

BALKAN CONFERENCES AS THE FOUNDATION OF CONTEMPORARY BALKAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract: The idea of uniting the Balkan states has historical roots extending back for more than a century, while the concept of unification has consistently been permeated by the same underlying aspiration: to achieve economic, political, and security stability. One of the more significant attempts at integrating the Balkan states is examined in this paper through an analysis of the Balkan Conferences and the initial agreements based on the ideas of union, resolutions, and the Balkan Pact. The analysis of the Balkan Conferences presented here forms a basis for understanding later aspirations toward the unification and integration of these states in the period of contemporary history.

Keywords: Balkan Conferences, Balkan Union, Balkan Pact, regional cooperation, multilateralism, Balkan integration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of multilateral cooperation, which at the same time has served the function of integrating the states of the Balkans, can be traced back to the nineteenth century. In thematic and substantive terms, this cooperation developed in several directions: liberation-oriented, security-related, economic, and cultural. Each substantive aspect of cooperation has generally shared a common objective: the achievement of stability in the region, often through dialogue and reconciliation.

Liberation alliances of the Balkan countries were formed at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, with the aim of liberating Balkan peoples who were still under Ottoman rule. These alliances consisted of a network of bilateral treaties between individual

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countries concerning friendship, defence, and military cooperation. In addition to these alliances, history also records various initiatives and proposals aimed at securing stability in the Balkans. Thus, alongside modern initiatives such as the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, there also existed earlier initiatives with similar objectives.

The promotion of economic integration through trade agreements, joint infrastructure projects, and the facilitation of business activities represents one of the more important dimensions of the integration of Balkan countries. Through the formation of common economic zones or the facilitation of free trade, economic stability is achieved as an important factor in the stability of the region. Strengthening regional security through cooperation in the fight against terrorism, human trafficking, illegal migration, and organised crime can contribute to stability and security in the Balkans. This may include joint military exercises, the exchange of intelligence information, and the establishment of mechanisms for conflict prevention.

Multilateral cooperation is also significant in the fields of culture and education, as it contributes to strengthening ties among the Balkan peoples. This is often manifested through student exchanges, cultural events, and support for the preservation of shared cultural heritage, which may contribute to building mutual understanding and trust. Encouraging dialogue and reconciliation among Balkan countries is essential for overcoming conflicts rooted in history and represents a sound path toward building a stable future. Multilateral and integration-oriented cooperation in the Balkans is essentially marked by continuous development, but also by adaptation in accordance with contemporary challenges and the needs of the region and the world. It can therefore be regarded as a key aspect of building a stable, prosperous, and peaceful future.

2. THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE BALKAN INITIATIVE

Initiatives concerning multilateral cooperation in the Balkans are often based on a practice supported by Europe, whose basic theoretical foundation lies in the theory of neofunctionalism. This theory presupposes the development of different forms of cooperation among states, or among political like-minded actors as their representatives, which over a longer

period of time may have a positive effect on multilateral and bilateral cooperation in the region, both in terms of political aspirations and economic development.

Although the theory of neofunctionalism provides a basis for understanding how interstate cooperation at the technical level could lead to broader political and economic integration, its application in the Balkans has not produced the expected results. The reasons for this may be numerous, including the lack of political will, deep historical divisions, ethnic tensions, and foreign-policy influences.

Balkan countries face complex challenges in the process of regional cooperation and integration. Although certain progress has been achieved, such as the signing of Stabilisation and Association Agreements (SAAs) with the European Union and the establishment of regional initiatives such as the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the Berlin Process, much remains to be done in order to achieve the long-term goals of stability, peace, and prosperity in the region.

Therefore, while neofunctionalist theory may offer useful insights into potential paths toward integration in the Balkans, its practical application remains challenging because of the complexity of the region's political, economic, and social dynamics. This can be observed through the development and effects of the Balkan Conferences, as the initial segment of integration among the Balkan countries.

