

TAKE IONESCU, ELEFTHERIOS VENIZELOS AND THE PROJECT OF A FIVE-MEMBER LITTLE ENTENTE*

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The lengthy process of forming the Little Entente led eventually to a formula of regional cooperation involving only three members, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and Romania. However, it is well known that Romania had actually envisaged a more extended formula, also including Poland and Greece into a “general alliance from the Baltic to the Aegean Sea.” The present paper makes an analysis of the circumstances which led to the failure of the project of a five-member Little Entente. A fundamental role in the project belonged to Take Ionescu, who developed and gave additional substance to an idea formulated by the president of Czechoslovakia, Thomas Masaryk. To put his project into practice, Take Ionescu kept close contacts with prominent representatives of the targeted states, such as Edvard Beneš, Nikola Pašić, and Eleftherios Venizelos. Owing to several factors, including the territorial dispute between Poland and Czechoslovakia over Teschen and the political situation in Athens, after Venizelos’ defeat in the elections, the project of a five-member alliance had to be abandoned.

Keywords: Little Entente; Romanian-Greek relations; Balkan status quo; interwar alliances; Take Ionescu; Eleftherios Venizelos; Apostolos Alexandris; I. G. Duca

The creation of the Little Entente was a long process, comprising several steps, among which most importantly the Czechoslovak-Yugoslav alliance of 14 August 1920, the Romanian-Czechoslovak alliance of 23 April 1921, and eventually the signing of a defensive alliance between the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Nikola Pašić), and Romania (Take Ionescu) in Belgrade on 7 June 1921. Although this formula of regional cooperation involved only three members, Romania had actually envisaged a more extended formula also including Poland and Greece, into a “general alliance from the Baltic to the Aegean Sea.”

The initiator of the project was Take Ionescu, who developed and gave additional substance to an idea formulated by the president of Czechoslovakia, Thomas Masaryk. The idea of an “eastern alliance of five members” was put forth by Take Ionescu in early 1919, at an event marking the first anniversary of the newspaper *La Roumanie*. The Romanian politician had the firm conviction that

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“Germany was not dead,” and that the group of five states – Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and Greece – would be able to keep the German peril under control.¹ To put his project into practice, Take Ionescu kept close contacts with prominent representatives of these states, such as Edvard Beneš, Nikola Pašić, and, last but not least, Eleftherios Venizelos. In fact, his friendship with Venizelos had already become notorious, and dialogue between the two flowed naturally.² Sometime before, Take Ionescu had written about Venizelos: “*l’ancien insurgé crétois se comportait comme un lord anglais ... est un vrai gentleman dans toute l’acception du mot.*”³ Therefore, Take Ionescu believed that the five countries should sign a treaty of alliance warranting the integrity of borderlines, arranging for periodical meetings of the ministers of Foreign Affairs, and putting forth a formula for military cooperation.⁴ Several hurdles soon arose. On the one hand, Poland was in conflict with the Soviet Union and had a serious territorial dispute over Teschen with another would-be member of the alliance, Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, Greece was on campaign in Asia Minor and was facing various political, economic and military issues.

As soon as Greece had signed the treaty of Sèvres⁵ (10 August 1920), which was a genuine success, Venizelos sent Take Ionescu his views on a rapprochement among states in the Balkan area. According to him, in Greece, “the feeling of solidarity among Romania, Serbia and Greece with regard to maintaining the Balkan status quo [...] is so profound, and the existence of a strong Romania so much in agreement with Greece’s interests, that we could not remain impassive in

¹ C. Xenii, *Take Ionescu* (Bucharest: Universul, 1858–1922), 465.

