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Beyond Nationalism? The Inter-war Period and Some Features of the Complex Transformation of Southeastern Europe

Abstract: In Southeastern Europe, the end of the First World War marked a profound geopolitical transformation and the start of an important and conflicting process of modernisation of the economic, social and political structures of the countries in the region. Agrarian reforms, changes in political structures, increasing urbanisation, population growth, and ad hoc legislation for minority rights protection were some of the most important issues addressed in those years. This essay aims to elucidate the main knots and contradictions in the internal and international life of the countries of Balkan Europe, showing how efforts to change political and social structures encountered enormous obstacles in the intrinsic weakness of those socio-economic structures, but also in the will of important segments of the Balkan ruling classes, especially those who had realised the nationalistic dreams of the decades before the Great War, to reassert the supremacy of their respective power and ethnic groups. Yet there were changes, and important ones at that. In foreign policy, for example, the Balkans was the only region in Europe where an attempt was made to turn the so-called 'spirit of Locarno' into a concrete achievement, albeit unsuccessfully.

Keywords: interwar years, modernisation, reforms, Balkans, economic policy, foreign policy.

Several years after the end of the First World War, many Western travellers and observers passing through the Balkan Peninsula left a miserable image of the places they had visited, that of savage and backward places far from the standards of true European civilisation, which, in their minds, roughly coincided with the Western part of the continent. Maria Todorova's acute observations about this are well known. In pages of extraordinary lucidity, Todorova did not hesitate to speak of judgments strongly influenced by racist prejudice against the populations of Southeastern Europe.[1] At the same time, peasants and their villages always appeared as miserable places where nothing had changed over the centuries. Yet, Ulf Brunnbauer rightly noted that from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, in various parts of Southeastern Europe, such as in Bulgaria, many rural

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[1] See M. Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 204–215.

areas had made significant progress: more and more villages had schools, running water and other basic infrastructures, cooperatives had sprung up and, in some cases, even agricultural financial institutions.[2] Those judgments were also the result of an overall negative view of the new Balkan reality and were certainly influenced by the enormous territorial changes and the emergence of new states, such as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SHS) and Albania[3] – and drastically changed borders of other countries, which, on the whole, seemed to sanction the affirmation of the most intransigent nationalism and to bury forever the very idea of great multi-ethnic empires, but in a context marked by a long trail of violence, if not by real low-intensity wars.[4] Unrest, wartime events, internal chaos, and population displacement, among other things documented in great detail by the European media of the time and disseminated *en masse* in Western public opinion[5], overshadowed the complex of great social, economic, cultural, and other changes that affected interwar societies in the Balkan space.[6] Already in the early 1920s, there was no shortage of those who pointed out that the time had come to move beyond the deep-rooted prejudices of the ruling classes in Southeastern Europe. In fact, as an observer of the time, Hamilton F. Armstrong, pointed out, politicians in the region were authentically European and, while it was certainly true that many Balkan statesmen had in the past put their own interests and those of their power groups before the real needs of their respective populations, "[...]it may fairly be said that the men who have ruled the destinies of the Balkan states during the past five years have been neither more nor less scrupulous than their colleagues in Western Europe".[7]

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[2] See U. Brunnbauer, "Overview. Challenges of changes. Economic and population growth, social and cultural transformations up to World War II." In *The Routledge Handbook of Balkans and Southeast European History*, eds. John R. Lampe, Ulf Brunnbauer (London: Routledge, 2021), 291. However, it is also fair to point out that particularly after the fall of communist regimes, many historians who have discussed the interwar period have emphasised that, apart from the major and often unresolved problems that burdened the region, for the other half of the continent these were years of consolidation of nation-states, accelerated modernisation of the economy and infrastructure, and greater inclusion and participation of citizens in decision-making processes and political structures of the relevant states. See U. Brunnbauer, "Introduction : (re)writing history in Southeast Europe". In *(Re)writing history: historiography in Southeast Europe after socialism*, ed. Ulf Brunnbauer (Münster, Lit, 2004).

[3] In fact, Albanian independence was proclaimed in Vlora on 28th November 1912 by a group of Shqiptar notables headed by Ismail Qemali. However, despite of the international recognition granted by some important powers, Albania entered a period of chaos and violence that made that declaration of independence an entirely aleatory event. The arrival on the Albanian throne of a king, the German Prince Wilhelm of Wied, who counted on the support of the concert of powers, was insufficient to give substance to that proclamation. Wilhelm's reign, plagued by internal instability and widespread violence, lasted only six months (from March to September 1914). His authority never reached beyond Durrës, where he was defended by the Italian naval infantry. With the outbreak of the Great War, Albania was occupied and divided between the Central Powers and the Entente, and it was not until the early 1920s that the Albanian state painstakingly acquired its first yet fragile state and administrative structure and began its state-building process. See R. Clegg Austin, *Founding a Balkan State: Albania's Experiment with Democracy, 1920–1925* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2012).

[4] See M. Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 1998), 43.

[5] See K. Kaser, "Visualizing the Balkans: the Balkans Wars, the Great War and Visual Modernity." In *Contextualising Changes: Migrations, Shifting Borders and New Identities in Eastern Europe* (Sofia: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic

With the sole exception of Bulgaria, where the protagonist of the early post-war years was the leader of the Bulgarian National Agrarian Union (BZNS), Aleksandar Stamboliyski, other countries had political figures such as Nikola Pašić, Ion I. C. Brătianu or Eleftherios Venizelos with their respective circles of power and clientele, who had dominated the public scene in the prewar years and retained power in the first post-war phase and spearheaded the crucial early stages of the reconstruction and development of Southeastern Europe. In order to better understand this second phase of Balkan modernisation, it is worth clarifying that, albeit with different nuances, all three of these notable Balkan statesmen seemed determined to transform their countries based on the Bismarckian premise that it was better to have the most active forces of society on one's side rather than to move against them. Like Venizelos, both Pašić and Brătianu had organised their respective parties as extensions of their power and were ready to change tactics and principles according to convenience and the specific situation; this would shape the long-term social and political development of their countries.[8] As the political scholar Joseph Roucek noted in the early 1930s, the parties of the Balkan leaders were based on specific interests and, above all, were mainly instruments that served these dominant personalities, who, in turn, represented the backbone of those organisations. Once those political figures disappeared, their parties dissolved, leaving power vacuums that threatened the very survival of the entire system.[9]

Museum Bulgarian Academy of Science – Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Science, 2015), 13–27.

