

The Fight for Balkan Latinity. The Aromanians until World War I.

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Abstract *The Aromanians of Vlachs are a people of the Balkans historically mentioned in many sources and documents throughout the centuries, since the age of Roman colonization. Their particular identity emerged during the XIX century, when the rise of nationalism involved also the Vlachs, who demanded the protection of the Sultan against Greek propaganda and denationalization policies. Also the newborn State of Romania was interested in their situation and started a diplomatic controversy with Greece to defend Balkan latinity. The question gained relevance during the age of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and the first World War, when the arrival of Italian troops in the region of Pindus was welcomed by the Aromanians who welcomed Italian army and appealed to the common Latin inheritance for the defense of their national specificity and traditions.*

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1. A Little Community

The Great War showed all the potential conflictuality and ethnic complexity of Central-Eastern Europe and especially of the Balkan regions. Then, many issues became known to international diplomacy and public opinion, which had followed all the evolution of the Eastern Question and the decline of the Ottoman Empire. But at the end of the first world war, when many populations built their own national identity and connected it to the creation of a State, not all the groups of the Balkans could follow such a path. It was not the case of the Latin communities that had inhabited the region for long long times, since the era of Roman colonization.

These groups were often connected with the ancient Roman colonies and while many passages of their history remained obscure, they were gradually absorbed by the larger nations surrounding them. Their extinction was retarded only by “the natural increase of the hill population, the Turkish conquest and the slow advance of education and trade have all been causes that have retarded their extinction” (Wace, Thompson, 1914).¹

Vlachs or Aromanians were known also with different denominations: besides the variations as armâni, rămâni, rămăni, remeni, other denominations are tsintsari, țințari, *kutsovlabi*, *mavrovlabi*, Macedo-romanians, Megleniți; in Greece, they could be divided in *grămușteni*, *pindeni*, *fărșeroți*, in Albania in *caționi*, *cațani*, *căciăuni*, *cara-cațanii* or *saracacianii*. In spite of their different names, they were often identified with the Balkan communities speaking a romance language deriving from Latin.

These communities were settled in different parts of the Balkans, from Istria and Timok valley in the north to the regions on the Pindos mountains - which are placed between Albania, Greece and

¹ Though much of the history of the Balkan Vlachs is obscure, one fact stands out clearly, that from time when they first appear in history they have been allowing themselves to be absorbed gradually by the larger nations that surround them. The natural increase of the hill population, the Turkish conquest and the slow advance of education and trade have all been causes that have retarded their extinction. Wace and Thompson's book is a good work on the reality of Vlachs and especially on the region of Samarina. It stated that the “widespread belief in a Roman origin” would come from the language and from the assonance of the term with the Roman general Flaccus, who should be the ancestor of Latin people in Balkan-Danubian area (p. 265).

Macedonia – their ridges and the surrounding plains in Epirus, Thessaly and Macedonia, the Vermion mountains and Mount Olympus.² They had left historical signs in *Regnum Bulgarorum et Valachorum* (XII century), during the rule of Asans (XII-XIII centuries), in the times of the crusades and later under Ottoman yoke. Even if they were often connected with the traditional activity of nomad sheep-breeding, the latter was not their exclusive occupation and many Vlachs were involved in other activities, in selling alcoholics and were greatly impressed by the trade between the Occident and Orient, especially in the city of Moscopole, which became one of the most important and prosperous cities along the Via Egnatia, until it was sacked and pillaged by Ali Pasha at the end of XVIII century.

Although it seems quite difficult to deal with the Aromanians as a whole – for the different dialects, the lack of ties among them, the different historical destiny... - it could be interesting to deepen the study of the communities of Pindus and Epirus in their historical dimension, especially between XIX and XX centuries. At that time, in fact, also Aromanians began to show a certain level of national consciousness as they expressed precise cultural and political shapes, which could be considered in the perspective of a national revival. Throughout the centuries, Aromanians proved to be like chameleons, *les caméléons des Balkans* (I. Nicolau, 1993), and were thus assimilated by the other communities of the Balkans, maintaining their special features but softening them and often replacing them with others. It happened especially in reference with the Greek language and culture. Vlachs were subjected to a long and gradual process of Hellenization, as a consequence of religious communion, of language assimilation, of commercial relations and sometimes also because of special policies pursued by Greeks such as Kosmas Aitolos, who at the end of XVIII century conducted a strong campaign to convert Aromanians into real and devote Greeks. Moreover, Greek was a sort of *lingua franca* in the South of the Balkans and, for non-Muslims, Greek culture represented an undisputable benchmark. It is not strange that in the Eighteenth century, when many Western travellers - William Martin Leake, Reaserches in Greece, London, John Booth 1814, Pouckeville, e.M. Cousinery - noticed the increasing of Aromenian settling in villages and the growth of their level of education, also these communities took a strong pro-Greek orientation. Nevertheless, it was not a general attitude, as many remained extraneous to this process of political convergence with the independent Greece, contrasting it and showing sympathies for the Ottomans, the Albanians or the Romanians.³