² According to Take Ionescu, the two politicians met for the first time in London in January 1913, both being invited to lunch by a famous English journalist, Dillon, an old friend of Venizelos. Quite an interesting reference is made to this event in Take Ionescu’s preface to a book on Venizelos by C. Kerofilas, published in Paris. Take Ionescu writes, among other things: “[...] j’ai eu l’occasion de voir Venizelos avoir raison contre tout le monde et imposer sa volonté pour le plus grand bien de sa patrie ... je fus dès le premier moment attiré. Cette tête de saint byzantin qu’on dirait descendue d’une fresque d’église, ce regard à la fois si pénétrant et si tendre, ce sourire si fin, cette sympathie irrésistible qui se dégage de toute sa personne, cette modestie presque de jeune fille et qui est d’autant plus charmante qu’elle est alliée à une volonté de fer, tout cela vous prend à la première rencontre. Je lui demandai le secret de son succès, et il me répondit ces paroles si simples mais si profondes: « J’ai toujours dit à mes concitoyens toute la vérité, toute, et je me suis toujours senti prêt à quitter le pouvoir sans aucun regret. » La sincérité, le culte de la vérité, voilà la plus belle des qualités de Venizelos, et en même temps le secret de sa force.” See Take Ionescu, foreword to C. Kerofilas, *Un homme d’État – E. Venizelos: Sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris: Imprimerie de l’Est, 1915), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 8. Take Ionescu evoked on the occasion the telegrams exchanged by the two statesmen on 13 and 15 June 1913, and noted in the aforementioned foreword that these “ont posé les bases de toute la politique gréco-roumaine de l’année 1913.”

⁴ Take Ionescu, *Mica Înțelegeră* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1921), 6–7.

⁵ For the Peace Treaty between the Allied and Associated Powers and Turkey (Treaty of Sèvres) – 10 August 1920, see J. A. S. Grenville, *The Major International Treaties 1914–1973. A History and Guide with Texts* (London: Methuen, 1974), 73–77.

the event of an attack by Bulgaria against Romania, should the Soviets launch an offensive on this last remaining power.”⁶ He believed that neither Romania could remain impassive should Bulgaria attack Greece.⁷ Additionally, the moment had come to begin negotiations for a defensive alliance of Romania, Greece and Yugoslavia, and as soon as the elections in Greece were over, he would visit Belgrade and Bucharest, to discuss the details of such an alliance.⁸

Anticipating somehow that Take Ionescu might wish to speed up negotiations, Venizelos believed that the Romanian politician’s intercession in Belgrade would be beneficial. One should note that beyond the availability displayed, the Greek State was preoccupied with the imminent clash with Kemal’s troops, and with the fact that Italy had denounced the secret Italian-Greek treaty, a source of worry in the event of a clash with the Turkish army. A new Greek-Italian treaty regulating the jurisdiction of the Aegean Islands was signed in August 1920, but Italy conditioned its coming into effect on the ratification of the peace treaty with Turkey.

In the meantime, Take Ionescu’s tour to probe the European chancelleries on the project yielded results. Indeed, positive signals were received from France (coinciding with the removal from Quai d’Orsay of Maurice Paléologue, the initiator of the project of the Danubian Confederation), Italy (during his visit in Rome, in September), and London (a favorable point of view regarding the five-member project being expressed by Lloyd George).⁹

Unfortunately, more hurdles arose, the most evident being the territorial dispute between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Quite suggestive in this respect is the report written by the Romanian representative to Warsaw, Alexandru Florescu, who analyzed the declarations of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Sapieha, and concluded that animosity persisted between Czechoslovakia and Poland, whereas Poland’s traditional friendship towards Hungary was obvious.¹⁰ In another report sent shortly after, Florescu wrote that Poland’s reluctance to participate in the project of the Little Entente was due first of all to “the Czechs’ attitude towards the Polish population living in Silesia and in Teschen,” which excluded a possible participation

⁶ Biblioteca Națională a României (Bucharest, Romania), Fond St. Georges, P. VIII, D. 7, f. 49, dated 2 September 1920.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. Here is the text: “[...] perhaps the time has come to begin negotiations for the prompt settling of a defensive alliance of Romania, Yugoslavia and Greece, in anticipation of a possible attack by Bulgaria. Indeed, such an alliance would prevent Bulgaria from embarking on a policy of adventure, and it would be unanimously acclaimed, at least in Greece; it would additionally exclude any pretext from the members of the opposition, who might attempt to derive some political benefit by opposing Greece’s entering the war alongside Romania, in the absence of contractual obligations deriving from an alliance between the two countries. Being absorbed by the treaty with Turkey and not knowing that the issue was pressing, I intend to visit Bucharest and Belgrade in late October or early November, as soon as the elections in Greece are over.”

