That was the reason why the Foreign Office decided to delay recognition until the government conducted itself in a civilized manner (Teli, 2005: 247). Thus, Lazarević decided to formulate a careful answer. In line with this stance, the SCS prime minister Nikola Pašić acknowledged the receipt of the note and expressed his hopes for constructive neighbourly relations. However, regardless of the diplomatic courtesy, the response note did not imply that the Kingdom of SCS recognized Noli's government (TNA, 1924, F: FO371/963).

Belgrade was given the opportunity to examine the circumstances surrounding the response. As a result, there were several arguments against recognition. First, Noli's attempts to get closer to the Soviet Union were taken into account. Noli had proposed the establishment of diplomatic relations between Albania and the Soviet Union (Puto, 2009: 377). This act caused widespread dissatisfaction in the Kingdom of SCS, which feared communism.

Another point of contention was that Fan Noli was seen as someone with pro-Italian leanings and supportive of the irredentist movement in Kosovo, particularly the

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<sup>2</sup> Great Britain was represented in Albania in rank of a legation. A legation was a diplomatic representative office of lower rank than an embassy. Where an embassy was headed by an ambassador, a legation was headed by a minister.

Committee for the National Defence of Kosovo<sup>3</sup> (Komiteti Mbrotja Kombetare e Kosoves) led by Bajram Curri and Hasan Prishtina. The security services of the Kingdom of SCS obtained information that Hasan Prishtina was in touch with the VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization),<sup>4</sup> aiming to establish cooperation between Albanians and Macedonians (Ристић, 2020: 157). Similar views were held within the diplomatic circles of the Kingdom of SCS, attributing the events in Albania to VMRO and the Kosovo Committee. They emphasized that the “*kachaks*<sup>5</sup> who fled our country have found shelter and support in Northern Albania from the new forces in power” (Arifi, 1981: 143).

The public sentiment in Belgrade was conscious of the repercussions stemming from the events of June 1924 in Albania, as reported in Serbian newspapers: “... failure of Ahmet Zogu means that our country has lost a lot” and “... Bajram Curri was fighting against the government and his units consisted of hundreds of *kachaks* from Kosovo” (*Srbija i Albanci – Pregled politike Srbije prema Albancima od 1913. do 1945. godine*, 1989: 28).

Another argument was the fact that Belgrade traditionally had its own men with political influence in Albania. Individuals like Esat Pasha, Marka Gjoni and others played a role in furthering Belgrade’s objectives in Albania. Consequently, Noli was not regarded in the same light by Belgrade; Ahmet Zogu stood as the sole hope for the Kingdom of SCS. Zogu’s alignment with Belgrade was not arbitrary either; he might have been willing to make concessions to the Kingdom of SCS if they supported his return to power (Austin, 1998: 143-148). Pašić believed that Ahmet Zogu’s skills and ambition for power could bring success to “SCS minimal project”. This meant “an independent, but weak and unconsolidated Albania” with a regime under the influence of the Kingdom of SCS. An unstable Albania would create a negative image internationally, potentially leading to no objection from any state if circumstances allowed for Albania’s partition (Arifi, 2015: 283).

At the end of World War I, Nikola Pašić held significant influence as a key politician shaping the foreign policy of the newly formed Kingdom of SCS. His stance

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<sup>3</sup> Committee for the National Defence of Kosovo (1918-1924) – political and military organization that aimed to liberate Kosovo and unite it with Albania (*Fjalori Enciklopedik i Kosovës*, 2018: 827).

<sup>4</sup> Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), Macedonian Vatrshna Makedonska-Revolutionshna Organizatsiya (VMRO), a secret revolutionary society that was active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its many incarnations struggled with two contradictory goals: establishing Macedonia as an autonomous state on the one hand and promoting Bulgarian political interests on the other. Retrieved January 15, 2023. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Internal-Macedonian-Revolutionary-Organization>

<sup>5</sup> Kachak movement – a movement for resistance and liberation from the Ottoman Empire and from 1913 onwards against Serbian/Montenegrin rule in Kosovo. This movement was defeated only in 1928 (*Fjalori Enciklopedik i Kosovës*, 2018: 966).

towards Albania was focused on preventing Albania from becoming a satellite of Italy and preventing Albanian irredentism in Kosovo by halting its support (AK, 1924, F: AIHU).