[6] On endemic violence in the Balkans in the years before and after the Great War see: M. Bionfich, *The Balkans. Revolution, War and Political Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[7] See H. Fish Armstrong, "The New Balkans", *Foreign Affairs* 3, 2 (1924), 293.

[8] See A. Dimou, *Entangled Paths towards Modernity. Contextualising Socialism and Nationalism in the Balkans* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009), 352–353.

[9] See J. S. Roucek, *The Politics of the Balkans* (New York: McGraw–Hill Book Company, 1939), 10–14.

In this article, I focus on analysing some aspects that are less related to military and political violence, trying to highlight the set of novelties and transformations that, in a particularly complex and contradictory context, marked the start of the most important, albeit conflicting, process of modernisation and social change, but also of the gradual reappraisal of the international role of the region as a whole, which had been initiated in Southeastern Europe up to that time. Unlike the first modernising wave, which we can broadly frame in the period between the birth and political consolidation of nation-states – in other words, in the first and second half of the 19th century – up to the First World War, which was marked by the decisive importation of the Western political, economic and social model[10], this second phase saw, on several levels, a much more critical approach to the development pattern of the West and a greater focus on local political and cultural paradigms and traditions.[11] It was, after all, a matter of trying to harmonise some major projects for the transformation of more traditional economic and social structures with the needs determined by new political and ethno-social structures. This was the case with the sweeping agrarian reforms initiated in all new states in the region in the aftermath of the war, albeit with a different spirit and mechanisms. The process of land redistribution, in which national issues were intertwined with those that had to do with agrarian and economic-social dynamics, was subject to extremely complex administrative procedures –not always perfectly linear – that in almost all countries lasted well beyond the end of the 1920s. The combination of these factors also determined the amount of the total land distributed to the peasants. In Bulgaria, for example, where the latifundium practically did not exist, and the outcomes of the two Balkan wars and the Great War – disastrous for the Bulgarians – followed by population displacements to neighbouring states meant that the bulk of the population was compactly ethnically Bulgarian, the expropriated land area did not exceed 3.2% of the total. In contrast, in Romania and the Kingdom of SHS, 12.3% and 8.3% of the available agricultural land, respectively, was expropriated, while a unique case was Greece where, under pressure from the arrival of a huge mass of refugees from Asia Minor and other Balkan territories following the population exchanges agreed with Turkey and Bulgaria, 40% of the entire arable land was expropriated and four-fifths were allocated to refugees.[12] However, beyond the economic and social results, on the whole rather disappointing and, notwithstanding some significant progress in certain territories, incapable of radically changing the yield and quality of production as well as the living standard of the rural population, the revolution triggered by the agrarian reforms was to accelerate and accentuate the predominant role of the state. It was the state institutions, in fact, that decided on the quantity and quality of land to be expropriated and redistributed to specific social and ethnic groups and, by extension, on the main economic asset of each Balkan country. Thus, the state completely abandoned the liberal spirit to assume the role of decision-maker and active protagonist in economic life.[13] The set objectives were important. Once the great multinational empires had been definitively destroyed, the Balkan successor states, although far from compact in terms of ethnic composition, tried to achieve the so-called 'Staatsnation', i.e., to redefine their national territories to make them as ethnically and culturally as homogeneous as possible and closely attached to a notion of purity; in short, political objectives trumped economic and social ones.[14] In other words, the economy, understood in its broadest sense and based on the principles of integral economic nationalism (highlighted in 1923 at the congress of Turkish economists who gave substance to Kemal Atatürk's vision in which military victory had to be crowned by economic triumph[15]) became an instrument for launching the process of state-building and/or perfecting.[16] In Yugoslavia, more than in any other country in the region, the new authorities' preferred instrument was colonisation, implemented mainly through war veterans generously subsidised by the state and carried out particularly in Kosovo, Vojvodina and Macedonia. Colonisation decrees preceded the issuing of ad hoc agrarian regulations. This practice intensified in the 1930s. According to the most radical exponents of Serbian nationalism, such as Djoko Perin, if the results proved unsatisfactory (and especially in Kosovo and Macedonia, the resistance of Albanian communities was quite intense and led to serious clashes), the Kingdom would resort to more extreme measures, such as the expulsion of non-Slavic populations through population exchanges with neighbouring countries.[17] In short, if the overall disappointing result of the bumpy road of agrarian reform seems to have been well trodden, it is no less true that a closer look reveals that the changes that affected the countryside at least helped initiate a process – admittedly a rather difficult one – of transforming Balkan agriculture (and, more generally, the whole of Central and Eastern Europe) towards a more efficient and competitive Western model – albeit for reasons that often had little to do with social equity. The power of large landowners was reduced; societies, albeit timidly, opened up to new trends and techniques, and new social groups emerged with their own expectations and specificities. Indeed, if the agricultural reform progress was incapable of making a qualitative leap in various national economies and the living standards of the peasantry[18], the most significant contribution of the green wave was made in the social sphere: The countryside made its voice heard at the centre, and politicians could no longer afford to turn their head away from its needs, not least because even the minimal improvements in their living conditions meant that their contribution became decisive in the growth of domestic markets that, among other things, underpinned industrial growth.[19] This was also possible by virtue of a process of the progressive emergence of agrarian populist thought, which, influenced by multiple models from the West (Stuart Mill, Michelet, etc.) and the East (Russian populism, Tolstoyan humanitarianism, etc.), was more clearly defined in the Balkans, acquiring an original conceptual and ideological form. In Bulgaria, for example, the years in power of the BZNS (1919–1923), despite all their contradictions and errors, which certainly helped accelerate its downfall, contributed to clarifying the agrarian specificity and the possibility of carving a third way between Western capitalism and Eastern Bolshevik communism. Beyond Stamboliyski's violent invectives against both of these models, some BZNS champions and associated intellectuals more accurately specified the movement's objectives and ideological structure. For example, the populist Todor Vlajkov focused on criticising what he saw as Marxist dogmatism and, in particular, the elimination of private property, which, according to him, would also lead to an unhealthy proletarianization of the peasantry. On the contrary, according to Vlajkov, land ownership would be a powerful stimulus for generating a civic attitude even among the rural masses, strengthening the state and its structures and easing the way towards an agrarian democracy.[20]

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[10] See D. Mishkova, "Modernisation and Political Elites in the Balkans before the First World War". *East European Politics and Societies* 9, 1 (1994), 63–89.