⁹ Ibid., P. LXXIX, D. 6, unnumbered, dated 15 September 1920, Take Ionescu.

¹⁰ Ibid., P. XCII, D. 1, ff. 92–93, Warsaw, 22 September 1920, signed Florescu.

of Poland in the Little Entente.¹¹ As to the participation of Greece, new negotiations were to be held after the elections of 14 November. By then, nothing indicated the shock which was to be experienced by Venizelos' Liberals and by Venizelos himself. However, before the parliamentary elections in Greece, a very important event occurred on 15 October 1920: the announcement of the engagement of Prince George of Greece to Princess Elisabeth of Romania.

Moreover, the marriage of the Crown Prince of Romania Carol to Princess Helen of Greece was expected. After King Alexander's death, debates on the dynastic question in Greece were resumed. The variants were either to recall the deposed King Constantine or to place Prince George on the throne. As there was a strong trend of opinion against Constantine, especially in Paris and in London, the enthronement of George seemed much more likely, and this gave new dimensions to the prospective marriage of Diadochus George to Princess Elisabeth of Romania and caused a rise in the interest of the Romanian government and of the Royal House of Romania.

The enthusiasm in Bucharest was soon tempered by the prompt stand taken by the Greek representative in Bucharest, who informed a higher official in the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Gheorghe Deroussi, that the marriage between the members of the Royal Houses of Romania and Greece could have "a negative impact on relations between the two countries."¹²

Everything seemed to indicate the accession of George to the throne of Greece. Venizelos was raising no objection to it, provided the future king declared he had no sympathy for Germany. However, Venizelos' Liberals lost to the Royalists in the elections, which paved the way for ex-King Constantine's return. An explanation for Venizelos' severe defeat in the legislative elections of 14 November 1920 was put forward by Nicolae Filodor on 18 December.¹³ Filodor begins by noting that several supporters of Venizelos, upon learning of the results in the elections, had been tempted to organize a coup and arrest the leaders of the opposition. They were stopped by Venizelos, who wanted to avoid bloodshed. Further on, Filodor attributes the cause of the defeat to "the mistakes of the former government" and the "particularistic spirit of modern Greeks," especially as Eleftherios Venizelos had asked "too much sacrifice from his co-nationals in achieving the goal."¹⁴ Moreover, "*his bellicose enterprises have never been popular with the masses.*"¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., f. 144, Warsaw, 30 September 1920, signed Florescu.

¹² Ibid., P. VII, D. 7, Bucharest, 15 October 1920. A strong impression was made, and Take Ionescu was to be called in again to intervene, based on his privileged relationship with Venizelos, to assuage the worries of the Greeks and persuade them that the planned marriage had no negative connotations and could not influence the Greek-Romanian relations.

¹³ Ibid., P. VIII, D. 7 (Take Ionescu Archive), report by Nicolae Filodor, Romanian Legation in Athens, 18 December 1920, ff. 95–102.

¹⁴ Ibid., f. 98.

¹⁵ Ibid. According to Filodor, many Greeks thought that the expedition to Smyrna was colonial, and the public opinion was only interested in the campaign in Thracia, as "the re-conquest of Byzantium has remained a popular myth."

Given the new situation in Greece, the western powers announced on 22 November 1920, two days before the referendum on the recall of King Constantine, that they were withdrawing all support for the government in Athens should Constantine regain the throne. Greece's desertion by her allies and Venizelos' fall from power took a toll on the campaign in Asia Minor.

Concurrently, Venizelos' defeat and the change in political background in Athens marked a new blow dealt to Take Ionescu's initial project of a general five-member alliance. No less true is the fact that Take Ionescu continued to hope that at a certain point in time the rapprochement with Greece would materialize, and this is why Nicolae Filodor had been sent to Athens, on a secret mission, to gather intelligence on political developments. One should note that political tension in Greece was somewhat felt in Romania as well. A pro-Venizelos group headed by Leonidas Kostomiris, director of the newspaper *Ethnos*, was active in Bucharest. The activities of this group funded by the "Central Committee of the Movement Abroad" had elicited disapproval from the local Greek community, especially given the imminent visit to Romania of Nikolaos Theotokis, with "a special mission in relation to the Romanian Royal House." As a result, several means were considered, including the expulsion of Kostomiris, so as to prevent escalating tensions.¹⁶

Considering the new situation, Take Ionescu adopted a different strategy which consisted of bilateral treaties signed between the involved parties. Therefore, in the summer of 1921 the Little Entente had taken shape, but with just three member states.