Considering those arguments, the Kingdom of SCS initially sought to obstruct other nations, especially Italy, from recognizing Noli's government. The foreign minister of the SCS Government, Momčilo Ninčić, conveyed to the Italian *charge d'affaires* in Belgrade on June 22, 1924 that he considered it reasonable to delay a decision on this matter until the stance of the Albanian government became clearer; three days later he repeated that "... the situation in Albania won't be fixed quickly, therefore it was not worth rushing and recognizing governments that are formed one after the other" (*Documenti Diplomatici Italiani, Settima Serie: 1922-1935*, 1959: 151).

Furthermore, Ninčić reassured his Italian counterpart that France and Great Britain were also not eager to promptly recognize Noli's government. At the same time, Bijikok, the French representative in Tirana, acted in accordance with SCS diplomacy, while the British Government received counsel from its representative in Albania. Robert Parr cautioned his government against recognizing the newly formed government in Albania until ensuring its acceptance by the Albanian people (Teli, 2005: 247). The SCS intervened with the Little Entente allies' government. Prior to and even after the events of June 1924, the Czechoslovak Government attempted to establish a consulate in Albania. However, the Kingdom of SCS hindered these attempts. Lazarević informed the Czech *charge d'affaires* in Belgrade that the SCS Government backed Ahmet Zogu and strongly recommended postponing the consulate's opening until the situation stabilized (Milo, 1992: 248).

In addition to the commitment to prevent the recognition of Noli's government, the next objective of the SCS Government was to prevent Italian penetration into Albania. Despite the joint assurances about the neutral stance concerning Albanian events, the SCS Government remained concerned about how Italy might interpret the Conference of Ambassadors' resolution of November 9, 1921, concerning the Italian mandate over Albania. The resolution, recorded in the League of Nations, contained two clauses: (1) if Albania "was not able to maintain its territorial integrity" then the matter would be raised in the League of Nations, and (2) Great Britain, France, and Japan promised that if the matter were presented to the League of Nations, they would propose to the Council of the League "that the restoration of Albania's borders be entrusted to Italy" (Milo, 2013: 531-532).

Based on these clauses, the foreign minister of the SCS cautioned the British and French diplomats in Belgrade, seeking assurance that such a mandate would not be imposed in cases in which events in Albania could not be classified as foreign intervention. Otherwise, his government would be forced to sign a special agreement with Italy (Avramovski, 1986: 232). Should there be a separate agreement with Italy, the

Kingdom of SCS would become an active factor in all discussions regarding Albania, including its potential partition.

In response to the above-mentioned claims, on July 14, 1924, the British Government assured the Kingdom of SCS that "... according to the framework of the Ambassadors Conference Resolution of November 9, 1921, any issue related to the territorial integrity of Albania was subject of discussion at the League of Nations". Moreover, the British representative in Belgrade was instructed by the Foreign Office to make it clear to the SCS counterparts that "... the British government was not inclined to disclose in advance its stance if a claim would be considered before the Council of the League of Nations" (Avramovski, 1986: 232-233; Jarman, 1997: 643).

At the same time, the Kingdom of SCS focused on propaganda and accused the Albanian Government of encouraging armed gangs at their border. Attempting to influence international opinion about the problems derived from the situation in Albania, King Alexander requested Mussolini's intervention in Tirana to "put a stop to the harassment that Albania was pursuing against the Kingdom of SCS" (Arifi, 1981: 245; Puto, 2009: 368).

