

Milan Stojadinović and Italian-Yugoslav relations (1935-1941)

di Bojan Simić

This article deals with Yugoslav-Italian relations in the second half of the 1930s, seen through the prism of relations between Yugoslav Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Milan Stojadinović (1935-1939) and Italian diplomacy and its representatives: Count Ciano, Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Italian envoys in Belgrade and some other officials who had contact with the Yugoslav Prime Minister. The relations between Milan Stojadinović and Italian diplomacy, especially with Count Ciano, were closer than established before in historiography. The two had a friendly relationship, which evolved both through direct contact and through intermediaries. They frequently exchanged opinions, and even documents, on topics of mutual interest, but there were also direct requests to work in accordance with Italian interests, as well as the interests of Yugoslavia.

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Relations between Italy and Yugoslavia in the period between the two world wars are a vital segment for understanding the history of the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia throughout its existence. They are also important for understanding the history of the Balkans, the Danube region, and even the whole of interwar Europe. Relations between the two countries, which underwent numerous phases and ups and downs, were mostly accompanied by suspicion and mutual mistrust. Italy and Yugoslavia had many open interstate issues, among which borders, the situation of national minorities, support for separatist movements, primarily the Ustasha movement on the part of Italy, and influence in Albania stood out. We may conclude that the periods of cooperation were relatively short as compared to the periods of mistrust and quiet conflict that lingered for most of the interwar period. According to Yugoslav historian Vuk Vinaver, Mussolini's aim was to break up Yugoslavia, and if he could not do that, not to give it to someone else. King Alexander strove to settle relations with the aggressive neighbor. His rapprochement with Germany just before his death in 1934 was spurred by problems with Italy. There were positive signals on the other side of the Adriatic in the early thirties, but apart from examining the terrain, no tangible negotiations took place.

A special phase in the relations between the two countries was the period stretching from late 1936 to early 1939. Numerous factors on both sides influenced this improvement in relations. Italy was exhausted by the war in Ethiopia and by the sanctions imposed by the League of Nations, but the decisive factor was Germany, which threatened Italian economic and political interests and sought to preserve the status quo in the Balkans. Yugoslavia, on its part, wanted to regulate relations with

its “problematic” neighbor and to remove danger from its Western border, at least for a while¹.

Professor Slobodan Jovanović and journalist Milan Jovanović Stoimirović, noting the lack of trust, defined Italy as a woman who «should be constantly entertained so that she doesn’t slip away and end in someone else’s hands»². This was indeed the case, as the Fascist regime did not care much about the signed agreements, respecting them while they were useful, and renounced them very easily when there was nothing to be gained by abiding by them. For that reason, cultivating relations with this neighbor was one of the priorities of the Yugoslav governing circles. As Italian diplomat Suvich wrote, a minor incident or a simple controversy in the press was enough to bury the good intentions that appeared on both sides³.

As Italy prepared for war in Africa, its policy toward other states, including Yugoslavia, had to be a conciliatory one, at least until the war ended. Thus, in 1935, Italy undertook several different initiatives aimed at an agreement between the two countries. During the spring, Italian diplomacy showed readiness for talks. When handing over the credentials, the new envoy in Belgrade, Guido Viola, brought with him Mussolini’s statement saying that Italy nurtured exclusively friendly feelings towards Yugoslavia and that it did not intend to hinder its development and its territorial integrity, but, on the contrary, wanted to utilize all existing possibilities to achieve real and friendly cooperation and understanding in the political and economic fields⁴.

The view of the Yugoslav Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Milan Stojadinović, who considered the agreement with the western neighbor to be key to his foreign policy, also worked in favor of the Italian policy⁵. Through diplomatic representatives, as well as personal contact with Viola, he signaled a willingness to reach an agreement with Italy. Prince Regent Paul Karađorđević also wanted such an agreement. The day after King Alexander’s funeral, he informed the Italian ambassador, Carlo Galli, that he was ready to continue the talks his cousin and Musso-

¹ Some of the titles dealing with Italian-Yugoslav relations in the second half of the 1930s: B. Simić, *Milan Stojadinović i Italija. Između diplomatije i propagande*, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Beograd 2019; L. Monzali, *Il sogno dell’egemonia. L’Italia, la questione Jugoslava e L’Europa Centrale*, Le Lettere, Firenze 2010; M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, B.A. Graphis, Bari 2006; Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske zemlje i velike sile 1935-1937*, Prosveta, Beograd 1968; J. Paszkiewicz, *Jugosławia w polityce Włoch w latach 1914-1941*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznan 2004; J. Burgwyn, *Italian Foreign Policy in the Interwar Period*, Praeger, Westport/London 1997, pp. 101-171; R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce*, v. 2, *Lo Stato totalitario, 1936-1940*, Einaudi, Torino 1996, pp. 398-404, 581-584; E. Milak, *Italija i Jugoslavija 1931-1937*, Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd 1985; B. Krizman, *Italija u politici kralja Aleksandra i kneza Pavla (1918-1941)*, in «Časopis za savremenu povijest», n. 1, 1979, pp. 33-97.

² M. Jovanović Stoimirović, *Dnevnik 1936-1941*, Matica srpska, Novi Sad 2000, p. 341.

³ F. Suvich, *Memorie 1932-1936*, Rizzoli, Milano 1986, pp. 208-209.

⁴ *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji*, v. 2, ur. Ž. Avramovski, Globus, Zagreb 1986, p. 332.

⁵ Milan Stojadinović (1888-1961) was an economist and politician who was Minister of Finance on three occasions. He was Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs for more than three and a half years (June 1935-February 1939). He took office with the support of Prince Paul and the British. After falling from power, he began opposition activities and was arrested in April 1940, and then extradited to Great Britain in March 1941. He spent World War II in Mauritius and after that he lived in Argentina.

lini had held through intermediaries⁶. A quick agreement was prevented, however, by mutual mistrust as well as by the sanctions of the League of Nations against Italy, which Yugoslavia adhered to, although reluctantly.

The first specific positive step in the direction of settling relations was the trade agreement concluded on September 26 and promulgated on October 1, 1936. Stojadinović gathered journalists in his cabinet and stated that Yugoslavia and Italy were two countries that fortunately complemented each other in their economic structures, and, according to him, the future development of both economic and other relations between them could be looked on more positively⁷. This agreement was supposed to move things from a dead-end, suspend the mutual exchange interruption, and start a new period of economic cooperation.