[11] See R. Daskalov, D. Mishkova, "'Forms without Substance': Debates on the Transfer of Western Models to the Balkans." In *Entangled Histories of the Balkans, Vol. Two: Transfer of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, eds. Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova (Leinden: Brill, 2014), 3–4.

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[12] As Roderick Beaton noted, the exact number of refugees who arrived in Greece between 1922 and 1925 will probably never be known. The most reliable estimates speak of between 1.3 and 1.4 million people, i.e., a quarter of the Greek population before their arrival. According to the 1928 census, every fifth inhabitant of Greece was a refugee. See R. Beaton, *Greece. Biography of a Nation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019), 251.

[13] See D. Müller, "Statehood in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe". In *The Routledge History Handbook if Central and Eastern Europe in Twentieth Century, Vol. 2, Statehood*, eds. Włodzimierz Borodziej, Sabina Ferhadbegović, Joachim von Puttkamer (London: Routledge, 2020), 160–161.

[14] See C. Giordano, "Land and ethnic tensions: scenarios in Southeast Europe". In *Potentials of Disorder*, eds. Jan Koehler, Christoph Zürcher (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 75.

[15] See I. T. Berend, *Decades of Crisis. Central and Eastern Europe before World War II* (Berkley: California University Press, 1998), 234.

[16] Cf. U. Brunnbauer, *Overview... op. cit.*, 293.

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[17] Cf. D. Müller, *op. cit.*, 162–163.

[18] Here, too, the importance of the emergence of the cooperativist movement should be noted, at least in its theoretical implications, capable, according to many champions of agrarian reform, of being a valid response not only to the problems of the agricultural world but of society as a whole. See J. Eellend, "Agrarianism and Modernization in Inter–War Eastern Europe". In *Societal Change and Ideological Formation among the Rural Population in the Baltic area 1880–1939*, ed. Piötr Wawrzeniuk (Huddinge: Södertön Höhskola, 2008), 42–51. In the Balkan context, the most interesting case is undoubtedly Bulgaria, where the creation of a cooperative system became an integral part of Aleksandar Stamboliyski's process of radical transformation of agriculture and the country itself. The goal was to create a strong national cooperative network, based, in addition to the National Bank of Bulgaria, the effective financial support of two ad hoc banking institutions: the Bulgarian Agricultural Bank and the Bulgarian Central Cooperative Credit. See Ts. Marinova, N. Nonovsky, "Cooperative Agriculture Farms in Bulgaria (1890–1989)." In Munich Personal RePEc Archive, 6–11.

[19] See A. Mai Köll, "Agrarianism and ethnicity – an East Central European survey". In *History and Culture of Economic Nationalism in East central Europe*, eds. Helga Schultz, Eduard Kūbu (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts Verlag, 2006), 143–152.

For many observers, this was the period when even in Southeastern Europe the state ceased to be an abstract entity that, at best, appeared for tax collection and conscription. This took place in a context in which the economic role of governments steadily grew, contributing to the reconstruction of the economic fabric first by intercepting and guaranteeing fundamental international loans and then by bestowing generous orders and high protective tariffs[21], measures that strengthened national production in an increasingly globalised and competitive market. Following the shock of the Great Crash of October 1929, there was again a need for direct intervention by various executives to prevent the collapse of agricultural and industrial enterprises and support domestic demand and exports. The state and its institutions became necessary and irreplaceable props not only for defending borders but also for ensuring social and economic security in their respective countries.[22] Another aspect of this vision was the constitutional transformations that affected the state-building process after the war. In Bulgaria, the threat posed by the unprecedented agrarian power to the pivotal concepts of the so-called Tārnovo Constitution (1879), adopted in the aftermath of gaining autonomy from the Ottoman Empire and based on the Belgian constitution of 1831, was a powerful glue that united the traditional parties in a tough opposition to Stamboliyski's agrarian dominance. The all-out defence of the Tărnovo Constitution based on solid principles of liberal-bourgeois democracy and involving notions such as private property, the separation of state powers, and a parliamentary monarchy, became the embankment that had to be defended at all costs to prevent Bulgaria from becoming a dictatorship of the people based on the 'peasant democracy' preached by Stamboliyski's closest lieutenants, such as Rayko Daskalov. This danger brought together against BZNS and its leader a composite and intransigent front of traditional political forces, united in the so-called National Entente, determined to defend the old order by safeguarding the previous Bulgarian state-building from a green revolution that seemed to be heading towards a peasant republic, with the recognition of full citizenship rights and the limitation of all political and social rights to be enjoyed only by members of the peasant class.[23] Yet, apart from the agrarian reform measures and despite numerous aggressive declarations by the agrarian leaders, during their rule, the right to property enshrined in the Bulgarian constitution was not affected, except in a very limited and almost symbolic way in the BZNS reforms, and on many occasions the harshness of intentions was successfully tempered by an intervention of some of the most authoritative and experienced BZNS members, such as Finance Minister Marko Turlakov. It was Turlakov and his men who avoided implementing the most extremist reforms. It should be noted that in those very years, industrial investments continued receiving constant attention and full support from the agrarian executive.[24] The need to explore a third way to modernise the productive and social structures of their respective countries through developed agriculture and a modern industry linked to local production (e.g. efficient and large-scale processing of agricultural products) remained central to the vision of the Balkan agrarians, but these objectives required a strong state intervention to defend the still weak countryside from the aggressiveness of financial capitalism and the short-sightedness and conservatism of urban bureaucracies.[25] Of course, private property was not affected even by the new constitutions approved by the parliaments in Belgrade and Bucharest in 1921 and 1923 respectively, and yet the concept of property "[...] was not regarded as an unrestricted right in the liberal-individualist sense".[26] Article 17 of the Romanian constitution assigned a social function to private property, while Article 37 of the constitution of the Kingdom of SHS, while guaranteeing the right to property, specified that purposes and limits of property would be regulated by statutes.[27] These were not just details, as the subsequent economic, social and political developments in Romania and Yugoslavia clearly demonstrated. In the first case, the undisputed leader of the country's post-war transformation was the Liberal Party (or rather, the National Liberal Party/PNU, as it was always meaningfully called after the war), led until his death in November 1927 by Ion I.C. Brătianu, the great architect of the so-called financial oligarchy, a small but powerful group of bankers and industrialists grouped around the Romanian Bank.[28] It was precisely Brătianu who gave the country a nationalist economic turn, encapsulated in the motto Prin Noi Înșine! (On our own!), inspired by the eponymous title of an article published by Vintilă I. C. Brătianu, Ion's brother and long-time Minister of Finance, in 1905. The idea, set out in the electoral programme produced by the party in November 1921, reflecting Mihail Manoilescu's corporatist theories, was to promote deep state intervention in the economy and offer strong financial support to businesses by imposing high import duties. Romanians were to become masters at home by excluding foreign financiers and companies even from the most important sector of the national economy: oil. The enterprise was framed as a patriotic measure, but its first beneficiaries would have been precisely the members of the aforementioned liberal oligarchy.[29] After all, throughout the 1920s, the theorists of Romanian liberalism, especially the sociologists Stefan Zeletin and Dimitrie Drāghicescu, had tried to promote the idea that the liberals' dominant role in politics and economy stemmed from the fact that they actually represented the whole country.[30] The other aim of this manoeuvre was to economically marginalise minority elites and, in particular, the Magyar (Hungarian) elites in Transylvania and Banat and Russian elites in Bessarabia by tightening the hold on the Romanian state by, among other things, implementing a rigidly centralised administrative structure in politically important provinces, rich in natural resources but populated by conspicuous non-Romanian populations and on which the bureaucratic machine of Bucharest tightened its grip with suspicious efficiency in the otherwise slow and conflicted process of agrarian reform. 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[20] Cf. B. Trencsényi, M. Kopeček, L. Lisjak Gabrijelčič, M. Falina, M. Baár, M. Janowski, *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe, Vol. I, Negotiating Modernity in the 'Long Nineteenth Century'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 470–471.