The stance toward Noli's government persisted even after a newly elected SCS government took office at the end of July 1924. Nikola Pašić was replaced by Ljubomir Davidović (AK, 1924, F: AIHU). Davidović's appointment raised hope in Tirana due to his reputation as a liberal politician. The Albanian minister in the Kingdom of SCS, Ali Riza Kolonja, reported to his government that the new administration would likely pursue a more realistic policy towards Albania and Albanians in Kosovo. In a somewhat naïve belief, he said that the SCS foreign minister Marinković "has some sympathy for us" and would maintain friendly relations with Albania. However, three weeks later, Ali Riza Kolonja contradicted himself by announcing that the Davidović government was pursuing the same policy of supporting Ahmet Zogu (Puto, 2009: 368).

## **Organizing armed intervention**

Beginning in September 1924, the SCS Government was now convinced that the Great Powers would not recognize Noli's government. It seemed that a strategy to prevent the recognition of Noli's government had been pursued over the summer, and by autumn, the Kingdom of SCS had progressed further by aiming to overthrow it. Toppling Noli's government involved installing someone else as the ruler of Albania, aligned with the interests of the Kingdom of SCS. Ahmet Zogu emerged as the primary candidate. Amid the events in June, Zogu fled to the Kingdom of SCS, accompanied by an entourage of 300 individuals (19 officers, 150 soldiers, 50 gendarmes, mercenaries, and administrative clerks) (AQSH, 1924, F: 251). His brother-in-law, Ceno Kryeziu of



Gjakova, esteemed among the SCS authorities, facilitated his escape to the SCS (Vlora, 2003: 526). Upon arriving in Belgrade, Zogu promptly took action. He immediately met with prime minister Pašić, the head of the Albania section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, B. Lazarević, and other senior civil and military officials. The state protocol made a special concession in this case, treating Zogu as a politician in power, not as a regular political immigrant. Zogu was also praised by the pro-government press as a “spiritual friend of Yugoslavia, who has always shown his friendship to our country”. Zogu expressed his ambitions for power, although they were initially veiled (AQSH, 1924, F: 251).

After settling in, apart from expressing gratitude to the SCS Government for their hospitality, he shared his uncertainties regarding the stability of the Noli administration with Serbian newspapers (*Srbija i Albanci - Pregled politike Srbije prema Albancima od 1913. do 1945. godine*, 1989: 29). The alignment of shared interests paved the way for negotiations between Ahmet Zogu and the SCS Government. At the same time, Ahmet Zogu conducted secret negotiations with the Italian Government. At some point in August 1924, Zogu’s special envoy, Jak Koci, travelled to Rome to ask for financial aid from Italy. Zogu offered Mussolini a naval base and numerous concessions in exchange for financial aid of 2 million Italian lire (Fischer, 2004: 80). However, Zogu’s interactions with Italy were disclosed by the SCS authorities. The SCS diplomats concluded that Zogu was determined to return to Albania, and if the SCS Government did not support him, he might get support from Italy. To secure political sway over Ahmet Zogu and gain a range of concessions upon his ascent to power, the SCS decided to support his movement. This agreement between Ahmet Zogu and Nikola Pašić was allegedly reached sometime around August 1924 (Avramovski, 1968: 131).

There are different theories about the existence of this agreement, particularly when Pašić was in opposition and Zogu was in exile. Two versions of this agreement exist: one suggesting it was a written accord, while the other implies it was only verbal. In general, the SCS Government supplied political, financial, and military support to overthrow Noli’s government in Albania, and in turn, Ahmet Zogu had to fulfil SCS’s claims. The SCS’s claims in the written agreement consisted of 16 points, with some of the most notable ones including the following: (1) Albania was committed to joining the Kingdom of SCS through a personal union; (2) Ahmet Zogu would be recognized as Albania’s president and he would recognize the Karađorđević dynasty; (3) the Albanian Ministry of War would be abolished and Albania would renounce a national army; (4) Albania would have a gendarmerie sufficient to keep the peace in the country and to protect A. Zogu and his regime; (5) a customs union between Albania and the Kingdom of SCS would be established, with open borders; (6) the Kingdom of SCS would take over the diplomatic representation of Albania; (7) Albania would cede Saint Naum monastery and the Vermosh and Kelmend settlements to the Kingdom of