Italy also received an incentive to settle relations with Yugoslavia from its most important ally, Hitler. During the meeting with Ciano on October 24, 1936, the Reich leader stated that Germany had good relations with Yugoslavia and that he wanted Italy to establish such relations with it too, and that Rome should induce Hungary to turn its irredentism towards Czechoslovakia and not against Yugoslavia, as Germany had already advised it⁸. He pointed out that Yugoslavia was worried about Italy's aggressive intentions. He proposed giving Yugoslavia the necessary guarantees so that it would definitely break away from French influence. Ciano assured the German chancellor that the agreement had been being worked on for some time, that progress had been made, and that the Italian side was ready to go further⁹.

The German envoy in Belgrade, von Heeren, talked with Stojadinović and assured him that the Italian intentions were sincere, advising him that it would be wise for Yugoslavia to make the most of the current situation and the mood of Italy¹⁰. Stojadinović received the news with pleasure. He expressed that attitude during his visit to Ankara in late October, when he optimistically spoke to the Italian envoy Galli about the possible resolution of the dispute between the two countries¹¹. Apparently, a clear signal from Italy was awaited. And it arrived very quickly from several directions.

On October 29, 1936, Ciano invited the Yugoslav envoy Dučić for a conversation in Palazzo Chigi. He told him that he had considered all the disputes between

⁶ C. Galli, *Jugoslavia tragica (1928-1934)*, Istituto Grafico Tiberino, Roma 1953, p. 56. Indirect and secret negotiations between King Alexander and Mussolini began in the late 1930s, mediated by Guido Malagola Cappi, but they failed to yield any concrete result. See more in: B. Krizman, *Italija u politici*, cit., pp. 44-55.

⁷ *Zaključen novi sporazum sa Italijom*, in «Vreme», 1 October 1936, p. 1.

⁸ It was a meeting between Hitler and Admiral Horthy held on August 22, 1936, when the Chancellor demanded that Hungary accept the policy of approaching the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. D. Lukač, *Dileme Stojadinovićeve spoljne politike u vreme uspostavljanja Osovine Rim-Berlin*, in «Balcanica», n. 10, 1979, p. 218; M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, cit., p. 328.

⁹ *I documenti diplomatici italiani* (Ddi), Ottava serie, v. 5, *1° settembre-31 dicembre 1936*, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1994, doc. 277, Colloquio del ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, con il cancelliere del Reich, Hitler, 24-10-1936, p. 319.

¹⁰ Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske zemlje*, cit., pp. 264-265.

¹¹ Ivi, fn. 1.

the two countries. He energetically and theatrically showed his readiness to remedy the problems of Dalmatia and Croatia. He called for economic cooperation, emphasizing the complementarities of economies. He said that, just like himself, Stojadinović was a realist and he expected that they would understand each other because of that. Finally, he exclaimed: «Everything opposing has to fall like a house of cards, and everything in common has to rise», and to make Italy and Yugoslavia not two friends but «two sisters»¹². As a sign of good will, on the same day, Ciano ordered that the radio program in Serbo-Croatian, broadcast from Florence and Bologna, and favoring Croat separatists, be stopped¹³. At the end of the meeting, he asked Dučić not to send his messages to Belgrade, but to go there in person and bring him back Stojadinović's answer. The Serbian diplomat did so, so he was in the Yugoslav capital the following week.

The next impetus for the Italian-Yugoslav rapprochement came from the top. Mussolini's speech in Milan on November 1, 1936, marked the beginning of a new phase in Italian-Yugoslav relations. It was a long speech that will be remembered for the fact that the Berlin-Rome axis was mentioned for the first time. Regarding Yugoslavia, Mussolini stated that there were sufficient conditions of moral, political and economic significance for establishing truly friendly relations between the two countries¹⁴.

The response of the Yugoslav Prime Minister to Mussolini's outstretched hand was positive. Stojadinović believed that economic reasons also pointed to the agreement. Only a few days after Mussolini's speech, he sent a coded telegram to all Yugoslav envoys abroad, emphasizing that Yugoslavia had no reason to be an opponent of Italy if the latter respected the Yugoslav state borders, Yugoslav legitimate interests and rights. He also ordered them to convey the positive impression given to him by the Milan speech to their Italian counterparts¹⁵.

The Italians seemed to be in a hurry. Ciano was disappointed to learn that the Yugoslav side had not appointed its delegates for negotiations in mid-December. He was afraid they were waiting for the end of the negotiations to reach an agreement between Great Britain and Italy. He asked that delegates be sent to Rome between Christmas and New Year, or at least in the first days of January. Dučić excused himself by saying that Stojadinović was waiting for the return of Prince Paul from London. Regardless of the fact that Stojadinović and Dučić have repeatedly denied such claims, it seems that the Yugoslav side was still waiting for the Italian-British agreement to be concluded first. When the so-called Gentlemen's agreement was concluded on January 2, by which Great Britain and Italy expressed their interest in preserving the status quo in the Mediterranean basin, negotiations could begin.

¹² J. Dučić, *Diplomatski spisi*, Prosveta, Belgrade 1991, p. 191; M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, cit., p. 329.

¹³ See «Ciano ad Alfieri, telespresso R. 12904 del 6 novembre», in Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 5, cit., doc. 377, fn. 4, p. 425.

¹⁴ B. Mussolini, *Opera omnia*, v. 28, *Dalla proclamazione dell'Impero al viaggio in Germania (10 maggio 1936-30 settembre 1937)*, a c. di E. Susmel, D. Susmel, La Fenice, Firenze 1959, p. 69.

¹⁵ M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, Otokar Keršovani, Rijeka 1970, p. 411.

Thus, at least formally, it seemed that Yugoslavia was just following the British example.

Talks on the agreement were lengthy and lasted from January to the second half of March 1937. They have been extensively studied in both Yugoslav and Italian historiographies, so we will analyze them briefly¹⁶. The Yugoslav representatives were Ivan Subotić, a permanent delegate to the League of Nations, and Milivoj Pilja, as an expert on economic issues. On the Italian side, the representatives were Gino Buti for the political part and Leonardo Vitetti for the economic part.