[21] The Romanian economist Mihail Manoilescu, one of its most important theorists, saw protectionism as the most powerful weapon to ensure the full success of economic nationalism and the emancipation of small states from the tutelage of great powers. See M. Manoilesco, *La teoria del protezionismo e dello scambio internazionale* (Milan: Treves, 1931), infra.

[22] Cf. M.–J. Calic, *The Great Cauldron. A History of Southeastern Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), 431.

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[23] Cf. C. Promitzer, "Interwar Bulgaria Populism, authoritarianism, and ethnic minorities". In *Interwar East–central Europe, 1918–1941. The failure of democracy-building, the Fate of Minorities*, ed. Sabrina Ramet (London: Routledge, 2020), 185.

[24] Cf. B. Trencsényi, M. Kopeček, L. Lisjak Gabrijelčič, M. Falina, M. Baár, M. Janowski, *A History of Modern Poliitcal Thought in East Central Europe, Vol. II, Negotiating Modernity in the 'Short Twentieth Century' and Beyond*, Part I, 1918–1968 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 144. On the support of agrarian governments' support for the industry, see A. Basciani, "Growth without Development: The Post-WWI in the Lower Danube. Perspective and Problems of Romania and Bulgaria", *Journal of European Economic History* 3 (2020), 146–156.

[25] *Ibid.*, 153–154.

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[26] Cf. D. Müller, *op. cit.*, 158.

[27] *Ibid.*

[28] See K. Hitchins, *Rumania 1866–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 383.

[29] See A. Harre, "Economic nationalism in Romania", *op. cit.*, 257

[30] K. Hitchins, *op. cit.*, 384.

Harre noted, modernisation, as it was understood by the National Liberals, experienced the imposition of a kind of social harmony dominated by an elitist society and was guaranteed by the rigid combination of national unity and economic nationalism.[31] From the perspective of the Romanian elites, one of the primary goals was the full economic and political integration of the peasantry into the country's political life, transforming them into voting citizens with full rights. However, this was always a functional perspective: the peasants remained largely political tools, and the effort remained limited to granting them the right to vote, improving education and assigning land plots, but this social class never became a real and active political subject.[32] The devastating effects produced by the 1929 crisis in Romania showed that the emperor had no clothes. An industrial economy grown artificially thanks to state protection (orders and duties) and to the detriment of the needs of agriculture (which had, directly and indirectly, financed that growth), was not enough to shelter the country from the storm. Indeed, the effects were even harsher when the main consumers (the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie) were no longer able to buy products, and the fragile domestic market dramatically shrunk. The effects of the Liberals' policies and the onset of the crisis also swept away the most modern and ambitious Romanian political project of the inter-war period, the one championed by the National Peasants' Party, which sought to be a synthesis of the best agrarian practices of the old kingdom and the modern nationalism of the Romanian elites of Transylvania. Unlike Stambolijski, the National Peasants' Party did not in any way want to fuel the urban-rural divide and agriculture vs. industry clash, just as they repudiated the economic nationalism of the liberals by heralding, on the contrary, a season of 'open doors' to foreign capital and a focus on the needs of the consumer before those of the producer.[33] The repercussions were terrible: the economic crisis became the grave of the fragile, and imperfect Romanian liberal democracy swept by unprecedented violence fuelled by a poor and lost youth that considered itself betrayed by modernity uncritically imported from the West. Corneliu Z. Codreanu's Iron Guard shrewdly exploited these feelings of anger and frustration, particularly among the youth, the frustrated generation of students, intellectuals, teachers, etc., in its bloody pursuit of power.[34]

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[31] A. Harre, *op. cit.*, 258.

[32] Cfr. S. Radu, "Statul national si integrarea politică a taranilor. O tema de cercetare deschisă". In *România interbelică. Modernizare politico–institutională si discurs national*, eds. Sorin Radu, Oliver Jens Schmitt (Iasi: Polirom, 2023), 128–133.

[33] See A. Harre, *op. cit.*, 261, and R. Daskalov, "Agrarian Ideologies and Peasant Mouvements in the Balkans". In *Entangled Histories of the Balkans, Vol. II, Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, eds. Roumen Daskalov, Diana Mishkova (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 312–318.