SCS; (8) the Albanian Orthodox Church would relinquish ties with the Patriarchy of Constantinople and would be linked with the Serbian Orthodox Church; (9) Albania would pay no interests for ethnic Albanians outside of its borders; (10) the Albanian Government would declare at the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris that it renounces its claims for sovereignty over the Saint Naum monastery and the Vermosh and Kelmend settlements, remaining in Yugoslavia's possession; (11) the Albanian Government could not declare war on any country without the prior consent of Yugoslavia; etc. (AQSH, 1924, F: 251).

On the other hand, a well-known Yugoslav researcher named Živko Avramovski, famous for his thorough studies in Yugoslav archives, dismissed the presence of a documented agreement. He only mentioned a verbal agreement, outlining several key points: annexation of St. Naum by the Kingdom of SCS; dissolution of the Committee for the National Defence of Kosovo; establishment of Serbian influence over the Albanian Orthodox Church; commercial agreements and the establishment of a SCS-capitalized bank in Albania; Albania's agreement to finalize railway construction deals without prior consultation with the SCS Government, and more (Avramovski, 1968: 131).

However, the agreement reached between Zogu and Pašić was not binding between the states. It needed to be subject to parliamentary ratification and registration with the League of Nations because neither Zogu nor Pašić were in power when it was reached. Ahmet Zogu had been exiled, whereas during the period from July to November 1924, Nikola Pašić was in the opposition (AK, 1924, AIHU).

However, this does not imply that the agreement was non-existent, because when Pašić came back to power in November 1924 the campaign against the government of Noli intensified, and the preparations for armed intervention were almost complete. At the same time, the stance of the international community against Noli solidified due to two specific political acts by Fan Noli: firstly, his satirical speech at the League of Nations that tarnished the reputation of the Albanian Government and created a negative impression of Great Britain and France, after which the SCS foreign minister congratulated Zogu and informed him that "his road to Albania was open now" (Vilamasi, 2012: 386); and secondly, Noli's visit to the Soviet embassy in Rome on the way back from Geneva, followed by fierce propaganda highlighting the Bolshevik threat. During the session of the League of Nations in Geneva, in order to neutralise the position of Belgrade and to show that Albania was not a threat to any country, Fan Noli stated to the media that, "From our side, we seek positive neighbourly relations with the SCS Kingdom, and we need peace in order to concentrate all our attention on the organization and economic development of the country." "As for me, I see no reason why our countries should not live in peace" (*Srbija i Albanci - Pregled politike Srbije prema Albancima od 1913. do 1945. godine*, 1989: 31). He also paid attention to the issue of Albanians in the SCS. He declared: "As for the Kosovars, the Albanian government

has taken measures to keep them calm... a small and poor state like ours cannot afford the luxury of irredentism. If you want the Kosovars not to be the cause of strife and hatred between the two countries, then you should be tolerant of the Albanian minority in your kingdom” (Avramovski, 1968: 131). Despite these declarations, circumstances related to the communist danger facilitated Ahmet Zogu’s efforts in organizing an intervention and recruiting his followers in the Kingdom of SCS (TNA, 1924, F: FO371/9640). He also continued to recruit dissatisfied people in Albania. Ceno Kryeziu, Muharrem Bajraktari, Murat Kaloshi, Abdurrahman Krosi, and many more, were engaged to find people on both sides of the border. Ahmet Zogu obtained the means to pay his followers. He received 105 million dinars, or 30,000 golden Napoleons from the SCS Government (Dedijer, 1949: 124). He also received funding from the APOC (Anglo-Persian Oil Company) amounting to 50 million dinars (50,000 sterling), half of which was provided upfront and the remaining sum upon his return to power, when the oil concession was ratified (*Historia e Popullit Shqiptar*, 2002: 241).