2. Between Romania and Greece

The split between the different political choices increased with the consolidation of respective nationalisms, throughout the XIX century. At the Congress of Berlin, for example, while the pro-Greek factions sustained the concession of Thesalia to Greece, others opposed this choice and opted to remain under the Ottoman rule with the Aromanians of Epirus and Macedonia. This was a consequence not only of blood kinship but also of the policies developed by Romania. At the Congress of 1878, Bucharest decided to catch the sympathy of Aromanians, which were considered part of the same nation, as they were the heirs of the Roman colonists exactly as Romanians as far as to the North of Danube.

At that time, Greece and Romania had already started a political and cultural battle to take Aromanians under their influence. Since 1860's, this battle was fought with the foundation of schools and associations and, after Berlin, it became also a question of international relationships. In spite of the strong impact of Greek policy and the effects of secular Hellenization, however, the connection with Roumania became a topic and could not be refused. In fact, Romania discovered her national identity thanks to her Latin legacy and this point naturally made Aromanians converge under the influence of the new-born Roumanian State. Together with the opening of Romanian schools in the Balkans, the Macedo-Romanian Society of Culture was founded in Bucharest to sponsor and develop the contacts between the

² Most inhabitants of Athens associated the term *Vlachos* with rural, lesser civilised and uncouth people. For others, they were nothing more than good cheese-makers or lamb-producers. This interpretation could not be isolated by the existence of a division between the influences of Greek and Roman culture in the Balkans, which would be cut off in two different zones by the Jireček Line conceptualized by the Czech Konstantin Jireček in his history of Serbians written in 1911.

³ An important connection between Vlachs and Albanians is the language, as it has been explained by Noel Malcolm in the second chapter of his history of Kosovo: "Linguists have long been aware that Albanian and Romanian have many features in common, in matters of structure, vocabulary and idiom, and that these must have arisen in two ways. First, the 'substratum' of Romanian (that is, the language spoken by the proto-Romanians before they switched to Latin) must have been similar to Albanian; and secondly, there must have been close contact between Albanians and early Romanian-speakers over a long period, involving a shared pastoral life. (Some key elements of the pastoral vocabulary in Romanian are borrowed from Albanian.) The substratum elements include both structural matters, such as the positioning of the definite article as a suffix on the end of the noun, and various elements of primitive Balkan pre-Latin vocabulary, such as *copil* ('child' in Romanian) or *kopil* ('bastard child' in Albanian)".

homeland and the Romanians of the Balkans.

In 1860, teachers for Macedonia began to be trained in Bucharest and in 1864 the first Aromanian school was established in Macedonia by Dimitrie Atanasescu in the village of Trnovo.

Aromanians became known also because of the scientific debate aroused by the history of Romanians, who claimed to be the heirs of Romans both in the North and South of the Danube. Anyway, this statement was not totally accepted by those, as Roesler and the Magyar authors, who considered the Romanians of Transylvania as nomad sheep-grazing migrants coming from the Balkans who later settled in the regions devastated by the Tatar invasions in the XIII century. Thus, Aromanians became a subject of the political and cultural debate which accompanied the birth of the independent Romania. The new Kingdom became much interested in the conditions of the Aromanians and in their education. Aromanian communities of Bucharest featured very influent figures as D.D.Cozacovici, Z.Sideri, I.Goga, who sustained the efforts of the governments and contributed to the creation of many schools and to the development of what could be defined both as the help of the Mother-country or as Romanian propaganda.

The "Society for Macedo-Romanian Culture" and "Societatea Culturala Macedo-Romana" could count on the help of many ministers, of the Orthodox hierarchy and on the elite of the Romanian political class. The Societatea de Cultura macedo-romana, inaugurated on 23rd September 1879 was legally recognized by a special law (Nr.1298/15 Aprilie 1880, publicat in Monitorul Oficial Nr. 93 din 20 Aprilie 1880) and had among its members Mihail Kogalniceanu, V.Alecsandri, C.A.Rosetti, Nicolae Kretulescu, Ion Campineanu, Cristian Tell, Titu Maiorescu.