In the instruction to Subotić, Stojadinović emphasized that the Yugoslav government was especially interested in four issues: the political agreement, Albania, the Ustasha and the issue of the Yugoslav minority in Italy. He underlined that there had to be no simultaneous concessions in all points, i.e. concessions in one had to be related to counter-concessions in other points¹⁷. And so it was. It turned out that the Italian side was the most rigid on the issue of Albania, while in other points it gave in. Negotiations began on January 11, when Subotić had talks in Rome, first with Ciano and later with appointed Italian representatives. Subotić's tactic was to let his interlocutors state their proposals first, so that he could give an answer after consultations with Belgrade. He also followed the idea that one should not be overly bound by the agreement and still tried to get the most out of the issue of terrorists, as the Ustashes were then officially called, and real independence for Albania¹⁸. During the breaks in the negotiations, Subotić consulted with Stojadinović, while they both exchanged opinions with the British Foreign Secretary Eden and the British minister in Belgrade, Campbell¹⁹. Later, in the annual report, the British embassy in Belgrade proudly underlined that the Yugoslav government had not expressed such an attitude towards anyone, not even towards its allies, until the negotiations reached the final phase²⁰.

As early as March 11, 1937, Subotić announced the arrival of Ciano in Belgrade for the signing of the agreement, which was scheduled for March 24 or 25. He concluded that the Italian minister cared to cause a sensation, coming by plane to Belgrade, signing the agreements and taking them back to Rome by plane for ratification, to «confuse the whole world»²¹. Finally, the issues that were not resolved by the planned signing were postponed. It was important for the Italians to divert attention from the current failure in Spain, and the Yugoslav government was in a hurry because of the forthcoming meeting of the Little Entente Council, planned for

¹⁶ Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske zemlje*, cit., pp. 267-285; J. Hoptner, *Jugoslavija u krizi 1934-1941*, Otakar Keršovani, Rijeka 1973, pp. 99-112; B. Krizman, *Italija u politici*, cit., pp. 65-73; M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, cit., pp. 336-361. Materials related to the negotiations can be found in: Archives of Yugoslavia (AJ), Milan Stojadinović Collection (37), box 30 and partly in the material of Vojislav Jovanović Marambo (68), box 21.

¹⁷ J. Hoptner, *Jugoslavija u krizi*, cit., p. 99.

¹⁸ AJ, 37-30-42, The last meeting with Buti and Vitetti, 16-1-1937.

¹⁹ M. Bucarelli, *Mussolini e la Jugoslavia*, cit., pp. 348-350.

²⁰ *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji*, v. 2, ur. Ž. Avramovski, cit., p. 558.

²¹ AJ, 37-30-55, Subotić's letter to Stojadinović, 11-3-1937. It is interesting that Subotić asked his minister to hide his identity as a negotiator, if possible, as they were not friendly towards Italy in the Geneva area.

early April in Belgrade. Stojadinović mentioned on several occasions that he wanted to present the completed agreement to the Czechoslovak and Romanian allies²².

The political agreement meant mutual recognition of borders, dealt with some minority issues, provided for neutrality in the case of unprovoked attack from other states and obligation not to tolerate irredentist movements on one's own soil against the other party. The trade agreement regulated issues of commerce whose goal was to revive the cooperation the two countries had before the sanctions against Italy caused by Ethiopian War. There were also four secret annexes: an assurance regarding Albania and Italian interests there, the promise that Ustasha terrorists would be subjected to strict control, the prospect of new economic benefits beyond those provided by the trade agreement and the understanding that, in exchange for meeting the demands of Italians in Dalmatia, the Yugoslav minority in Italy would regain the right to their own schools and the use of their mother tongue in worship²³.

The conclusion of most contemporaries and historians is that the Yugoslav side gained more with these agreements, at least on paper. This primarily refers to the guarantee of territorial integrity, the issue of the Ustasha, as well as the issue of national minorities. With the economic agreement, Italy also committed itself not only to import more Yugoslav products, but also to give Yugoslavia the status of most favored nation in all trade relations. The only issue where Italy got more was the recognition of its positions in Albania. One more symbolic gain was the mention in the treaties of the Italian king as the emperor of Ethiopia, to which Stojadinović had given his consent back on March 1 in a conversation with the Italian envoy to Belgrade, Indelli²⁴. In effect, the Yugoslav side still did not formally recognize the empire, waiting for the decision of the League of Nations.

It should be noted that the significance of the agreement for Italy was not in its specific provisions, but in Italian plans for the future. On the one hand, there was the intention of attracting Yugoslavia, which might later cause it to join the Rome-Berlin axis and break, or at least loose, its existing alliances. No less important reason, if not more important, was the struggle for influence within the Axis itself. The fear of a German incursion into Yugoslavia, especially after a successful economic penetration, was a very important driving force for the Italian side. Ciano said that very clearly to Subotić as early as the beginning of March. He emphasized that Germany was not only a dangerous opponent, but also a difficult friend. He underlined that he did not think that Italy and Yugoslavia must turn against Germany, but that they must together organize their cooperation with it²⁵.

The British also testify that Prince Paul and Stojadinović did not have many choices, but had to go this way. The 1937 annual report of the British embassy in Belgrade literally says: «When, soon after the conquest of Abyssinia, Yugoslavia

²² Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 6, *1° gennaio-30 giugno 1937*, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1997, doc. 281, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 16-3-1937, p. 340.

²³ *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji*, v. 2, ur. Ž. Avramovski, cit., p. 559.

²⁴ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 6, cit., doc. 217, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 1-3-1937, p. 276.

²⁵ J. Hoptner, *Jugoslavija u krizi*, cit., p. 102.

realized that it could no longer count on the help of France and the League of Nations, and that Great Britain, despite its desire, could not provide protection, it felt the need to reach an agreement with the powerful neighbor, with whom relations were occasionally been so bad in recent years that they posed a threat to peace in Europe»²⁶. Apart from clear foreign policy reasons (security from a dangerous enemy), Yugoslavia also had an important domestic policy reason. By settling relations with Italy, external support was taken away from both the Ustasha movement abroad and the Croatian separatist movement in the country. Stojadinović hoped that this would force the leader of the Croatian opposition, Vladko Maček, to give in and give up federalist demands. That expectation of the Yugoslav Prime Minister turned out to be wrong.