3. BALKAN CONFERENCES AS THE BEGINNING OF INTEGRATION

The Balkan Conferences, held between 1930 and 1933, aimed to create a “Balkan Union” and represented an important step toward establishing multilateral cooperation in the Balkans. This period in Balkan history was characterised by political instability, turmoil in international relations, and a desire to avoid future conflicts.

The idea of a Balkan alliance emerged under the influence of various initiatives launched after the First World War in order to avoid the danger of new conflicts and to achieve the unification of European states. At the Twenty-Seventh World Peace Congress, convened by the International Peace Bureau in Athens in 1929, it was concluded that it was necessary to

convene a conference of representatives of the Balkan countries for the purpose of creating an alliance among them (Đukanović, Krstić, 2021).

The main proponents of this initiative were representatives of Greece, led by former Greek Prime Minister Papanastasiou. In each of the six Balkan countries – Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Turkey – national committees were established, which, with the consent of their governments, formed delegations for the First Balkan Conference. These delegations included prominent politicians, intellectuals, representatives of chambers of commerce, journalists, and other relevant actors, while official diplomatic representatives of the Balkan states had the status of observers.

Although the Balkan Conference did not formally have an official character, the positions of the national groups were always aligned with the positions of their governments. This conference represented an important step toward creating mechanisms of cooperation and conflict prevention in the Balkans, but at the same time it also reflected the political turbulence and complex international relations of that period.

The First Balkan Conference, held from 5 to 12 October 1930 in Athens, represented an important event in the history of Balkan diplomacy. The conference was attended by 99 official delegates. The Yugoslav delegation, which had ten members, was led by Dr Čedomir Đorđević, while the role of secretary of the delegation was held by Živko Topalović, Secretary of the Workers' Chamber in Belgrade (Cvetković, 1997).

The conference adopted a series of ambitious proposals and resolutions aimed at bringing the Balkan states and peoples closer together. Among the adopted resolutions were those concerning the economic rapprochement of the Balkan countries, the foundations upon which a Balkan alliance should rest and political measures for its creation, intellectual rapprochement, transport, and “social and hygienic issues” (Petković, 1988).

Particular emphasis was placed on the “Address to the Peoples, Governments, and Press of the Balkans”, which highlighted the fraternal ties among the Balkan peoples and their ability to resolve disputes by peaceful means. As a first step, the conference proposed regular meetings of the foreign ministers of the Balkan countries in order to exchange views on issues of common interest.

In addition, a Statute was adopted by which the conference was established as a permanent organisation with the aim of promoting rapprochement and cooperation among the peoples of the Balkans, with the intention that this would lead to a union of Balkan states. The organisation of the conference was envisaged according to the model of the League of Nations, with bodies such as the General Assembly, Council, Bureau, Secretariat, and national groups (Lopandić, 2000).

The First Balkan Conference laid the foundations for further efforts to establish multilateral cooperation in the Balkans and represented an important step toward stabilising the region and preventing future conflicts.

The Second Balkan Conference, held from 20 to 25 October 1931 in Constantinople and Ankara, represented another important step in the process of establishing multilateral cooperation in the Balkans. Nearly three hundred delegates attended the conference, which was also welcomed by Turkish President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Ranković, Milutinović, 2023).

The Yugoslav delegation of sixteen members was led by former minister Vasilije Jovanović, and included prominent figures such as the musician Josip Slavenski (Lazarević, Matijević, 2021). The work of the conference took place within six commissions envisaged by the Statute, which adopted the relevant conclusions and resolutions. The conference was characterised by the establishment of an organisational commission, a commission for political rapprochement, a commission for intellectual rapprochement, an economic commission, a transport commission, and a commission for hygiene and social policy.

At this conference, the proposal of the Greek delegation concerning the establishment of a Balkan Pact was particularly emphasised. The purpose of the Pact would be to prevent new conflicts among the countries of the Balkans. In addition, the Inter-Balkan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Inter-Balkan Postal Union, and the Balkan Tourism Federation were established, and their statutes were adopted (Kovačević, 2019).