Among the most enterprising Aromanian activists there were the poet Dimitrie Bolinteanu and Apostol Margarit, a teacher of Vlaho-Clisura who was accused of treason by the Greeks for his pro-Romanian attitude. He experienced prison and many attempts of assassination before escaping to Bucharest and coming back in Turkish territory after the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 as inspector of the Romanian schools. With the help of the French priest Jean Claude Faveryal, he supervised the birth of many Romanian schools for the Vlach population of the Ottoman Empire. He dedicated many works to the Aromanian question - *Raport despre persecuțiile școlilor române în Macedonia din partea Grecilor* in 1875; *Réfutation d'une brochure grecque par un Valaque épirote* in 1878, *Etudes historiques sur les Valaques du Pinde* in 1881, *Les Grecs, les Valaques, les Albanais et l'Empire turc par un Valaque du Pinde* in 1886; *La politique grecque en Turquie* in 1890; *Memoriu privind la școlile de peste Balcani* in 1887 -. Even if his activity caused also many controversies and accusations - the Italian Consul Millelire, in 1898, argued that Margarit corrupted the vizir Ali Rifat Pasha to open the schools - Margarit succeeded in becoming the principale voice of Vlach emancipation in the Balkans, fighting the Greek influence and conditioning Bucharest policy. He became a member of the Romanian Academy and his death was celebrated with national funeral in 1903.

Another important Vlach activist was George Murnu who was born and educated in Macedonia and later became a professor at University of Iași and Bucharest. But Aromanians had not emigrated just to Roumania; Aromanians contributed to the cultural and social development of the nationalities they had chosen: it was Greece (Aristotelis Valaoritis, Gheorghios Zalocosta, Kostas Krystalis) Serbia (Jovan Sterija Popović, Alecu Nusić, Draboliub Sotirović), Bulgaria (Aleco Kostantinov) or Romania (Dimitrie Bolinteanu, Dimitrie Anghel, Nuși Tulliu, Leon T. Boga, Nicolae Batzaria, Ion Foti, Marcu Beza). After the decline of Moscopole, many had participated actively in the Greek struggle for independence (Theodor Colotroni, Constantin Righas Phereos), many others moved to other countries. This *diaspora* produced relevant figures like the bankers Sina, the Dumba of Vienna, the Hungarian Mocsony (Mocioni) or the Bellio who arrived to Vienna, Bucharest and Paris.⁴ Many communities had formed not only in Vienna or Budapest, but also in Transylvanian cities or even in the United States, where in 1903 Nicolae Cican founded the *Societate Romana de Ajutor sibi Cultura Sperantsa* which helped the newcomers and was renamed *Farsatorul* in 1906.

The policy developed by Bucharest addressed towards a strange alliance with Istanbul and against Greece, who was more dangerous for Ottoman interests than the new-born Romania (an important exception was constituted by Turkish governor Osman Pasha who opposed the Vlachs and was generally considered pro-Greek). After the war of 1875-78, the closure of the schools was soon followed by an agreement. Turkish authorities took steps to promote the Aromanian national cultural movement and gave Vlachs the right to be taught in their own language and afforded assistance and protection to their teachers. In 1888 the Macedo-Romanians obtained an imperial firman (*ulah kilise*) granting them the right

⁴ Georges de Bellio lived in Paris and became one of the first sponsor of impressionist painters like Manet, Monet, Sisley, Pissarro, Renoir.

to set up national churches, and after the Greek annexation of Thesalia, Vlachs asked to be returned to the Ottoman Empire, as stated in the memorandum signed by G.Majdar, G.Papa-Khadji, D. Gargala and many others.

For some years a church in Voskopojë was managed by the Aromenian priest Cosma Demetresescu even after he was closed in a monastery, in 1891. In the same year another decree allowed Vlachs to use their language not only in the religious functions but also in the ritual books. In 1894 negotiations for the election of a primary metropolitan started (the name proposed was Antim). The first years of XX century continued to stage violent attacks on Vlach clergymen and notables, while Romanian diplomacy increased its efforts to obtain from the Sultan privileges as the creation of an independent patriarchate. In 1903 Aromanians were among the victims and at the same time the participants of the Ilinden insurrection (in the Soviet of Krushova republic there were around 20 Aromanians and later, in the reform commission appointed by the Turks there was the Romanian Pandelescu Maşu). In 1903 an Aromenian cemetery was set in Monastir while in 1904 a Romanian consulate was opened at Yanyna.