In the new Kingdom of SHS, the response of the Serbian elites to the challenges posed by the emergence of a post-imperial and multi-ethnic state was the implementation of a strongly centralised administrative system, which highlighted the feeling, particularly acute in the newly acquired regions (particularly Croatia), that the entire administrative apparatus was run by Serbs. The fact that of all Yugoslav lands, only Serbia could boast a well-established state bureaucratic tradition could only partially justify Belgrade's clear dominance, which became intolerable in the eyes of other citizens due to the great shortcomings in the technical preparation and moral standing of these bureaucracies.[35] In this way, the Yugoslav ideal, increasingly pervasive in the views of the intellectual elites of the three nations in the new state of the South Slavs[36], was immediately tarnished amidst fierce polemics. This aspect, however, was but one element of a much broader issue that led the new state of the South Slavs to implement a range of measures in the 1920s that made it impossible for non-Yugoslav citizens to participate in economic activities. Strongly desired by politicians and directed by both the central and peripheral bureaucracy, a veritable 'Yugoslavisation' of the economy was initiated to ensure that the vital points of industry, trade and the exploitation of natural resources were placed beyond the reach of foreigners.[37] The tight of this operation by various executives, who quickly succeeded one another at the top of the Kingdom of SHS until January 1929, was aimed at achieving a relatively rapid accumulation of national capital and protecting local industries from competition with high tariffs. However, some of the most important effects were the gradual shift of the economic centre of gravity to Belgrade, a generalised, continuous increase in prices, which severely affected the less privileged classes, and the loosening of the traditional ties of economic cooperation that the most dynamic Croatian and Slovenian enterprises had had with Central Europe.[38] Therefore, the economy became an integral part of the clash between Belgrade and Ljubljana and, even more so, Zagreb, whose entrepreneurial bourgeoisie also felt severely affected by the cumbersome mechanism that imposed a single currency, the dinar, replacing all other currencies in 1918 but failing to stabilise until 1925.[39] Thus, in a Yugoslavia with Serbian political domination, the state directed the economy and took possession, directly or otherwise, of some of the key assets of the Yugoslav economic structure. Transport, the most important mining sites and forestry came under state control (in many cases traceable to the political-economic power groups in Belgrade, ultimately leading to Pašić's Radical Party). The arsenals of Kragujevac and Sarajevo, the largest metallurgical enterprises in the Karadjordjević kingdom, belonged to the state.[40] However, the enormous effort made by the Yugoslav state, despite its limited resources, to finance post-war reconstruction should also be emphasised and, above all, the importance of state guarantees for loans necessary to re-launch investments even in the richest regions, often to the detriment of the poorest ones, such as Montenegro or Bosnia, which remained rather neglected. Similarly, the Yugoslav state invested significant financial resources in developing the railway network in Slovenia and Croatia and funding tourism on the Dalmatian coasts. However, it neglected railways and roads in the central and southern regions to the extent that some Serbian, Bosnian or Macedonian territories appeared to be isolated peripheries with no contact with the most active economic, cultural and political centres.[41]

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[34] See R. Clark, *Holy Legionary Youth. Fascist Activism in Interwar Romania* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

[35] Cf. O. Jens Schmitt, *I Balcani nel Novecento. Una storia postimperiale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021), 99–102.

[36] See E. Ivetic, *Jugoslavia sognata, Lo jugoslavismo delle origini* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2012), in particular 153–170.

[37] See Z. Lazarević, "Economy and nationalism in Yugoslavia", *op. cit.*, 270.

[38] Cf. *ibid.*, 270–271.

Despite the negligible political strength acquired in the inter-war period by the Agrarian Party of Greece, the ideas of peasantism also experienced considerable diffusion in the Greek state and exerted considerable influence, especially among intellectuals.[42] Even though certain branches of industry (such as tobacco processing) became important and despite the development of a merchant navy and its relatively lively financial activities (especially in comparison to neighbouring countries), in 1928, 67% of the Greek population lived in villages and small provincial towns with less than 5,000 inhabitants and 53% of the working population was employed in agriculture.[43] However, the intense partitioning of land, resulting in estates too small to develop in a modern manner, antiquated cultivation methods, and the shortcomings of the cooperative and credit network (which also saw an interesting development in those years[44]) prevented the development of modern agriculture and were often at the root of unrest and protests. Suffice it to say that in the early 1930s, only 3 kg of fertiliser per inhabitant was used in Greece, compared to 12 kg in France and Denmark.[45] Like in neighbouring countries, in Greece, an agrarian reform without adequate financial support and modernisation of its structures led to stagnant production and an inability to sustain the country's exports.[46] Again, the state played the leading role in steering economic development. For Greek statesmen, the key to developing industry and agriculture seemed to be the rigid application of 'authoritarian corporatism', which resulted in attempts to further limit workers' rights. These practices became much more pronounced from the mid-1930s with the advent of the Metaxas regime.[47] Overall, these measures were far from sufficient to ensure stable and robust industrial growth. On the contrary, even in Greece, following the Great Crisis of 1929, industrial production simply collapsed, shattering the comfortable illusions of the mid-1920s.[48]

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[39] See J. B. Allock, *Explaining Yugoslavia* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2000), 55–56.

[40] Cf. *ibid.*, 58.

[41] See S. Grgić, "The Kingdom of Diversity and Paternalism. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, 1918–1941", *op. cit.*, 216–217.

[42] See S. Ploumidis, "Agrarian Politics in Interwar Greece: The Stillborn 'Peasant' Parties (1923–1936)", *Studia Universitas Cibiniensis. Serie Historica* IX 31 (2012), 57–87.

[43] See S. Seferiades, "Small Rural Ownership, Subsistence Agriculture and Peasant Protest in Interwar Greece: The Agrarian Question Recast," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 17 (1999), 278–279.

The bloody overthrow of the Bulgarian agrarian regime in June 1923 put an end to the already slim chances of overcoming the particularisms of the new Balkan states by returning to a kind of primitive Balkan peasant fraternity often evoked by Stamboliyski but equally ignored by all its neighbours. The possibility of overcoming political and diplomatic peculiarities by promoting the creation of a unified Balkan economic area actually proved rather uncertain because of the incompatibility of these economies, which were not only all based on agriculture but also predominantly relied on grain.[49] Yet, the severity of the economic crisis, the social dangers it portended and the need for a dialogue to try to combat the most pernicious and destabilising effects of economic instability meant that when the most acute phase of the Great Depression ended (and once again in all the Balkans, the direct intervention of the state proved decisive with the creation of consortia and special ad hoc agencies that, by purchasing large consignments of foodstuffs, managed to contain to some extent the ruinous fall in prices[50]), the most conscious and authentically liberal parts of civil societies began to reflect on the failures produced by the creation of the nation-state. In particular, as Pavlos Hatzopoulos pointed out, there was sharp criticism of the so-called fetishisation of borders as the greatest obstacle to serious regional cooperation and the most insidious threat to peacekeeping.[51] It was time to bring out commonalities and put aside differences. Trying to ride the long wave of Locarno (December 1925), a movement was set in motion in the Balkans, which only partly had connections with official circles (governments and parliaments), to overcome the barriers represented by borders to achieve the formation of a Balkan federation. Politicians also seemed to be influenced by the still small but important change of perspective. In fact, the late 1920s saw an intensification of diplomatic activity that led to the signing of a series of bilateral treaties (the 1929 signing of the treaty of conciliation, arbitration and judicial agreement between Romania and Yugoslavia; a bilateral agreement on real estate between Romania and Bulgaria was signed in 1930, followed by a series of bilateral trade agreements between Greece and Yugoslavia, Greece and Bulgaria etc.), which, although of limited political importance, nevertheless facilitated reciprocal contacts and helped to make the general climate less tense by dispelling at least some of the traditional mistrust that had always characterised inter-Balkan relations.[52] This was the beginning of the Balkan Conferences, the most concrete fruit of the International Peace Congress held in Athens between 6 and 10 October 1929, organized by Greek diplomacy and former Prime Minister Alexandros Papanastassiou with the active support of the International Peace Bureau. In order to avoid diplomatic embarrassments and political incidents, the round of consultations ended with the decision that the countries involved (Albania, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Greece and Romania) would send strictly unofficial delegations to the conference – which began in Athens on 5 October