Upon his return, Ciano conveyed his impressions of his stay in Yugoslavia to Mussolini in detail. His impression was that the reached agreement was the first step, albeit the most difficult, in the direction of an alliance. He believed that Italy should take a position in Yugoslavia France had held until recently. He expressed the hope that all problems that could arise in the future would be eliminated quickly. For that purpose, Stojadinović's brother Dragomir and Filippo Anfuso, Italian diplomat and Ciano's personal friend, were appointed as go-betweens, who would act independently of normal diplomatic channels²⁷.

Ciano was fascinated by his Yugoslav counterpart. As we have seen, he had a positive opinion of him before, but now he was first-hand convinced as to what kind of person he was. To Ciano, the Yugoslav Prime Minister seemed like a man of «indomitable will, clear and open mindset». He considered him a fascist, although not formally, but according to his «conception of authority, state and life». Thus began a friendship that would transcend the usual diplomatic relations, which were mostly courteous and devoid of emotion²⁸. They frequently exchanged opinions, and even documents, on topics of mutual interest, but there were also direct requests to work in accordance with Italian interests, as well as the interests of Yugoslavia. These requests were mainly related to Stojadinović's actions within the Little and Balkan Ententes on the one hand, and with Italian influence on revisionist countries, Hungary and Bulgaria, on the other. The initiatives were at times successful, at other times only partly so, but there were also times when Stojadinović could not and did not want to meet the Italian requests. He did not turn them down directly, of course, but rather employed all sorts of excuses instead. Ciano also received assurances from Prince Paul that he had unlimited trust in Stojadinović, which led him to conclude that he would have the position of a dictator in the future²⁹.

²⁶ *Britanci o Kraljevini Jugoslaviji*, v. 2, ur. Ž. Avramovski, cit., p. 520.

²⁷ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 6, cit., doc. 345, Colloqui del ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, con il presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri Jugoslavo, Stojadinović, 26-3-1937, pp. 412-418.

²⁸ See more in: B. Simić, *Milan Stojadinović and Count Ciano. A History of a Friendship*, in «Tokovi istorije», n. 3, 2019, pp. 11-36.

²⁹ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 6, cit., doc. 345, Colloqui del ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, con il presidente del Consiglio e ministro degli Esteri Jugoslavo, Stojadinović, 26-3-1937, p. 417.

Of the European countries, the Italian-Yugoslav pact was most warmly received by Germany. The German envoy in Belgrade, von Heeren, delivered heartfelt congratulations from Hitler, who marked this agreement as a significant step in strengthening European peace. Great Britain accepted the pact with some reservations as some of its advice had not been taken into account, primarily due to the introduction of the neutrality and consultation terms in it. France was dissatisfied and allegedly tried to prevent the signing. However, the press wrote mostly positively, which was also registered by Yugoslav newspapers³⁰.

During July, the work of the Italian-Yugoslav Economic Committee, foreseen by the Economic Agreement in March, was completed. The result was a 100% increase of Yugoslav exports to Italy, primarily timber and livestock. The same trade conditions applied to Austria and Hungary were extended to Yugoslavia. Italy, on the other hand, was allowed to pay through the clearing for wheat and corn worth about 80 million dinars³¹.

An episode from the end of August 1937 is of special importance for the development of Stojadinović's trust in the Italians. Namely, Anfuso was sent to Bled to present the Prime Minister with proof of a French-Czechoslovak plot against him. It was a British document that the Italian intelligence service had come by, in which Campbell quoted a telegram from the British envoy in Prague, about a conspiracy to remove Stojadinović³². As expected, when he received the photographed document, the Yugoslav Prime Minister was furious. After the return of Anfuso, Ciano concluded: «He will go to the meeting of the Little Entente with bloodshot eyes. The blow is successful»³³. The Italian minister could be satisfied with what was achieved and believed that he would tie Stojadinović even more to Italy. In a conversation with the Italian envoy in Belgrade Indelli, the Prime Minister said that, before or after his visit to Rome, he would go to Paris to formally renew the pact of friendship from 1927, but that he would not change «a single comma» in it, despite French demands. Referring probably to the content of the document he had seen, he added that French recent position on Yugoslav internal affairs had cooled him down considerably in connection with the trip³⁴.

In the fall of 1937, the Yugoslav Prime Minister visited three major European capitals, Paris, London and Rome. As we saw earlier, Stojadinović had already explained to Italian diplomats why he was going to the French capital reluctantly. He had a new conversation on the topic with Indelli in late September. Indelli's impression was that, despite some attempts, Stojadinović had failed to reduce the distrust of the French. Because of that, he had decided to make a personal move,

³⁰ Ž. Avramovski, *Balkanske zemlje*, cit., pp. 292-302.

³¹ *Izveštaji Ministarstva inostranih poslova Kraljevine Jugoslavije za 1937. godinu*, ur. N. Petrović, Arhiv Jugoslavije, Belgrade 2013, p. 357.

³² Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 7, 1^o luglio-31 dicembre 1937, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1998, doc. 236, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 23-8-1937 and fn. 2, p. 284.

³³ G. Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, Rizzoli, Milano 2010, p. 29.

³⁴ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 7, cit., doc. 250, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 26-8-1937, p. 305.

but even that, in Indelli's opinion, would not change things. In September 1937 the Italian envoy sent a report to Minister Ciano, stating how he saw the interests of his country. Indelli wrote: «What interests us, in my opinion, is that Stojadinović manages to retain and consolidate power, which could enable our not-very-easy action aimed at systematic continuation of the progress and increase of the position we have already achieved to succeed, in the short time that remains until King Peter comes of age, when elements whose actions would be unknown as far as we are concerned, could return and take command»³⁵. These words, written on September 29, 1937, best describe the attitude of Italian diplomacy, but also of the fascist top brass towards Stojadinović.

That the Italians really cared not to annoy Stojadinović in any way is also testified by Ciano's message given just before the celebration of Independence Day in Albania (November 28). He explained to the Yugoslav Prime Minister that Italy's participation in the celebration and economic assistance to Albania was in the spirit of the notes exchanged the previous March concerning Albania. «Nothing has been done and will not be done if not in keeping» with «friendly relations between Italy and Yugoslavia»³⁶.