The sympathies showed towards the Sultan were soon repaid and in 1905 Abdul Hamid issued a decree (*irade*) to grant Aromanians all the rights of a *millet* with the exception of a religious head, creating in this way the *Ullah millet*.⁵ The *irade* of 22th May 1905 granted to the Vlachs the use of their language in religious matters and the freedom of electing mayors (*muhtar*). But it caused many angry protests among Greek ecclesiastical authorities, starting from the patriarch Joachim. Besides the opposition of the Greek priests, the *irade* caused the violent reaction of the bands born to fight the Bulgarian *komitadji*. The repression of Aromenian rights included the killing of clergymen, the denial of the Sacraments and violent attacks against the attendants of Aromenian schools: “*Non sacrilegio, non nequizia, non delitto venne risparmiato*” (B.DeLuca, 1919).

During this phase, Aromanians and Greeks continued a violent and troublesome confrontation. Greek *antarti* conducted their attacks against Aromanians who reacted and gave birth to a cruel escalation of violence which was presented by the Romanian and Greek press as a reaction caused by the other part's attacks. The Greek-Romanian conflict reached its climax exactly when the Sultan issued a decree officially recognizing the Vlachs and affirming their rights to maintain their schools and churches. This led to a violent reaction by the Greek diplomacy and, on the ground, it encouraged Greek bands, who attacked prominent figures like the priest of Berea who was murdered on his way to the church and whole villages. Avdela, a center of pro-Romanian sentiment near Bitola, fell victim of many attacks between the summer and October 1905.⁶ Even if it was not as widespread as other national movements, Vlach national identity in the Ottoman Empire was encouraged by the *irade* which founded the *Ullah millet*. In fact, Aromanian élites developed the identity of their people and, supported by their linguistic relatives in Romania, chose Bucharest as a patron against the oppressing Greek influence. At the beginning of the XX century there were more 100 churches and schools for the Aromanians.

The *guerrilla* in the Balkans, after 1905, was accompanied by anti-Greek demonstrations in Bucharest and by a serious break between the States of Romania and Greece. Romania accused the Greek authorities of connivance with the armed bands, broke the relationships with Athens and expelled Greeks from Romania.

3. The Age of Wars

Many documents recently collected by Romanian historiography proved to be very meaningful to describe how Romanian authorities received news from those regions where Aromanians were fiercely facing Greek aggressivity and discrimination.

This situation was followed also by Italian diplomacy, as it was showed by many documents sent by Italian consuls in Ianina. Italians described the conflict that opposed Greeks and Aromanians, especially because of their schools. Sometimes they even witnessed grotesque episodes, as reported by in 1904 Millelire, who reported about the intervention of Greek authorities to stop the supply of ice cream destined to a Romanian school.

Many times it was just a matter of school accidents caused by the political activity of Romanian

⁵ Millet is a term used for the confessional communities of the Ottoman Empire, where nations were considered according to religion. Thanks to this system, religious communities were allowed to rule themselves under their own regulations in the cultural and confessional fields.

⁶ It has to be mentioned that Aromanians were opposed not only by Greeks, but also by other Slav nationalities. In 1900, for example, the teacher Ştefan Mihăileanu was killed by the Bulgarian Boris Sarafov. Many accidents occurred to Aromanians are related by M.Payfuss and other works about Aromenian history.

students like in the case of Pucerea's manifesto *Autonomia Macedoniei văzută de Tașcu Pucerea și alți macedo-români*. Pucerea headed the activity of Macedo-Romanians in Bitola and in Bucharest, where in 1905 he became the protagonist of some accidents occurred at the university.⁷ In the first years of the XX century the Vlah question was very popular and had a special place in Romanian public debates and in cultural circles, as part of the wider Balkan question.