Proposals were also submitted for the creation of other technical bodies for cooperation, such as the Inter-Balkan Bureau for the Protection of Cereals, the Inter-Balkan Bureau for Tobacco, the Balkan Institute for Historical Research, the Balkan Maritime Commission, the Balkan Health Commission, the Inter-Balkan Labour Bureau, and others.

A significant measure proposed by the conference was the abolition of visas for citizens of Balkan countries in order to facilitate the movement of people in the Balkans. This would contribute to the rapprochement of peoples and the strengthening of regional cooperation. Like the previous conference, this conference also aimed to strengthen cooperation and stability in the Balkans and represented an important step toward achieving that goal.

The Third Balkan Conference, held in Bucharest from 22 to 27 October 1932, produced significant results, but also faced serious disputes that revealed deep contradictions among the national delegations (Lopandić, 2012).

The most important result of the conference was the adoption of the draft Balkan Pact by the political commission. However, this provoked the most serious dispute up to that point, particularly because of opposing positions concerning the regulation of the so-called minority question. The delegations of the “revisionist countries” were dissatisfied with the borders established after the First World War – primarily Bulgaria, but also Albania – which led to the first disagreements in the sphere of minority rights (Jazić, 2015). On the other hand, the delegation of Yugoslavia and certain other countries did not want the Balkan Conference to provide an opportunity to open the question of the Bulgarian or Albanian minorities, as this would indirectly lead to a revision of borders. Thus, this conference also recorded the first more significant disagreements regarding common goals.

The Bulgarian delegation even temporarily suspended its participation in the conference as a reaction to dissatisfaction with the progress made in resolving minority-related problems. Decisions at the conference were adopted by majority vote rather than by consensus, which further complicated the situation. In addition to the Balkan Pact, this conference also adopted the draft Convention on the Status of Citizens of Balkan Countries.

Various steps were also proposed for the intellectual rapprochement of the Balkan peoples, such as common history textbooks, the translation of literary works, the use of radio and film for the purpose of better mutual acquaintance, as well as the work of a special commission of jurists tasked with preparing a conference on the approximation of the positive law of the Balkan states.

Like the previous conferences, this one also represented an important step toward the rapprochement of Balkan countries and the building of regional cooperation. At the same time, however, it demonstrated the deep political differences among individual countries, which often made it difficult to reach agreements and implement decisions.

The Fourth Balkan Conference, held in Thessaloniki from 4 to 11 November 1933, represented another step in the efforts of the Balkan countries to establish, above all, regional economic cooperation (Jovičević, 2015). Among the most significant results of this conference was the adoption of the draft Regional Economic Agreement of the Balkan States, as well as the draft statutes of the Balkan Cooperative Office and the Statute of the Maritime Section within the Inter-Balkan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Golubović et al., 2012). The conference also considered and adopted proposals concerning the development of a network of Balkan transport infrastructure, including railways and roads, with clearly specified priority connections.

However, although technical progress was made, the Fourth Conference was burdened by the same political disagreements as the previous ones. The draft Balkan Pact, which emerged as a result of the previous conferences, provoked opposing reactions among the delegations, particularly between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria. The Yugoslav and Bulgarian delegations made efforts to revise the previously adopted proposal. In addition, the conclusion of the Little Entente agreement and the separate quadripartite Pact of the Balkan Alliance between Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania, and Turkey – which Bulgaria and Albania refused to sign – contributed to the weakening of the importance of the Balkan Conference (Birovljev, Davidović, 2010).

Preparations for the Fifth Balkan Conference were marked by the decisions of the Yugoslav and Turkish delegations not to participate in the conference. The Yugoslav delegation even proposed that political issues no longer be discussed at the conference, but that the focus be placed exclusively on economic and intellectual matters. On the other hand, the Turkish delegation also announced its absence from the Fifth Conference, considering that the formation of the Pact of the Balkan Alliance between Yugoslavia, Greece, Romania, and Turkey had achieved the basic objectives of its policy. All these circumstances led to the fact that the Fifth

Balkan Conference was never held, which effectively marked the dissolution of the Balkan Conference (Ranković, Milutinović, 2023).