At that time, Mussolini had already made the decision for Italy to leave the League of Nations. The date of that decision was connected with Stojadinović's visit. In a secret telegram on November 27, Ciano informed the ambassador in Berlin, Attolico, that he did not want Stojadinović «to be put in an unpleasant situation» if that act was committed during his stay in Italy³⁷. For that reason, the official announcement of the withdrawal from the League of Nations was postponed until December 11.

Stojadinović arrived in Rome with his wife Augusta late in the evening on December 5. He was accompanied by the Yugoslav envoy to Rome, Boško Hristić, who had handed over his credentials to King Victor Emmanuel III only some twenty days earlier. The delegation also included Yugoslav journalists. At the Termini station, Stojadinović was greeted by Mussolini and Ciano with numerous officials. In addition to the talks with the "leader of fascism" and Ciano, during his three-day stay in Rome, Stojadinović was received by the King and Pope Pius XI. The Yugoslav Prime Minister then visited a drill of fascist youth organizations with Mussolini, the Guidonia air center, the new cities of Littoria, Pontinia, Sabaudia and Aprilia, as well as an exhibition at the Museum of Ancient Rome. Thousands of people were engaged in the entire program, and the guest was showered with attention at every step.

On the way to Milan, he was accompanied by Ciano and by the Minister of Propaganda, Alfieri, who had previously held a reception for the Yugoslav journalists' delegation. Stojadinović visited the Alfa Romeo car factory, the Pirelli tire factory, the Caproni plane factory and the famous Scala Theatre in Milan, where he and his

³⁵ Ivi, doc. 378, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 29-9-1937, pp. 458-459.

³⁶ Ivi, doc. 627, Il ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, all'ambasciatore a Belgrado, Indelli, 27-11-1937, p. 735.

³⁷ Ivi, doc. 626, Il ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, all'ambasciatore a Berlino, Attolico, 27-11-1937, pp. 734-735.

wife watched Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. There he met and talked with many people, from managers to ordinary workers. When he left, he was also shown respect by the fact that Mussolini had accompanied him to the station in Rome and Ciano did the same in Milan.

Ciano was very pleased with the visit. He concluded that Stojadinović liked the Italian dictatorship and wanted to apply the system in his country. He estimated that Stojadinović would certainly remain in power for another four years, until the king came of age, and probably even after that. In the concluding consideration of the visit, the Count believed that it laid the foundation for a future alliance that «could work in various directions. One day, maybe even to the north»³⁸. By “north”, he obviously meant Hitler's Germany. Stojadinović, on his part, concluded that «although during my stay in Rome and Milan no new agreements were concluded or signed, my talks with Mussolini and Ciano further strengthened the direction of policy, the foundations of which were laid in the agreements signed in March in Belgrade». The “foundations” meant: peace on the Adriatic shores and security against a possible German invasion in the direction of the Mediterranean Sea³⁹.

A report from late 1937 attracts special attention. It seems that the Italians came by a document of the British embassy in Belgrade again, which they decided to hand over to Stojadinović in person. This time, Filippo Caracciolo di Melito, an official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the appointed messenger. Upon his arrival in the Yugoslav capital, he handed the document over to Indelli⁴⁰, and at the same time received a confidential report from him on the situation in Yugoslavia, which he passed on to Ciano. In that report, Indelli noticed a certain duality in Yugoslav politics represented in the personalities of Prince Paul and Stojadinović. While the former was a cautious element primarily related to Great Britain, the latter was a «new and dynamic» element. He saw Stojadinović as the guarantor of Italian-Yugoslav relations, as a deterioration of those relations would be considered a personal failure of the Prime Minister⁴¹. The document the Italians had come by was not to their liking, but Indelli doubted that Stojadinović had direct connections with it. It is important to note that already then, at the end of 1937, Prince Paul was perceived as primarily oriented towards Great Britain, while the Yugoslav Prime Minister was looking towards Italy.

Criticism of Stojadinović's foreign policy by the opposition in the country continued during 1938. This especially concerned the pact with Italy, so Stojadinović turned for help through Indelli. Namely, he asked the Italians to give him an argument with an appropriate statement, at least a purely formal one, which he could use to calm down the opposition in parliament. It can be gleaned from the note that he

³⁸ G. Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, cit., pp. 66-67.

³⁹ M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, cit., p. 449.

⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the document in question has not been preserved in the Italian archives. Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 7, cit., doc. 741, fn. 1, p. 845.

⁴¹ Ivi, doc. 741, L'addetto all'ufficio di Gabinetto, Caracciolo di Melito, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 26-12-1937, pp. 845-846.

expected some additional guarantee regarding the issue of minorities in the border areas⁴². Ciano rejected this request as there was no minority representative to talk to, and more importantly, as such talks would resemble democratic and parliamentary practices that were «absolutely unacceptable»⁴³. He added, however, that the issue would be looked into by the Ministry of the Interior in line with Stojadinović's wishes. So, like the Yugoslav Prime Minister, Ciano had certain borders he did not cross in this cooperation.

The Anschluss was accepted by both countries as inevitable considerably before it actually happened in March 1938. Ciano met with Hristić on March 24 and stated that a thousand reasons had pushed him to make the Belgrade Agreement, and that there were now a thousand and one to strengthen it. He expressed the desire to see Stojadinović and suggested a meeting in July in Venice⁴⁴. Indelli also commented from Belgrade that regardless of the good relations Stojadinović had with Germany, he would have, just in case, to stabilize the Yugoslav-Italian relations, as well as those with the Balkan allies⁴⁵.

Regarding its significance and the funds invested, the exhibition “Italian Portrait through the Centuries”, held from March 28 to May 9, 1938, in Belgrade, is the most significant propaganda action promoted by the Italian government in Yugoslavia, and generally one of the most important it conducted in interwar Europe. Similar exhibitions were organized in London in 1930, Paris in 1935 and Berlin in 1937. It was also the most visited art exhibition in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and can be said to be an event of wider significance. The idea of the exhibition was formally launched by Prince Paul. It was organized by the Italian Ministry of Popular Culture with the logistical support of the Venice Biennale and the cooperation of the Yugoslav Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Education⁴⁶.

Just as Italy often intervened on behalf of Hungary, it did the same on behalf of Albania as regards an agreement Yugoslavia reached with Turkey on the transfer of Muslim residents from Yugoslavia to Turkey. The Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, through the envoy in Tirana, Jacomoni, expressed his fear that Yugoslavia would use the agreement with Turkey to evict a large number of Albanians from Kosovo. Ciano immediately expressed his skepticism as to the foundations of such

⁴² Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 8, *1° gennaio-23 aprile 1938*, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1999, doc. 185, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 18-2-1938, pp. 214-215.