Besides the activity of the schools, another subject which gave birth to harsh controversies was the development of Aromanian churches or, at least, the claimings about the functions to be held in Romanian language. All these efforts brought about the strong refusal of Greek authorities and the violent reaction of Greek bands, which led many attacks against Aromanians, like that of May 1906, when 60 families moving from Grebena to Avdela with the escort of some Turkish soldiers were assaulted. In that occasion, which was described also in Italian documents, at least 4 Aromanians and 10 Turks were killed. The troubles of the Balkans were carefully observed by Bucharest where the Aromanian question became a subject of public and political debates. The historian Nicolae Iorga created an institute for the study of South-Eastern Europe while politicians as Take Ionescu, Mihail Sturdza, Lahovary, Ion Brătianu managed to combine Romanian Foreign policy with the defence of the Aromanians and of Balkan balances. This ambitious target made Bucharest react against the menaces coming from Greek bands which were afflicting Aromanians and weakening her international image.

The end of the diplomatic crisis with Greece was soon followed by other episodes of violence which exacerbated Romanian public opinion and caused another wave of accusations against the government, which was guilty of having negotiated the fate of other Romanians.

In this situation, many articles accused the government's inactivity and the lack of a serious protest against Greece and the Sultan, who could be pressed until concrete intervention in the question. Bucharest was accused of having developed a sleepwalker policy (*Politica de somnambuli*, in "Tribuna Macedoniei", 5 August 1907) and of having paid more attention to other nationalities like Jews, as it was said at the meeting of the Macedonian-Romanian Cultural Society on 10th December 1909. The newspaper "Actiunea" (30th March 1911) sadly concluded that Romania had not been satisfied at all while "Adevarul" (13th May 1911) argued that the reality was humiliating for Romanian policy (*Un triumf al Greciei, O umiliță a României*).

All over the country many meetings and publications launched critical comments towards the government and, in some way, these proved to be not unfounded. At the end of 1912, "Berliner Tageblatt" reproduced some information coming from Salonique according to which Greek and Bulgarian soldiers had been responsible for all kind of violence, theft and discrimination against the Jews, Turks and Aromanians of Macedonia.

This kind of feelings was further animated by the start of the Balkan wars, which turned the guerrilla into war and strongly affected the Aromanians, who had no army to rely on. According to "Viitorul" (3, 7 Decembrie 1912) the Greek soldiers in Macedonia were spreading terror and fear, committing, as usual, all kind of barbarities. In these years Aromanians continued to carry on their policy inside the Ottoman Empire and they participated in the reform movement of Young Turks, which with the Hatti-i-Hümayun of 1908 enabled them to send their members to the Turkish Parliament (F.Mișea and N.Betzaria). But notwithstanding the troubles and the political debates and the decrease of the budget provided by Romania for the Vlah schools, the core of Aromanian strategy was undoubtedly placed in Bucharest.

During the Balkan wars in 1912-1913, the Aromanians emphasized their Romanian kinship and turned to Bucharest to seek protection and help. It was during the negotiations held in London in the summer of 1913 that the question of Kutzo-Vlachs gained international relevance.

During the peace talks Romanian diplomacy pressed the Powers to safeguard the position of Balkan Romanians, suggesting their incorporation inside Albanian frontiers and an international control to protect their national character. A note sent by N.Mișu to Sir Edward Grey (14/27 Mar 1913, Archivio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito (Aussme), folder E8, 74, 11) stated:

"Le nouvel Etat Albanais devrait garantir une autonomie administrative et communale, et autant que possible, politique aux Roumains de l'Albanie en ne mettant aucun obstacle au fonctionnement du chef religieux roumain des cantons habités des Roumains".

Romanians sent their notes to all the diplomatic centers showing a clear will of joining Albanian State

⁷ A Document issued by the *Serviciul de Siguranță (Prefectura Poliției)* of Bucharest (Dosar 73/190813 November 1905) reported about the problems caused by the activity of the Macedo-Romanian students led by Tașcu Pucerea. Some press articles appeared on "Tribuna Macedoniei" regarding the political struggle for the autonomy of the region (*Autonomia Macedoniei*, July 24 1907).

which was to be created by the London conference. From Bucharest, Maiorescu openly asked for the union with Albania and defined it the best solution.⁸

The Romanian position was sustained by Vienna and so the Austrian ambassador pressed on Sir Eduard Grey to intervene without leaving the matter purely in the hands of Greece and Romania. Austria-Hungary proposed to add to Sir Earl Grey's points a reference to the possibility for Roumania to safeguard the interests and the rights of the Kutzo-Vlachs in Epire.⁹

An exchange of notes between England and Austria followed until the final acceptance of an emendament stating:

“Quant au district habité par les Kutzo-Vlaches la Commission aura à constater leur nationalité. L'attribution soit à l'Albanie, soit à la Grèce appartiendra à la décision des Puissances après examen du rapport de la Commission internationale. Quant aux garanties à donner aux populations Kutzo-Vlaches elles feront l'objet d'une entente directe entre la Grèce et la Roumanie”.