The support that Ahmet Zogu received from the Kingdom of SCS was observed by the British consul in Skopje: “... a merchant from Dibra informed me that, at the beginning of this month (December), Ahmet Zogu sought a financial loan from Dibra’s merchants. Merchants’ reaction was weak, but after a while, a car that belonged to Ahmet Zogu brought 5 million dinars. Who else could provide such an amount excluding the Financial Administration of the SCS Kingdom?” (TNA, 1924, F: FO371/1054).

By late autumn, the SCS Government began to concentrate its military along the border, with the aim of supporting Ahmet Zogu when the time was right. According to British sources, the forces gathered at the border were “... around 1000 volunteers from SCS armed forces, mostly Montenegrins and Albanians; 1000 reserve forces from Kercova, Tetova, Gostivar and Dibra, dressed in Albanian native costumes, who believed that this intervention may lead to a union of their lands with Albania; 5000 highlanders from Mat area, followers of Zogu; around 800 soldiers and 40 officers of General Wrangel,<sup>6</sup> who were sheltered in the Kingdom of SCS; and 16 regular and uniformed soldiers of the Kingdom of SCS. Furthermore, 2 batteries of mountain artillery, 10 heavy machine guns and 20 light machine guns, ammunition, and motorized transport units were made available to Ahmet Zogu” (Swire, 2005: 350-351).

<sup>6</sup> Petr Nikolaevich Wrangel (1878-1928) “was a Russian general and political leader. He participated in the Russo-Japanese War, the First World War, and the Russian Civil War. After a successful Red Army offensive in the region of Perekop in November 1920, Wrangel was forced to order the evacuation of civilians, government institutions and the remnants of the army from Crimea. Wrangel and his staff landed in Constantinople, where he stayed from the end of 1920 until 1922, when he left for Sremski Karlovci in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes”. Retrieved January 15, 2023. Available at: [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/wrangel\\_petr\\_nikolaevich\\_baron](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/wrangel_petr_nikolaevich_baron)

Despite numerous facts that demonstrated preparations for armed intervention, the government of Noli decided, albeit belatedly, to raise its voice. A note addressed to the Great Powers in early November noted that military preparations by SCS authorities aimed at aggression against Albania (Milo, 1992: 305–306). At the same time, Albania faced a precarious situation. By the end of November, discontent in the Albanian army was evident. The officers of the battalion stationed in Permet declared their disloyalty to the government. On the other hand, monetary incentives and conspiracies against Fan Noli were employed to garner civilian support. The envoys of Ahmet Zogu managed to secure support from some minor tribal leaders (*TNA*, 1924, F: FO371/9640).

In early December 1924, Ahmet Zogu moved to Skopje where he coordinated the action plan with the military command of the SCS Third Army (Milo, 1992: 314). This move signified the readiness for intervention, which became evident when Fan Noli announced the parliamentary elections for the Constitutional Assembly (*TNA*, 1924, F: FO371/9640). Zogu could not allow Noli to turn the current unconstitutional regime into a legal constitutional regime, which would then be recognized internationally. To justify the intervention, the SCS diplomacy once again warned the powers about the Bolshevik threat coming from Albania, highlighting that a Soviet representative was being dispatched to Tirana (Swire, 2005: 350-351). From the office of Branko Lazarević came the propaganda about the Bolshevik threat. He sent correspondence to the governments of France, Great Britain, Italy, and the US about the activities of the Soviets in Albania. His communication stated that the Soviets were using the situation in Albania against the Kingdom of SCS and that they were supported by the Committee for the National Defence of Kosovo and the VMRO. Lazarević also claimed that individuals associated with these organizations were found in possession of letters and materials, evidence of both moral and financial support from the Soviets (Silajxhiq, 1999: 162-163).