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[44] See V. Partronis, K. Mavreas, *Agricultural Cooperative Organisations in Greece throughout the 20th Century: A Critical Overview*. At: www.ageconsearch.umn.edu

[45] *Ibid.*, 288–295.

[46] See S. D. Petmezas, "Export-dependent Agriculture, Revenue Crisis and Agrarian Productivity Involution. The Greek Case (1860s–1930s)", *Histoire & Mesure* XV 3–4 (2000), especially 325–337.

[47] See S. Ploumidis, "Corporatist in Inter-war Greece: from Theory to Practice (1922–1940)", *European History Quarterly* 44 (2014), 55–79.

[48] See O. Christodoulaki, "Industrial Growth in Greece between the Wars: A New Perspective", *European Review of Economic History* 5 (2001), 61–89. On the effects of the Great Crisis on the Greek economy, see the seminal work by M. Mazower, *Greece and Inter–War Economic Crisis* (London: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[49] See A. Basciani, *L'illusione della modernità. Il Sud–est dell'Europa tra le due guerre mondiali* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2016), 269–273.

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[50] In 1930, the Yugoslav and Bulgarian governments created special agencies that bought cereals at prices above the international market price; the Hellenic executive for tobacco followed suit in 1931; in 1932, a similar measure was taken by Romania for its own cereal production. See J. R. Lampe, M. R. Jackson, *Balkan Economic History, 1550–1950. From Imperial Borderlands to Developing Nations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 434.

[51] See P. Hatzopoulos, *The Balkans Beyond Nationalism and Identity. International Relations and Ideology* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 103.

[52] See S. H. Lukasik, "The Balkan Entente: a Reassessment of an Aspect of Balkan Diplomacy in the Interwar Period", *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 15 (1998), 73–74. For an emblematic case of concrete political and diplomatic rapprochement between two countries in the region see A. Basciani, "Il patto di non aggressione e arbitrage tra Romania e Grecia (12 March 1928)," *La cittadinanza europea* 2 (2007), 177–183.

1930 – but the governments, at the same time, sought to control the final decisions that would be taken by the delegations.[53] Not all states took part in this first meeting, presumably driven by the same intentions suggested by the meagre number of members of the Yugoslavian delegation (7), and yet the host, the Greek Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos, did not hide the difficulties of the undertaking, the difficult international economic situation, and the heavy legacy inherited from the national confrontations that had arisen between the Balkan states in the last two decades of the 19th century and what could be termed the Great Balkan War of 1912–1918, and made it clear that the time had come to prepare the ground for closer and friendlier regional relations to start a gradual process of Balkan unification.[54] The Greek statesman was too shrewd not to understand the enormous difficulties of the path he had embarked upon, starting with the grave reservations shown towards the project by the political and diplomatic circles in Belgrade and, in particular, the Yugoslav Foreign Minister Vojislav Marinković, who was openly hostile to the project. However, despite these problems, the negotiating skills of the Greek delegation and, above all, the passion with which the press, the attendees, and public opinion followed the proceedings, which at one point employed the motto 'the Balkans to the Balkan peoples', marked the unhoped-for success of the initiative.[55] It seemed that despite all open questions (first and foremost, the unresolved border questions, most acutely felt by Bulgaria), something had begun to change in the spirit of the political-diplomatic relations between the countries of the region but also in the concrete overcoming of the rigid nation-state scheme from which the extremist nationalism and exasperated imperialism of the previous decades had sprung. The final decisions taken by the participants at the first Balkan conference were undoubtedly important not only because it was decided that problems would be solved in the future without recourse to the intervention of any third major power, but also because the foundations were laid for starting negotiations to form a Balkan Pact. It was also decided to initiate more active cultural and student exchanges and a Balkans-wide press service, and in December 1930, the Balkan Journalists' Association was formed. One can fully grasp the importance of this step if one thinks of the decisive role played by the press of the individual countries in fuelling an extremist nationalism opposed to any compromise, portraying it as a betrayal of the nation's sacred historical rights.[56] Finally, six special commissions were also set up to investigate all major aspects of a possible unification project. Once again, economic issues took centre stage. The aim was to create the conditions for closer economic cooperation through financial and monetary union, a common trade policy, in which the creation of a Balkan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (formed in Istanbul in 1932) was to be the forerunner.[57] In 1933, at the opening of the Third Balkan Conference, hosted in Bucharest, the head of the Yugoslavian delegation stated in his opening speech that in the past, the problems between the states of the region had festered precisely because the only perspective from which they had been dealt with was a rigidly political one: "[...] The day we learn that we must start from an economic, social and cultural rapprochement, solutions to the problems will come more easily!"[58]

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[53] See T. Turan, E. Tüylü Turan, "The Rise of the Concept of a Balkan Pact and the First Balkan Conference", *History Studies. International Journal of History* 4, 4 (2012), 436–438.

[54] *Ibid.*, 439.

[55] See B. Raditsa, "Venizelos and the Struggle around the Balkan Pact", *Balkan Studies* 6, 1 (1965), 119–130.