In a convention attached to the treaty, Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia engaged in giving Vlachs scholar and religious autonomy in their respective territories and in creating a special Kutzo-Vlach episcopate. In their notes sent to the Romanian President of the Council of Ministries T. Maiorescu, the Greek K. Venizelos (23 Juillet/5 aout 1913) and the Serb P. Pachitch (25 Juillet 1913) adopted this form: *“consent à donner l'autonomie aux écoles et aux églises des Koutzo-Vlaches se trouvant dans les futures possessions (serbes or grecques...) et à permettre la création d'un Episcopat pour ces Koutzo-Vlaches”.*

According to Italian military documents the question was exacerbated by the clash occurred between Greece and Roumania some years before, which obstructed all the agreements that international diplomacy tried to sketch. As a matter of fact, violence continued to mark the inter-ethnic relationships in the Balkans, as denounced by the Romanian press which continued to invoke drastic measures against the discriminatory and violent treatment of the Aromanians.

"Aromanul" (13th November 1913) protested against the assassination of some Romanian activists (Dem. Zicu of Petrici and Mitra Arghieri of Şatra), "Viitorul" (*Rominii macedoneni*, 20th December 1913) and "Fulgerul" (*Exterminarea Aromanilor*, 20th January 1914) against the risk Aromanians could disappear; "Dreptatea" (*Romanii albanezi și asasinarea preotului Balamace*, 26th March 1914) and "Adevarul" (*Un mitropolit bandit*, 29th March 1914) talked about the fury caused by the murder of the Romanian bishop Haralambie Balamace and accused the Greek metropolit Ghermanos. Finally other protests were caused by the Greek response given by Venizelos, who accused the Albanians of having committed the massacres of the Vlachs in Coritza (*Guvernul și masacrele din Corita*, in "Adevarul", 30th March 1914; *Incorrigibili*, in "Mişcarea", 3rd April 1914).

The need of a foreign help increased as war broke out in 1914 and the antagonism between different nationalisms became stronger and more dangerous for the minorities, especially those with no kin States in the proximity. The war meant for these regions a continuous turmoil with the arrival of several armies and the birth of many short-lived and semi-autonomous States. In 1914, in the aftermath of Balkan wars, an Autonomous Republic of Epirus was formed around Gjirokastër. It was led by a distinguished local Greek politician, Georgios Christakis-Zografos, who referring to the *Megali idèa* gave birth to an autonomous administration, put under formal Albanian sovereignty and recognized also by the Great Powers with the Protocol of Corfu. The experiment took also to the creation of an autocephale church whose chiefs soon reconciled with Athens. The end of the principate was then followed by a period of Greek administration and, after the division between royalists and Venizelos' supporters had thrown Greece into an unstable position, by the arrival of French and Italian troops at Korçë and Gjirokastër.¹⁰ The two provinces of Korytsa and Argyrokastro were inhabited by a melting pot of

⁸ A note sent to Misu, diplomatic agent of Romania in London, (5/18 Juin 1913, Archivio storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito, Aussme, Roma, Folder E8, 74, 11) clearly admitted that *“L'incorporation a à l'Albanie est la meilleure garantie pour les Macédo-Roumains, si la constitution d'une Macédoine autonome est impossible”.*

⁹ The resume of these negotiations was drafted into Italian militar documents of the end of May 1917, when the Army was occupying those regions and retook the question under a new point of view, following a strategy targeted at developing Italian interests in the whole Albania.

¹⁰ From the Albanian perspective, adopted also by Italian and Austrian sources of that time, the Northern Epirote movement was directly supported by the Greek state with the help of a minority of inhabitants in the region, resulting in chaos and political instability in all Albania. In Albanian historiography, the Protocol of Corfu was either scarcely mentioned, or its interpretation grounded on different positions: it is seen as an attempt to divide the Albanian state and as a proof of the Great Powers' disregard for Albania's national integrity. With the ratification of the Protocol of Corfu the term "Northern Epirus", which was the common name acquired official status. However, after 1921, when the region was finally ceded to Albania, these terms were considered to be associated with Greek irredentism action and did not acquire any legal status by the Albanian authorities. On the other hand, anyone that made use of them was persecuted. The autonomy question remained on the diplomatic agenda as part of the Northern Epirote issue. In the 1960s, the Soviet General Secretary Khrushchev asked his Albanian counterpart about giving autonomy to the Greek minority, but this initiative was without any results. In 1991, after the collapse of the communist regime in Albania, the