There is no doubt that propaganda about the Soviet threat alarmed European diplomatic circles. At the same time, to cover its role, Belgrade reiterated its stance of non-involvement in the developments in Albania. The British minister in Belgrade received assurances that "... the government of SCS was not interested in getting involved in the battle between the political parties in Albania, it would follow a strict line of neutrality, and that the border authorities would be warned once again to avoid supporting any invasion" (*TNA*, 1924, F: FO371/9640).

However, this stance was modified shortly after. The SCS Government shifted its narrative to inform the public opinion about the need for alterations in Albania. Though not explicitly stated, it hinted its support for a government led by Ahmet Zogu. SCS foreign minister Ninčić expressed his vision of a free and independent Albania, with a government capable of maintaining public order and stability. To emphasize the SCS Government's singular intent of government change, Ninčić conveyed to the

British Ambassador in Rome: "... if tomorrow half of Albania is offered to us, we will reject such an offer... the current government does not give a hope for some stability, the only government that can offer political stability is the one led by Ahmet Zogu... if the SCS government has limited Ahmet Zogu before, preventing him from taking the political initiative regarding Albania, now the SCS government is not predisposed to maintain such restrictions, and tends to give him freedom of action". Ninčić spoke about an Italian-SCS agreement through which neither Italy nor the Kingdom of SCS would seek economic or political advantages in Albania (TNA, 1924, F: FO371/9640).

In fact, Ninčić's visit to Rome of December 10, 1924, aimed at securing Italian approval for the intervention in Albania. The official report of this meeting merely references the commitments outlined in the joint declaration of June 9, 1924, without further details. However, insights from the Albanian diplomat in Rome, Tefik Mborja, shed light on Ninčić's mission. Following a conversation between Mborja and Contarini, the secretary-general of the Italian Foreign Ministry, Mborja sensed from Contarini's language that Rome had not only distanced itself from Noli but had also possibly reached an unspoken understanding with Belgrade. It appeared that the SCS foreign minister had left Rome with the belief that a disguised intervention would face no opposition from the Italian side (Teli, 2005: 254).

On December 19, 1924, the operation to overthrow the Fan Noli government began. The attack came simultaneously from three directions. A unit that departed from Dibra towards Tirana was commanded by Ahmet Zogu. Tribal leader Elez Isufi and his followers lined up on the side of Zogu. Almost without any resistance, the unit arrived in Tirana. A second attack ensued from Montenegro, similarly met with no resistance, as the unit advanced to Shkoder. Difficulties arose only from the third direction, specifically along the Prizren-Lume road. The unit commanded by Ceno Kryeziu encountered resistance from Bajram Curri and his forces. Ceno Kryeziu was defeated and driven across the border. As a result, when the operation was in danger, Miloslav Jelić, an official from the SCS Foreign Affairs, took charge of the operation. He requested assistance from the Prizren military garrison. A battalion of infantry and two mountain battery units were available for the operation. He recommenced the operation, defeating Bajram Curri, and then reinstated Ceno Kryeziu's command. The operation's success was now assured. On December 24, 1924, Ahmet Zogu entered Tirana triumphantly (Avramovski, 1968: 130-131).

The SCS forces that supported the operation moved back to avoid signalling foreign intervention. Only Wrangel's mercenaries remained with Zogu. As the intervention continued, on December 18, 1924, the Albanian Government once again appealed to the Great Powers to contact Belgrade in order to stop the aggression. The same request was sent to the League of Nations. The complaints were futile. The attitude of the Great Powers regarding the developments had already been decided along the lines

proposed by British diplomat Nicolson: “if Albania files a complaint in the League, we should delay the complaint... slow it down a bit” (Bland and Price, 1986: 25). At the same time, hoping that this act would change the attitude of the Powers, Fan Noli’s government requested the departure of Soviet envoys who had arrived in Albania a few days before. They left on the same day (TNA, 1924, F: FO371/9643). Moreover, a protest note was directed toward the SCS Government accusing them of organizing gangs against Albania. An SCS diplomat replied that the accusations were not worthy of discussion (TNA, 1924, F: FO371/9640).