4. EFFECTS AND EPILOGUE OF THE BALKAN CONFERENCES

Within the framework of the Balkan Conferences, a series of proposals was put forward in order to give concrete form to cooperation aimed at establishing more stable political, social, and economic relations. Each proposal that accompanied the individual initiatives retains relevance for integration in contemporary geopolitical developments in the Balkans, where further and substantive implementation is pursued through new contractual and agreement-based forms. One of the more significant proposals that was realised was the Balkan Pact, as well as proposals concerning the development and status of citizens of the Balkan states.

The First Balkan Conference represented the initial segment of the integration of the Balkan states. In addition to the aspiration toward and pursuit of long-term objectives, its primary focus was placed on close political interconnection, which was ideologically proclaimed as the creation of a Balkan Union that would also fulfil a security function. This orientation toward a union was also proclaimed in a resolution stating that the key elements for the creation of a Balkan Union were the improvement of political relations among the Balkan states and the establishment of those relations on the foundations of mutual trust and reciprocal security (Lazarević, Matijević, 2021).

These elements were necessary in order to enable a stable political environment, which constituted the basis for further economic and social progress in the region. The resolution of the First Balkan Conference emphasised the importance of joint efforts by the Balkan states in achieving these objectives and building solidarity and cooperation among them. In addition, it stressed the need to respect the sovereignty and integrity of each state, as well as to resolve disputes through dialogue and peaceful negotiations. These principles constituted the foundation upon which a future Balkan alliance was to rest, with the aim of strengthening regional stability, prosperity, and interconnectedness.

The establishment of a special committee to draft the Pact and the elaboration of the proposal submitted by the Greek delegation represented

important steps toward achieving the goal of creating a Balkan Union. This was a process that required intensive diplomatic activity and negotiations among the Balkan states in order to reach agreement on the key points of the Pact. The adoption of the final draft of the Balkan Pact at the Third Balkan Conference, despite the strong opposition of the Bulgarian delegation, represented a significant step forward toward achieving the goals of political rapprochement and the creation of an alliance among the Balkan states (Golubović et al., 2012).

Although the suspension of Bulgaria's participation in the Conference represented a challenge, the other states continued their efforts toward achieving the objectives of the Balkan Pact.

Article 1 of the Balkan Pact, which obliged the signatory parties not to resort to war against another signatory party and to submit to a procedure for the peaceful settlement of disputes, represented a key element in preserving peace and stability in the Balkan region (Kovačević, 2019).

This obligation was of essential importance for conflict prevention and the promotion of the peaceful settlement of disputes. A procedure was also envisaged for the peaceful resolution of conflicts before the Permanent Conciliation Commission, the Permanent Court of International Justice, or a selected arbitration tribunal, which additionally strengthened mechanisms for resolving disputes without the use of force (Jovičević, 2015).

This ensured that potential conflicts would be resolved on the basis of law and the principles of international law, thereby promoting justice and peace. Chapter III on mutual assistance was particularly important for the Yugoslav delegation, as it provided mechanisms for responding in cases of flagrant violation of the obligation of non-aggression. This principle of mutual assistance enabled the parties to support one another in the event of attack or aggression, thereby strengthening collective security and deterring potential aggressors. The envisaged procedure for involving the League of Nations also provided an additional mechanism for the peaceful settlement of disputes and the promotion of stability (Jovičević, 2015).

The League of Nations, as an international organisation dedicated to peace and security, could provide support in resolving disputes through diplomatic channels and negotiations. The inclusion of Chapter IV on the protection of minorities in the Balkan Pact, at the insistence of the Bulgarian and Albanian delegations, reflected the importance of respecting

and protecting minority rights as a key element in building stability and harmony in the Balkan region (Golubović et al., 2012).