creeds and populations and included also some Vlachs. During the Epirus autonomy, the Greek administration viewed all Albanian Aromanians as part of the Greek minority without taking into account their different nationality. The region later fell under the control of the Bulgarians, who tried to join Austrian allies, before being stopped by French intervention. Also some groups of rebels were active in the region of Korçë, one was led by Themistokli Gërmenji and another by Sali Butka. The latter, sacked completely Moscopole and threatened with the same perspective Korçë. When the city of Koritza came under French control, the French tried to get a compromise and an Autonomous Albanian Republic of Korçë was established with a council made up of seven Christians and seven Muslims and with Themistokli Gërmenji as prefect of police. The new authorities introduced Albanian as the official language and replaced Greek schools with Albanian ones, which had been forbidden during the Greek administration of the city.

4. Conclusions. In Search of Protection

Italy reacted against this French policy aimed at influencing Albanian affairs and, as Italian armies were also present in many parts of Albania - the port of Vlorë and the southern region of the Albanian principality- proclaimed Albanian independence and tried to counter-balance French dominion.

In 1917, when Italian troops advanced into Albania they were welcomed in all Aromanian villages, for example in Ciamuria and Samarina. A National council for Pindus was created and it took a very pro-Italian attitude. They founded, with the help of some local representative as Alkiviadis Diamantis, the "Principate of Pindos" in the area of Aromanian settlement. Italy undertook attempts to convert the pro-Romanian Aromanians into pro-Italian one, taking advantage of the historical and language relations these communities had with Italian latinity. In this particular context, Italian military forces felt the need to improve the ethnic and political conditions of the Aromanians, and sketched some documents on their history and customs.

Their villages could be distinguished for the solidity and a certain elegance and were often placed in positions of military interest, next to the mountains and road junctions. The Aromanians were described as calm, wealthy, occupied in trade or sheep-breeding, resistant to any persecution or massacre, even though the denaturalization policies pursued by the Greeks "*con ogni arte e con ogni mezzo*", as reported by colonel Casoldi on 29th May 1917 in his account *Note circa la questione valacca*.

The Aromanian presence was particularly evident in two districts, Grammos – especially in the city and around Koritza - and Pindus, where 36 villages were clearly detachable. Even if they were not as populous as the old Moscopole, these settlements maintained their ethnic identity. The language, instead, was in some case abandoned, also as a consequence of the Greek propaganda, pressures and abuses. Aromanians even arrived at creating national armed bands against those sent by Greeks to terrorize the region and this resistance was considered almost incredible by Italians, due to the peaceful and calm traditions of the Vlachs. It was also noted that many Vlachs enlisted in the Romanian army staying in Moldova asked to be sent back to the Balkans to fight for the security of their lands.

Italians were sure that all Aromanians believed their origin was different from the one of the surrounding populations. Moreover, a particular feature to take into consideration was the particular economic situation of those shepherds who periodically migrate and had thus become matter of study because they kept high the economy of sheep-grazing, dairy, weaving and tanning - "*la principale industria valacca della pastorizia e quelle altre che ne derivano (caseificio, tessitura, conciatura etc.)*" -. Trying to conquer the sympathies of those communities, the Italians thought that the strategy to follow was that of sponsoring the birth and increase of local authorities in order to prepare for the peace negotiations a fertile ground for the establishments of cantons or political and administrative autonomy. These hopes were alimentated also by the demands of Aromanian communities, who after the years of the Greek-Romanian dispute and the troubles of war searched in Italy a stronger protector.

On 25th July 1917 a first phonogram was addressed to colonel Delli Ponti, who was called brave Duce (*Duce valoroso*), and his new legions. E8, 74, 10

On 27th July 1917 the Italian commander in Valona, General Giacinto Ferrero, received a telegram coming from the mayors (sindaci) of many Aromanian villages who met in Metzovo, representing the Pindus-Zagori people.

chairman of the Greek minority's organization Omonoia called for autonomy for Northern Epirus on the basis that the rights provided for under the Albanian constitution were highly precarious.