⁴³ Ivi, doc. 220, Il ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, al ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, 24-2-1938, p. 269.

⁴⁴ G. Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, cit., p. 116.

⁴⁵ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 8, cit., doc. 386, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 23-3-1938, p. 447.

⁴⁶ More on the exhibition: L. Carletti, C. Giometti, «Un altro sfallo del 1938»: *La Mostra del ritratto italiano nei secoli a Belgrado*, in «Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti», tomo 168, 2009-2010, pp. 257-290; B. Simić, *Izložba Italijanski portret kroz vekove u Beogradu, 28. mart-9.maj 1938*, in «Istorija 20. veka», n. 1, 2013, pp. 23-34; A. Basciani, *The Ciano-Stojadinović Agreement and the Turning Point in the Italian Cultural Policy in Yugoslavia (1937-1941)*, in *Italy's Balkan Strategies (19th-20th Century)*, ed. V. Pavlović, Institute for Balkan Studies of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade 2014, pp. 203-207; L. Zamparelli, *Il controllo sulla stampa*, Talos, Castrolibero 2015, pp. 83-89.

news. However, the issue was opened through diplomatic channels. Galli reported from Ankara on all the details of the agreement between Turkey and Yugoslavia regarding the displacement of Muslims from Kosovo and stated that it would involve about 25,000 people⁴⁷. Only after the meeting in Venice, during June, did Ciano send a message asking Stojadinović about it and received the answer that those rumors were unfounded⁴⁸. In this case, the Italians did not want to put pressure on the Yugoslavs as they cared about cooperation and did not want to make it more difficult with this particular case.

An official note from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, compiled by Ciano himself, tells us about the topics, the course and the seriousness of the talks in Venice. The very first sentence of the report unequivocally indicates the true character of Stojadinović's visit and completely denies the official version that underlined its private nature. The note states: «Prime Minister Stojadinović said that the main goal of his trip to Italy was to get to know our policy in detail by observing the general situation, to inform us of his intentions and to absolutely synchronize his international activities with ours»⁴⁹. Several topics were discussed at the meeting: the situation connected with Czechoslovakia, the relations with Germany, the relations with Great Britain and France and the Albanian issue. The Yugoslav Prime Minister pointed out that the problem of Czechoslovakia was the most important issue for him at the time. He said that in no case did he intend to drag his country into conflict with Germany in the attempt to save the «artificial and hostile Czechoslovakia». In order to formally absolve himself of responsibility, he asked Italy in talks to influence Hungary not to initiate an attack on Czechoslovakia in the future, since in that case Yugoslavia would be forced to act upon the treaty on the Little Entente alliance (namely, to provide assistance to the attacked country). If Hungary were to take advantage of the crisis caused by Germany, without resorting to direct aggression, «then Yugoslavia would remain completely indifferent to the fate of Czechoslovakia»⁵⁰. Ciano assured him that Hungary had no intention of provoking a conflict with Prague. The events from the autumn that year completely confirmed the second scenario, that is, Germany was the first to attack Czechoslovakia, and the reaction of the Yugoslav government was as Stojadinović had predicted, which in some circles earned him the nickname of «the gravedigger of the Little Entente».

Relations with Germany were of crucial importance for the foreign policy of both countries. The pressure on Yugoslavia increased especially because Hitler's Germany became its neighbor after it annexed Austria. The new situation caused unrest both among political circles and among ordinary people. Stojadinović be-

⁴⁷ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 9, *24 aprile-11 settembre 1938*, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 2001, doc. 122, Il ministro a Tirana, Jacomoni, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 20-5-1938 and fn. 4, pp. 167-168.

⁴⁸ Ivi, doc. 244, Il ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, al ministro a Tirana, Jacomoni, 21-6-1938, p. 333.

⁴⁹ Ivi, doc. 237, Il ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, al capo del Governo, Mussolini, 18-6-1938, pp. 318-321.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 318.

lieved that one of the goals of German policy was to reach the Adriatic and called on his Italian counterpart to be careful. Thus, he proposed a joint, «closely united» watching of Hitler's moves, but at the same time «maintaining the strongest friendly relations with Berlin, as both countries intend to maintain cooperation and friendship with Nazi Germany as the basis of their international activities»⁵¹. Stojadinović was particularly wary of the increased German economic influence in Yugoslavia and sought ways to improve trade relations with Italy.

Stojadinović's visit to Venice and his meeting with Count Ciano confirmed the policy of cooperation between the two countries, which had begun with the Belgrade Agreement in 1937. At the same time, the already cordial relationship and mutual respect between the two foreign ministers deepened. During the visit, the Yugoslav press reported the writing of the Italian newspaper «Il Telegrafo», which had written about Stojadinović: «he is a friend of Italy not only because it is a diplomatic need of his homeland, but also because of the deep affection of his taste and culture»⁵². Regarding the situation from mid-1938, Vinaver concluded: «Italy opted for Hitler, against France, and Yugoslavia opted for Italy»⁵³. Everything said above only confirms this further.

The organization and financing of group visits by members of the Yugoslav ruling party – the Yugoslav Radical Community (JRC) – was a special type of propaganda campaign carried out by the Italian government during 1938. There were more such visits, and we single out those of the JRC Student Club “Slovenski jug” in the middle of the year and the Yugoslav delegation (JRC workers' section) in September. All those visits had strong Stojadinović's support, both moral and financial⁵⁴.

Virginio Gayda wrote that the Italian public opinion was more in favor of Yugoslavia than ever before. Noting that the Yugoslav people were facing a great future, he added: «The ingenious policy of Dr. Milan Stojadinović opened a new horizon for Yugoslavia. In the face of that reality, Yugoslavia is already approaching the ranks of great powers»⁵⁵. This very same spokesman for Mussolini had fiercely attacked Yugoslavia in the early 1930s. Now he obviously had orders to speak differently, primarily about its prime minister.