This chapter provided mechanisms for the protection of minorities and for addressing their issues through the opening of offices for minorities in each Balkan country, as well as through the establishment of an Inter-Balkan Commission for Minorities. Decisions adopted by the Inter-Balkan Commission for Minorities had the potential to become binding upon the contracting states, thereby ensuring the effective resolution of minority issues at the regional level. If the Commission failed to reach a unanimous agreement, the issue could be forwarded to the Secretariat of the League of Nations for further consideration (Lopandić, 2000).

The efforts of the Yugoslav delegation to prevent the adoption of this chapter, or to raise the question of its revision, reflected the complexity and sensitivity of minority issues in the region. Their insistence on the competence of the League of Nations in these matters indicated a desire to ensure international supervision and support in the protection of minority rights.

The inclusion of the chapter on the protection of minorities in the Balkan Pact represented a step forward toward the improvement of human rights and the building of an inclusive society in the Balkans, although it caused disagreement among the participants in the negotiations.

The Fourth Balkan Conference recorded a significant segment of integration in the field of economic rapprochement, and a “Regional Economic Agreement” was adopted as the initial phase in the formation of a “Balkan Customs Union” (Lazarević, Matijević, 2021).

This draft agreement contained a total of twelve articles that represented the basis for improving economic cooperation among the Balkan countries. The signatory states guaranteed mutual privileges, which indicated their readiness to promote free trade and facilitate economic exchange among the Balkan countries. The establishment of a Permanent Commission for International Trade of the Balkan Countries, as envisaged in Article 10, was intended to improve mutual trade and facilitate trade procedures between the countries of the region (Lopandić, 2000).

Furthermore, the establishment of a “clearing house for international exchange” was also addressed at this conference. It envisaged certain facilities in mutual payments based on the exchange of goods and represented another step toward improving economic cooperation and

facilitating business operations among the Balkan countries. Particularly interesting is Article 2 of the draft, which concerned “inter-Balkan privileges” and provided that member states should include a “Balkan clause” in their trade agreements with non-Balkan countries, allowing derogation from the most-favoured-nation principle (Kovačević, 2019). This was similar to the concept of the “Iberian clause” and indicated a desire for joint action in international trade in order to preserve the interests of the Balkan countries (Kovačević, 2019).

At the First Balkan Conference, within the resolution on social and hygienic issues, a proposal was made that the Balkan states should ensure the same treatment of citizens of other Balkan states as of their own citizens with regard to freedom of movement, work, and overall activity (Lazarević, Matijević, 2021). This proposal was a significant step toward building freedom of movement for people and economic integration in the Balkans.

In order to implement this proposal, the Third Balkan Conference adopted a draft convention intended to regulate these matters. It was envisaged that the Convention would form an integral part of the process of establishing the Balkan Alliance and that it would be applied as part of a political-economic triptych, together with the draft Balkan Pact and the economic convention (Jazić, 2015).

Article 1 of the draft Convention allowed the nationals of each contracting party to enter the territory of another contracting party freely, without passport formalities. This provision was crucial for facilitating the free movement of people between the Balkan states. Under the Convention, Balkan nationals would be mutually equalised with regard to all activities of an economic character, including commercial, industrial, and financial activities, as well as the practice of liberal professions, subject to a certain number of exceptions.

These proposals indicate the desire of the Balkan states to strengthen economic cooperation and regional integration by facilitating the free movement of people and business activity. This initiative could contribute to economic development and to improving the standard of living of citizens in the region.

In accordance with the draft Convention, national treatment was also envisaged in relation to various rights and areas, subject to the condition of

reciprocity. The key aspects defined in the draft were the following (Jazić, 2015):

First, inheritance rights, as well as the rights to acquire, possess, or lease movable or immovable property, were subject to national treatment under the condition of reciprocity. This meant that nationals of one Balkan country would have the same rights as nationals of another Balkan country with regard to inheritance rights and property ownership.

Second, nationals were also equalised in terms of legal and judicial protection, meaning that they would have the right to equal protection of their rights before the laws and courts of other Balkan states. They would also be treated in the same manner with regard to taxes, fees, and charges of a fiscal nature.