This radical change in Belgrade's attitude towards the Balkan pacification projects should only partly surprise us. The truth is that the entire Balkan society was gradually acquiring a new awareness of its resources, capacities and role, and this climate of greater mutual understanding and closer attention to the needs of the respective peoples was changing not only the old political outlook but also the role that the Balkans were to play in the international context and a new Europe. When, in the summer of 1930, the Yugoslavian national team landed in Uruguay for the first FIFA World Cup and was the only European football team to reach the semi-finals, Belgrade and the entire country felt a surge of pride and enthusiasm, which, for a fleeting moment, seemed capable of overcoming the particularisms poisoning the Kingdom's internal life in those years. Even the historical Belgrade-based daily *Politika* wrote on the eve of the decisive encounter with the hosts that it was now up to the Yugoslav national team to defend the pride of the old world against the sporting arrogance of the new.[59] From an element of crisis, the new Balkans sought to become a factor of stability for the old continent. In October 1933, Alexander I of Yugoslavia and Carol II of Romania visited Sofia together, where they received a warm welcome; this was the start of intense diplomatic activity that would materialise less than a year later with the signing of the Balkan Entente in Athens (9th February 1934), from which, however, Bulgaria and Albania withdrew. The conclusion of that agreement represented the finalisation of the main objective prepared at the four Balkan conferences, but undoubtedly the non-accession of Bulgaria (adamant not to budge on the border issues that concerned it) also represented its sorest spot.[60] However, the following months and years were marked by the most decisive diplomatic, cultural and economic openness achieved by the four Balkan allies towards Sofia and Tirana, with Yugoslavian diplomacy as its most active protagonist, which found an important backing in the Bulgarian technocratic government, an expression of the "Zveno" circle, which came to power in Sofia with a coup d'état in May 1934 and was determined to renew both the domestic and foreign policy of the Balkan kingdom by any means.[61] It is interesting to note that at these junctures, sport became one of the instruments of diplomatic approach and growing mutual trust.[62] Thus, while in Europe, sport and, in particular football, became a powerful factor in nationalising the masses and by no means a stranger to violence,[63] in Southeastern Europe, the Balkan Games (always held in Athens until 1934) made an important contribution to breaking the climate of suspicion and enmity that had hitherto characterised relations between these countries and their respective civil societies in Southeastern Europe. The conclusion of the Balkan Pact and the attempt to assert a new system of values and relations to which the respective civil societies were hostile represented an important effort on the part of Balkan statesmen to break away from the constraints that intransigent nationalism had imposed in the preceding years and to reaffirm the will to independently resolve the still open political and diplomatic issues. However, economic weakness and the persistence of too many political divisions fuelled once again by border fetishism, but also a substantial lack of interest on the part of the Western powers, perhaps sceptical about this attempt or too absorbed in their own internal troubles[64], frustrated the most coherent attempt to place the fate of the Balkans into the hands of the Balkan peoples, to paraphrase the (in)famous motto. In 1938, on the eve of the Anschluss, Germany had already paved the way for the creation of its 'informal empire' in the Balkans and, to name just one example, from 1937 to 1940, German investments in the crucial Yugoslav mining sector had risen from 1 to 20 per cent.[65]

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[56] Cf. I. Ilčev, *Rodinata mi – prava ili ne! B'išnopolitičeska propaganda na balkanskite straini, 1821–1923* (Sofja: Izd–vo Universitet Sv. Kliment Ohridski, 1995), infra.

[57] See R. Preshelenova, "Uniting the Balkans: Common Desires and First Initiatives in the Interwar Period". In *Disintegration and Integration in East–Central Europe 1919 – post–1989*, eds. Wilfied Loth, Nicolae Pāun (Nomos: Verlagsgesellschaft, 2018), 96–97.

[58] Speech by Yugoslav delegate Jovanović, quoted in Hatzopoulos, *op. cit.*, 108.

[59] Quoted in M. Calic, *op. cit.*, 432.

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[60] See R. J. Kerner, H.N. Howard, *The Balkan Conferences and the Balkan Entente 1930–1935. A Study in the Recent History of the Balkan and Near Eastern Peoples* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1936), 133.

[61] See V. Bojinov, "Political Circle "Zveno" between Sofia and Belgrade 1934–1935," *Tokovi Istorije* 3 (2014), 89–97. Writers also tried to make their contribution – albeit with varying results – to broaden the horizons of Bulgarian culture by breaking its isolation and linking it to the main currents of expression and, more generally, to cultural internationalism. See I. Gigova, "The Bulgarian Penn Club: A Study in Interwar Cultural Internationalism", *East European Politics and Societis* 34 (2020), 685–711.

[62] See P. Kissoudi, *The Balkans Games and Balkan Politics in the Interwar Years 1929–1939: Politicians in Pursuit of Peace* (London: Routledge, 2009), esp. see chapters 6 and 7.

[63] See B. J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport. National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006). On the violence unleashed by football, particularly in Central Europe, see D. Wojtaszyn, L. Venuti, "The Political and Social Determinants of Football Hooliganism in Central Europe in the Interwar Period," *History of Sport* 40, 10–11 (2023), 997–1016.

However, in the mid-1930s, although the international political situation grew increasingly complicated, the danger of a new Europe-wide war did not seem immediate. Apparently, the strong diplomatic and military relations with France and the two politico-diplomatic systems of the Little Entente and the Balkan Entente, which were moving towards closer military cooperation, seemed capable of protecting the region from possible turbulence.[66] In this context, in Southeastern Europe, too, alongside the attempt to forge a new Balkan spirit that would help cleanse the public spirit of Balkan countries of the ultranationalist toxicity of the previous decades and allow wider margins of autonomy in international relations, an attempt was made to create a new citizenry, which would be strong, physically healthy and well-educated. Between the 1920s and 1930s, the entire region was traversed by a twofold cultural-educational and eugenic campaign in an attempt to radically change the physical and mental appearance of the local populations. Once again, the undisputed protagonist of these initiatives was the state. Between the mid- and late 1920s, all Balkan countries witnessed the construction of thousands of primary schools, libraries (including mobile libraries) and new universities, accompanied (perhaps semi-consciously) by the emergence of eugenic societies.[67] The first of these associations was created in Cluj, Romania, in 1927. Its members, overwhelmingly considering the peasant village to be the most authentic expression of the national values of their respective nations, did not conceal the severe underdevelopment in which the peoples of these villages lived by proposing measures aimed not only at improving the quality but also the quantity of the race.[68] As the debate on the need to improve the breeding process through selection intensified in Western Europe and Northern Europe, it was also impetuously taken up by eugenic scientists in the Balkans.[69] According to the Greek eugenicist Stavros Zurukzoglou, a modern application of eugenic principles would have provided two fundamental services to the cause of modern state-building: it would have given the nation the responsibility to implement a serious racial policy and ensured the mentally healthy and physically harmonious growth of each individual, who would thus have been able to put their qualities at the service of the needs of the modern state.[70] The consequence was that only the best, the healthiest, the best educated and most professionally successful could serve the nation and steer it towards progress, albeit in a completely reactionary manner.[71] In other cases, the state had to monitor, hide, repress and, above all, prevent the marginalised and defeated from mixing with and contaminating the healthy and active part of society.[72] In Bulgaria, for example, after 1932, eugenic theories attracted the attention of ever larger portions of civil society while eugenic theorists demanded the implementation of strict legislation that would lead to genuine racial hygiene.[73] During the same years, Bulgaria saw the evolution of an educational project linked to physical excellence and the cult of physical education, introducing school curricula in which physical education and the masculinisation of education played a leading role.[74] In Greece, after 1933, the debate on the need to introduce careful race selection through sterilisation in order to reduce the adverse effects of hereditary diseases became quite lively, although, unlike in neighbouring countries, the debate in Greece always remained confined to scientific circles.[75] Finally, the eugenic debate also flourished in the Kingdom of SHS, where the attempt to create a new Yugoslav man was harshly opposed by the Croats who, defending the specificity of their race, hoped to reject what they saw as the Serbian attempt to increase their strength and influence in the Yugoslav state. Yet, it was precisely in Croatia, that the newspaper *Nova Evropa*, in 1924 announced the forthcoming creation of a Yugoslav man, who, compared to the past, would be distinguished by superior physical and, by extension, moral qualities and capable of becoming a model citizen and bringing not only new and healthy subjects but also concrete economic benefits to his homeland.[76]