“Figli non degeneri di Roma sempre memori della madre nostra antica e tenaci custodi della lingua e delle tradizioni dei nostri padri dopo lunghi secoli di lotta sanguinosa contro lo straniero che tentava tutti i modi di cancellare il nostro carattere nazionale latino respiriamo finalmente le pure aure della libertà che le nuove legioni di Roma vittoriose agli ordini vostri hanno apportato ai loro fratelli di sangue dispersi lontani sul Pindo e Zagori”

Besides the enthusiastic recalling of ancient Roman roots, in this appeal the Aromanians underlined the security given to them by the Italian troops; their leaving would mean falling easily prey of the enemies who looked forward to the extermination of Aromanians. The latter invoked Italy and her powerful and careful protection, the only means of defence against the superiority of the enemies, *“il numero soverchiante di avversari”*. Finally, the signatories self-appointed themselves the sons of Rome, who throughout millenary events had kept intact and preserved the remembrance of the Roman civilization in the valleys and the mountains of Pindus.

Even if in a shorter form, the same declarations were included in the communication sent the same day to the president of the United States, to the president of the Provisional Russian Government, to the Belgian Foreign Affairs minister, to the French, English and Russian consuls in Yanina, to General Ricciotti Garibaldi in Rome and to the mayor of Rome, who was informed in Latin:

“Saeculis compluribus non mutata Romana gens Pindi et Zagoriae caetera patribus custodienda per Traianum tradita distinctus libertati et cultui defendes hostibus immitibus strenue adversata demum votis expletis alma amplectatur matrem urbem divinam Romam invictam aeternam...”

In 1918 a memorandum of the Vlach people was addressed to the Foreign Affairs minister Sydney Sonnino by the *Comité de l'action nationale du peuple valaque* together with a *Codicille confidentiel*. Another one was sent to the conference in Paris through the volume *Les Macedo-Roumains (Koutzo-Valaques) devant le Congrès de la Paix* redacted by the National Council of the Pindus Roumanians and signed by G. Munru, Nicolae Tacit, Arghir Culina, T. Papahagi. Besides the historical connection, the Aromanians recalled their will of joining Roman Catholicism repairing *“le plus grave erreur historique”* and reestablishing the relationships that Kalojan Asan had with the Pope, which proved the never-ending Latin character of the Vlach people, *“son orientation spirituelle découlant naturellement et logiquement de sa latinité”*. The memorandum of the Vlach people addressed to the Foreign Affairs minister Sydney Sonnino by the *Comité de l'action nationale du peuple valaque* also asked the Pope for the envoy of a Bishop in Macedonia to combine the adherence to the Roman Church with the respect of the Eastern religious rites exercised by the Vlachs used to exercise - *“l'exercice de leur culte conformément aux règles prescrites par l'Eglise Orientale”* -.

Italy was the natural benchmark of the Vlachs and her prestige deriving from the victory of the war increased her power and attraction towards the Vlachs, who kept on invoking Italian protection for the safeguard of their Latin culture.

At Delvino, on 28th December 1918 and 10th January 1919, a special Assembly was convoked. The meeting defined a precise political project: the autonomy of Pindus and Zagori united with Albania and under the protection of Italy and pointed out a strategy to avoid any other undesired solution.

“Ad evitare che i nemici, approfittando della nostra assenza e disorganizzazione all'estero, riescano, con intrighi e menzogne, ad indurre in errore gli uomini di Stato delle Grandi Potenze che, tra breve, alla Conferenza della Pace decideranno delle sorti di ogni popolo; sia eletta una delegazione, di compatrioti la quale venga inviata in Europa per esprimere, a chi di ragione, l'incrollabile volontà e la ferma decisione delle popolazioni romene del Pindo di non indietreggiare dinanzi ad alcun sacrificio per realizzare il loro sacro ideale nazionale; cioè: L'autonomia della regione del Pindo e Zagori unita politicamente all'Albania e sotto la protezione dell'Italia, sola via di salvezza...”

The end of the war and the postwar diplomacy could not condition the life of Balkan Aromanians, nor Italy could. The Vlach question, anyway, was managed both by Romanian and Italian diplomacy to consolidate their positions and their interests in the Balkan regions. Vlachs were reminded in all the documents presented by Romania to the peace talks and became the subject of a special policy of colonization started by Bucharest in the Twenties. Italian intervention, on the contrary, arrived once again during the second war, when a shortlived Aromanian State was created in Pindus region. After many centuries of isolation, only war could rejoin the Aromanians to the homeland of latinity.

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