The results of the parliamentary elections held on December 11, 1938, had a significant place in the reports sent from the Italian embassy in Belgrade. In the first analysis of the results, Indelli said that a minimal election victory (54% of the votes for Stojadinović's list against 45% for the opposition) was turned into a significant majority in the parliament (304 against 67 deputies) thanks to the election law. He concluded that the Croatian problem, i.e. the refusal of a unitary Yugoslav state, was the same as twenty years earlier, when the Kingdom of SHS was founded. Indelli

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 319.

⁵² *Prijateljstvo između Jugoslavije i Italija je bazični pakt Evropskog mira*, in «Vreme», 18 June 1938, p. 4.

⁵³ V. Vinaver, *Jugoslavija i Francuska između dva svetska rata*, Institut za savremenu istoriju, Beograd 1985, p. 378.

⁵⁴ See more in: B. Simić, *Italijanska propagandna ofanziva tokom 1938. godine*, in «Tokovi istorije», n. 1, 2016, pp. 97-114.

⁵⁵ *Jugoslavija već sada ulazi u red velikih sila*, in «Vreme», 20 September 1938, p. 5.

referred to an earlier statement by Stojadinović in which he had claimed that the federation meant «suicide of the state»⁵⁶. It was clear to him that the country was in a serious crisis. In the report that followed, he analyzed the causes of such outcome of the elections. He saw some of the reasons for the poor result of the ruling party in the organization of the party itself, in the attitude of Korošec, who cared only about his Slovenia, but also in the cooperation with the Muslim Spaho in Bosnia, which had turned the Serbs there against Stojadinović. On the other hand, the Italian envoy registered the loyalty of the national minorities, who overwhelmingly supported the government list⁵⁷. All in all, the results did not justify the hopes of Stojadinović and of the Italians themselves. At the beginning of the election campaign, the leading Italian newspaper «Corriere della Sera» published the article *The Birth of the Stojadinović regime*, which was a reflection of their wishes⁵⁸. The reality turned out to be different.

Ciano was not overly happy with the outcome of the Yugoslav elections either. When the leader of the Slovenes, Korošec, was soon expelled from the government at the request of the Prime Minister, he could conclude that the bad news were multiplying. However, he had faith in Stojadinović whom he described as a well-grounded pilot who «had overcome much bigger storms than the current one»⁵⁹. Despite the apparent instability of his friend's position in his country, Ciano apparently had not the slightest doubt about his ability to overcome. The events would soon prove him wrong. Still, before that, Ciano's visit to Yugoslavia had already been agreed.

From the words written by Ciano himself, the purpose of the January 1939 visit was quite clear. The Italian minister wrote: «We talked with the Duce about what I should say in Yugoslavia. The main point: the Albanian issue. We agreed that it is not worth jeopardizing Belgrade's precious friendship because of Albania. So, the situation is as follows, we will act only if we can reach an agreement that would be on the following grounds: rounding of the Yugoslav border, demilitarization of the Albanian borders, military alliance and support for the Serbian conquest of Thessaloniki»⁶⁰.

All sources on the talks indicate that the question of Albania was the central topic. Already in his introductory speech, Ciano emphasized that Mussolini did not want to do anything on that issue without consulting the Yugoslavs first. The official minutes of the conversation show that the division of Albania was mentioned, but that Ciano did not want to be specific on that point, mentioning only a certain border correction. Ciano concluded that the Yugoslav territorial demands would not be great, especially after Prince Paul's statement that Yugoslavia already had so many

⁵⁶ See «Telespresso 7360/1889 del 14 dicembre» in Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 10, *12 settembre-31 dicembre 1938*, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 2003, doc. 546, fn. 1, p. 595.

⁵⁷ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 10, cit., doc. 546, Il ministro a Belgrado, Indelli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 14-12-1938, pp. 595-596.

⁵⁸ See the report from Gobbi to Ciano, dated December 17, 1938, in Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 10, cit., doc. 578, fn. 3, p. 629.

⁵⁹ G. Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, cit., p. 227.

⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 240.

troublesome Albanians within its borders that he had «no desire» to increase their numbers⁶¹. Stojadinović, on the other hand, as far as the Albanian territories are concerned, was primarily interested in Shkodra and San Giovanni di Medua port on the Adriatic Sea. He did not hide his aim, even in his memoirs written after World War II⁶². After the talks, Stojadinović instructed Ciano to approach Prince Paul on this issue. The president of the Yugoslav government already knew that the Prince was averse to the division of Albania, and he did not want to make any promises, saying that he had to consult the military leadership⁶³. It was obvious that Paul too avoided a definite answer in the conversation with Ciano. In any case, Ciano left with the impression that both Yugoslav statesmen had a favorable opinion of his proposal, which he wrote in the official report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁶⁴. It did not take him long to realize that his conclusion was wrong⁶⁵.

The relations between the two states took an unexpected turn only two weeks after Ciano's visit, when the Italian favorite, Stojadinović, was removed from power. Stojadinović's fall was an unpleasant surprise for Mussolini and Ciano. On the day he learned the news from Belgrade, Ciano wrote in his diary: «Stojadinović's position seemed safe», he had personally assured him only fourteen days earlier «that no one and nothing can push him out of power»⁶⁶. Mussolini was furious. He concluded that the fall of Stojadinović was proof that the only secure policy can be made with Germany. After the unfavorable news from Belgrade, the Duce stated: «march anyway. With Stojadinović, partition [of Albania] between us and Yugoslavia. Without Stojadinović, our occupation [of Albania] without Yugoslavia and if necessary against Yugoslavia»⁶⁷.

With the fall from power, Stojadinović did not cease to be interesting to the leading people of the fascist regime. The desire for his return to power was occasionally clearly expressed. It was similar with German diplomats. Vladislav Stakić, the Prince's commissioner for talks with Mussolini and Ciano, wrote: «On the issue of Stojadinović, the Germans and the Italians did not give us peace at all. They periodically brought the issue to the fore»⁶⁸.

That the Axis powers did not want to completely give up on Stojadinović is also shown by their reaction after the arrest of the former prime minister. Ciano

⁶¹ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 11, *1° gennaio-22 maggio 1939*, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 2006, doc. 90, Promemoria del ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, sul viaggio in Jugoslavia del 18-23 gennaio 1939, p. 129.

⁶² M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, cit., p. 518.

⁶³ According to French sources, Stojadinović had an order from the Prince not to make any agreement with the Italians. D. Biber, *O padu Stojadinovićeve vlade*, in «Istorija 20. veka», n. 8, 1966, p. 26.