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[64] See, S. Economides, "The Balkans and the Search for Security: from Inter-War to Post Cold War", *Contemporary Security Policy* 13, 1 (1992), 121–123.

[65] See P. N. Hehn, *A Low Dishonest Decade. The Great Powers, Eastern Europe and the Economic Origins of World War II, 1930–1941* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 117. For a more complete overview S. G. Gross, *Export Empire. German Soft Power in Southeastern Europe, 1890–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), in particular the chapters in part two of the volume.

[66] See P. Wandycz, "The Little Entente: Sixty Years Later", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 4, 59 (1981), 548–564.

[67] For Yugoslavia I refer to Pieter Troch's seminal volume, *Nationalism and Yugoslavia: Education, Yugoslavism and the Balkan before Wolrd War II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020); for Romania to I. Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995); for Albania in A. Hoxha; "Education, Religion and Nation–Building in Interwar Albania", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 70, 3–4 (2022), 463–480; for Greece, finally, see A. Liakos, N. Doumanis, *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 20th and Early 21st Centuries* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 106–146.

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[68] See M. Turda, "Eugenics and race in Southeastern Europe", *op. cit.*, 342–343.

[69] *Ibid.*, 344.

[70] See M. Turda, *Modernism and Eugenics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 77.

[71] Cfr. Y. Antoniou, M. Assimakopoulos, K. Chatzis, "The National Identity of Interwar Greek Engineers: Elitism, Rationalization, Technocracy, and Reactionary Modernism", *History and Technology. An International Journal* 23, 3 (2007), 241–261.

[72] Cfr. S. Petrungaro, "Soup Kitchens and Yugoslav Poor Relief between the Two World Wars", *European Review of History* 26 (2019), 141–162.

[73] See C. Promitzer, "Taking Care of the National Body: Eugenic Visions in Interwar Bulgaria, 1905–1940". In *Blood and Homeland. Eugenics and Racial Nationalism in Central and Southeast Europe 1900–1944*, eds. Marius Turda, Paul J. Weindling (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007), 233–239.

[74] See G. Mircheva, "Physical Education in Bulgarian Schools, 1918–1944: the (re) production of masculinity and re-creation of the national body", *Women's History* 20, 4 (2011), 555–567.

The first victim of mounting political, economic, social and international upheavals was democracy. In the aftermath of the First World War, all states in the Balkans had become constitutional monarchies supposed to find their strengths in agrarian reforms, industrialisation, and projects to build large infrastructure networks, while the security of the new borders was to be ensured by a system of collective guarantees embodied in the League of Nations.[77] However, as we soon saw, the difficulties were overwhelming and, as Oliver Schmitt writes, those fragile democracies, in the ten years from 1928 to 1938[78], were swept away one after the other in favour of royal dictatorships that arose primarily as a reaction "[...] to the numerous crises of integration".[79] The peculiarity of these authoritarian regimes was that the leading role was taken not so much by extreme right-wing political movements (in Romania, even the dictatorial King Carol II was the bitterest enemy of the Iron Guard) but rather by members of the bureaucratic, military, educational and clerical elites, who very willingly put themselves at the service of their sovereign by trampling over old constitutions and every democratic rule in the conviction that the season of parliamentarism had utterly failed and only a strong state not enslaved by democratic conventions could build robust national structures capable of truly ensuring the transition from multi-ethnic empires to homogeneous nations, while at the same time eliminating the post-imperial legacies and the more cumbersome legacies of Western democracies, and then shoring up stability while banishing the spectre of Bolshevism. The imposition of the monarch's personal regime seemed to be the only possible way to ensure stability for the respective countries in turbulent times, and so the contradictions of the controversial Balkan modernisation meant that the crown, elsewhere in crisis or at least relegated to a marginal role, became the backbone of state-building in Southeastern Europe.[80] It is probable that not even stronger and more experienced state and socio-economic structures would have been able to withstand the storm that from 1939 onwards, with the Italian occupation of Albania, hit the Balkan region, already an economic hostage of the Third Reich. However, the impact of the war was devastating. On the ruins of this second and largely aborted modernisation, the post-1945 period saw (except in Greece) the rise of a diametrically opposite modernisation based on the Soviet model, even more alien to those realities and a harbinger of considerable problems, the signs of which are still evident today in the countries that inherited from that experience.

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[75] See S. Trubeta, "Anthropological Discourse and Eugenics in Interwar Greece", *op. cit.*, 131–135.

[76] See R. Yeomans, "Of "Yugoslav Barbarians" and Croatian Gentlemen Scholars: Nationalist Ideology and Racial Anthropology in Interwar Yugoslavia", *op. cit.*, 90–94.

[77] B. J. Fischer, "Introduction". In *Balkan Strongmen. Dictators and Authoritarian Rulers of Southeastern Europe*, ed. Bernd J. Fischer, (London: Hurst&C., 2007), 1–2.

[78] An exception is Greece, where Prime Minister Ioannis Metaxas became the central political figure in 1936.

[79] Cf. O. J. Schmitt, *op. cit.*, 160.

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[80] See J. S. Roucek, *op. cit.*, 12–13.

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