Greece did not adhere to the new regional entity but continued to show interest in the Little Entente, as seen in the visit of the Greek Minister of External Affairs Apostolos Alexandris to Bucharest and Belgrade in the summer of 1923. The press of the time followed the event closely, and on 18 June 1923, the newspaper *Eleftheros Typos* was publishing a paper on the prospects of Greece joining the Little Entente.

The Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs I. G. Duca, as related by the Greek journalist Dionisie Kavafakis, believed that the official Romanian circles were open to Greece joining the Little Entente.¹⁷ Moreover, "Mr. Alexandris has completed the first act," and the second act will begin as soon as the peace of Lausanne is signed."¹⁸ According to the Greek newspaper, Duca was strongly convinced that Greece's participation in the Little Entente was possible, because "Greece and Romania have mutual interests both in times of war and in times of peace."¹⁹

¹⁶ See, for instance, Constantin Iordan, *România și relațiile internaționale din sud-estul european: probleme ale păcii, securității și cooperării (1919–1924)* (București: Editura All, 1999), 46–47.

¹⁷ Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (Bucharest, Romania), Fund Grecia 71/1923, G–19, appendix to the report no. 908 issued in Athens by Djuvara, for the information of the Minister of Foreign Affairs I. G. Duca, f. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Before leaving for Belgrade, Alexandris gave an interview to the same Kavafakis, showing the true objectives of his visit to Bucharest, which had been “to prepare a Greek-Romanian alliance and Greece’s adherence to the Little Entente.”²⁰ He also noted that in Bucharest he had been “received not only as a friend, but also as an ally.”²¹ Moreover, Alexandris was granted at his request an audience with the King of Yugoslavia, who was in Bucharest at the time.

Despite Alexandris’ optimism, as reported by the Greek journalist sent to Bucharest, the Greek newspaper spoke of the existence of less optimistic opinions outside the official circles, along which “the deployment of the Greek contingent, if need be, is questionable, due to the difficulty of transport to Central Europe, there where the peril lies for the Little Entente.”²² The newspaper concluded that, on the whole, the official political circles in Romania, including the Minister of Foreign Affairs, as well as other ministers, had been very “optimistic about Greece’s participation in the Little Entente,” the only person in these circles less enthusiastic and showing “some reserve” being Brătianu.²³

In his statement to the press before leaving Romania, the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs was more cautious when describing the purpose of his visit to Bucharest (knowing that it had been an attempt to weigh the chances of Greece joining the Little Entente). He declared that, “the purpose of the trip was to express to the Romanian government and to the Romanian people Greece’s gratitude for their sincere and open demonstrations of friendship,” especially as Romania had “always proved the authenticity” of such feelings.²⁴ Only in the end of the interview did the Greek official allude to the purpose of his visit, namely “to alleviate the considerable burden ahead of all Balkan peoples, to speed up the coming of a new era of solidarity and peace”; he also stated that he had been very pleased to have found, “in all the political circles of the country, complete openness and great determination to collaborate to such an endeavor.”²⁵

It is known that Greece never became part of the Little Entente, for various reasons. Nonetheless, in February 1934, Greece joined Romania, Yugoslavia and Turkey in a new entity, the Balkan Entente.

²⁰ Ibid., f. 4, containing the article “Pășim spre visata alianță a Greciei cu România,” published in the newspaper *Eleftheros Typos*.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., f. 5.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “Ministrul de Externe al Greciei vorbește presei române,” *Universul*, Friday, 8 June 1923, 1.

²⁵ Ibid. According to his statement to the Romanian Press, the Greek minister had felt during his visit in Romania that he was “not only among friends, but also among genuine allies.”