⁶⁴ Ddi, Ottava serie, v. 11, cit., doc. 90, Promemoria del ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, sul viaggio in Jugoslavia del 18-23 gennaio 1939, pp. 129-130.

⁶⁵ More on Ciano's visit: B. Simić, *La visita del conte Ciano in Jugoslavia nel gennaio 1939*, in *Un mestiere paziente. Gli allievi pisani per Daniele Menozzi*, a c. di A. Mariuzzo et al., ETS, Pisa 2017, pp. 235-246.

⁶⁶ G. Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, cit., p. 248.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ V. Stakić, *Moji razgovori sa Musolinijem*, Iskra, Minhen 1967, p. 75.

asked the new envoy in Belgrade, Francesco Mameli, to inquire with the Yugoslav government about the reasons for the arrest in April 1940. The Italian envoy was explained that these were purely internal reasons, but he himself was not convinced, saying that the arrest was interpreted as an «anti-German and, to a lesser extent, an anti-Italian act», for which it was enough to open any French or British newspaper⁶⁹. The government tried to refute the foreign press' allegations with a sharp denial, underlining that the foreign policy concerns were not the reason for the «measures» taken.

During Stojadinović's internment, the reactions of the Axis representatives were even fiercer. On June 25, 1940, after receiving news from his representatives that his friend's life was in great danger, Ciano acted by promptly contacting the German representatives who immediately intervened to «save Stojadinović's life»⁷⁰. Journalist Alfio Russo wrote that Italy was ready to break off diplomatic relations when the news appeared, and that the murder of Stojadinović would mean a *casus belli* for Italy⁷¹! Both Axis envoys in Belgrade reacted to the rumors about the possible murder of Stojadinović. The reaction of the German envoy von Heeren was especially sharp. Prince Paul allegedly replied that he was not a murderer and that Stojadinović was safe. He went a step further, assuring the German envoy that it was him who had launched friendly policy towards the Axis and that he had to overcome some resistance from Stojadinović. In his report, Heeren concluded that the Prince would do everything to keep the former prime minister safe, but that he would refuse to cooperate with him in the future⁷².

At the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, Prince Paul sent a lawyer named Stakić on several occasions as his envoy to Italy. He talked to Ciano and Mussolini. These talks showed the attitudes of the leading figures of fascism towards the former Yugoslav prime minister. During his first meeting with Stakić in Palazzo Chigi, on November 11, 1940, Ciano could not help but talk about Stojadinović. He said that he was unpleasantly surprised by his fall from power. Especially, since he was dismissed immediately after their meeting in Yugoslavia. Ciano emphasized how his personal friendship with Mr. Stojadinović was great, adding that he had with him, as with the «highest figure of the Reich, unlimited friendship and complete trust», as he was «one of the first friends of the Axis». However, on that occasion, Ciano added that friendship was one thing, and politics was another⁷³. It is important to note that Stakić had explicit instructions from Prince Paul to clarify that Stojadinović's return was impossible for reasons of interior policy, since the Croa-

⁶⁹ Ddi, Nona serie, v. 4, 9 aprile-10 giugno 1940, La libreria dello Stato-Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, Roma 1960, doc. 343, Il ministro a Belgrado, Mameli, al ministro degli Esteri, Ciano, 9-5-1940, p. 273. Vinaver links Stojadinović's arrest to Italian preparations for the attack on Yugoslavia because the government considered him as possible "Italian Quisling Prime Minister". V. Vinaver, *Jugoslovenska politika prema Italiji 1939-1941*, in «Istorijski zapisi», n. 1, 1968, p. 92.

⁷⁰ G. Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, cit., p. 446.

⁷¹ A. Russo, *Rivoluzione in Jugoslavia*, Donatello de Luigi, Roma 1944, p. 77.

⁷² D. Biber, *O padu Stojadinovićeve vlade*, cit., p. 56, fn. 190.

⁷³ V. Stakić, *Moji razgovori sa Musolinijem*, cit., pp. 85-86.

tian leader Maček did not want to cooperate with him, and cooperation with Maček was «the basis of his [the Prince's] internal policy»⁷⁴. That friendship is one thing and politics another, as Ciano said, was not disputable, but still the policy was now implemented differently. While, as Crnjanski states, Ciano had conversations with Stojadinović «bathing in private» in Venice, he spoke «formally, in a drawing-room with his successor Cincar Marković»⁷⁵.

Somewhat later, in a conversation with Stakić in Palazzo Venezia on February 24, 1941, Mussolini too mentioned Stojadinović. He especially underlined the concession around the Ustasha. The Duce then said: «You have a delegate of your Ministry of Interior right here in Rome. According to my authorization, he has the right to control the work of Croatian emigrants, the Ustasha, at any time, when he finds it necessary. It is a rare privilege that I gave to Yugoslavia because of Stojadinović's allied attitude towards Italy»⁷⁶. It is important to emphasize that in the continuation of the conversation, Mussolini made it clear to Stakić that the situation with the Ustasha in the future depended on the attitude of Yugoslavia, that is, if Yugoslavia were not “friendly” to Italy, then the Croatian factor would again play an important role in his policy in the Balkans⁷⁷. The warning would come into being in a month and a half from the meeting.

In official documents related to the attack on Yugoslavia in April 1941, Count Ciano also mentions Stojadinović. In an attempt to justify the aggression, he claimed that Italy had remained faithful to the 1937 agreement, even after the «removal of Stojadinović from power» and «despite the tendency of a renewed hostile policy towards the government in Rome»⁷⁸. Certainly, in this case, it is clear that the statement of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs was not in line with the truth. The only thing that can be considered true is the repeated regret over Stojadinović's departure.

Italian diplomacy in the period from February 1939 to the April War of 1941 greatly regretted the departure of Stojadinović, especially, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Count Ciano, who had very close friendly relations with him. There are two main reasons for that: they saw in him a man with whom they would most effectively achieve their goals in Southeast Europe, and because of his very personality, which they highly valued and respected.

⁷⁴ Ivi, p. 95.

⁷⁵ M. Crnjanski, *Politički spisi*, Prosveta, Belgrade 1990, p. 332.

⁷⁶ V. Stakić, *Moji razgovori sa Musolinijem*, cit., p. 110.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Cited from: L. Monzali, *Il sogno dell'egemonia*, cit., p. 85.