It should be noted that the penetration of Zogu’s forces was facilitated by a sabotage in the ranks of the Albanian army and the negligence of Noli’s government. The reality of the threat was only realized by Noli’s government when Zogu’s forces had already reached Peshkopi. Under these conditions, on December 19, 1924, Noli declared the general mobilization of the population. At critical junctures, the command of the Albanian army blocked the movement of the Albanian volunteer forces of Vlora, Korça, and Golloberde, relocating officers to Shkoder, causing confusion within the army there. This type of interference lowered the army’s morale, making it increasingly challenging to resist Zogu’s intervention (Milo, 1992: 321).

Along with his ministers, their families, and some military personnel, Fan Noli fled to Italy (“The Courier,” 1924: 5).

The SCS Government denied any responsibility for the intervention. Only three years later, in April 1925, Ninčić acknowledged the SCS’s involvement. In a statement to a French newspaper, he expressed: “... this was the only situation in which intervention in terms of Bolshevik threat was possible” (Puto, 2009: 382). Ninčić did not present any other key reasons for the intervention; his purpose was to portray the Kingdom of SCS as a devout anti-Bolshevik ally.

## Summary

Political instability in Albania reached its peak in June 1924 when the political group led by Fan Noli took over the government. The Kingdom of SCS had a vested interest in the events in Albania for a variety of reasons: the rivalry between Italy and the Kingdom of SCS in the Balkans, the Albanian National Movement in Kosovo, communism, and the need to establish political influence over Albania. Albanian government that emerged from a rebellion, headed by Fan Noli, was not perceived positively in Belgrade. The Kingdom of SCS took a negative stance against Fan Noli’s government because of its closeness to the National Movement in Kosovo, doubts that he was working for Italy, and the links to the Soviet Union. In the beginning, Noli’s government was not recognized by the Kingdom of SCS. Later, it was overthrown following an agreement between the SCS and Ahmet Zogu. The SCS Government

financially and militarily supported the armed intervention in Albania. The Great Powers silently approved the overthrowing of Noli's government. A new regime came to power in Albania. Consequently, a new era in bilateral relations was opened in the Balkans. The newly established regime led by Ahmet Zogu resulted in the reduction in the nationalist movement of Albanians in the Kingdom of SCS, but at the same time, Albania became the focal point of rivalry between Italy and the Kingdom of SCS in the Balkans, with both powers competing for control over Albania.

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## Vanjska politika Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca prema albanskoj vladi premijera Nolija

### *Sažetak*

Rad analizira interese i čimbenike koji su utjecali na stav Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca prema albanskoj vladi pod vodstvom Fana Nolija. Početno je Vlada Kraljevine SHS bila protiv međunarodnog priznanja i podrške, da bi kasnije aktivno podupirala svrgavanje Nolijske vlade. U tu su svrhu korištena diplomatska i vojna sredstva. Novi režim koji je predvodio Ahmet Zogu preuzeo je vlast u Albaniji. Rezultat je bilo otvaranje novog razdoblja u bilateralnim odnosima na Balkanu. Novi režim pod vodstvom Ahmeta Zogua rezultirao je smirenijim nacionalističkim pokretom Albanaca u Kraljevini Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, ali je istodobno Albanija postala središte sukoba između Italije i Kraljevine SHS na Balkanu, pri čemu su se obje države natjecale za kontrolu nad Albanijom. Ovaj rad koristi komparativni i kronološki pristup temeljen na arhivskim izvorima i relevantnoj literaturi. Dok su prethodna istraživanja ovoj temi pristupala koristeći jugoslavenske i albanske izvore, ovaj rad koristi stranu literaturu, te tako nastoji steći nove uvide i neutralnu perspektivu, otkrivajući i specifične činjenice, ali i šire međunarodne odnose.

**Ključne riječi:** Fan Noli, Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, Ahmet Zogu, Italija.