Third, the nationality of commercial companies was defined in Article 9 of the draft Convention. This made it possible for commercial companies established under the legislation of a particular state to conduct activities in the territories of other Balkan states, provided that they complied with the laws of the state in which they operated.

These provisions indicate the intention of the Balkan countries to create a common economic environment in which nationals and business organisations would be treated equally regardless of their country of origin. This could contribute to the improvement of free trade and business activity in the Balkan region.

The Pact, known as the Balkan Agreement or the Balkan Entente, was signed in Athens in 1934 between Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece, and Turkey. This agreement resulted from mutual bilateral agreements concluded between 1928 and 1933, and was preceded by the Convention for the Definition of Aggression, concluded in 1933 and signed by Czechoslovakia, the USSR, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Turkey (Lopandić, 2012).

Bulgaria and Albania refused to accept the territorial status quo in the Balkans and oriented themselves toward closer relations with Italy and Hungary. For this reason, the “anti-revisionist” Balkan countries, at the initiative of France, concluded the multilateral Pact of the Balkan Agreement, known as the Balkan Entente (Lopandić, 2012).

The Balkan Entente primarily concerned territorial guarantees in the Balkans and contained only three articles. This agreement formed part of an attempt to oppose the growing influence of Germany and Italy in the

Balkans by creating a barrier, or at least a counterweight, to their influence. The Pact represented an important attempt by the Balkan countries to preserve regional peace and stability in the context of growing tensions and rivalries in Europe before the Second World War.

However, its effectiveness was limited, and in the following years, under the influence of international developments, the Balkan Entente failed to preserve the territorial status quo in the Balkans.

These proposals reflected the desire to create a peaceful, prosperous, and united Balkans, which would enable stability and progress in the region. On the other hand, however, the delegations also had to represent the current political interests of their governments, which often caused disputes and tensions, especially in view of the different political, economic, and historical interests of the Balkan countries.

This dual dynamic led to the Balkan Conferences becoming a forum in which different interests and ambitions of the Balkan states came into conflict. Although some proposals were ambitious and idealistic, the difficulties in reaching consensus and achieving long-term objectives demonstrated the complexity of the political reality of the Balkans at that time. By considering the historical overview of the conferences, several key factors can be identified that contributed to the problems surrounding the full realisation of the Balkan Conference and to the general impossibility of achieving peace-related objectives in the Balkans during that period.

First, decisions were adopted by majority vote rather than by consensus, which often caused tensions and disagreements among the delegations. This made it more difficult to achieve long-term solutions and compromises, leading to boycotts and the weakening of the authority of the Conference.

Second, the international circumstances of the time, including the rise of totalitarian regimes such as Hitler's Germany, were not favourable to ideas of reconciliation and integration in the Balkans. These factors further hindered progress toward regional stability and cooperation.

Third, ideas such as the League of Nations and European federation, although noble, lacked sufficient support and were not capable of being effectively implemented under the circumstances, which further contributed to the failure of the Balkan Conference.

Finally, European history took a different course with Hitler's rise to power, which led to new catastrophes in the form of the Second World War. This further postponed the possibility of a renewed gathering of the Balkan countries for the purpose of achieving the objectives of multilateral cooperation and integration.

5. CONCLUSION

The Balkan Conferences indeed reflected a complex dynamic, balancing between an idealistic approach viewed through the lens of peace-oriented enthusiasm and the realities of power politics. Through these conferences, the delegations of the Balkan countries demonstrated significant efforts to promote ambitious proposals concerning the creation of a Balkan Union, customs and monetary unification, the establishment of the Balkan Pact, and the improvement of various aspects of society, such as gender equality, cooperation among scientists, artists and journalists, and student exchange.

Numerous factors, including internal disagreements, international tensions, and changes in the political landscape of Europe, contributed to the failure of the Balkan Conference and prevented the achievement of peace objectives in the Balkans during that period. A renewed gathering aimed at multilateral cooperation and integration would require time, stability, and changes in the political context of the region.

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