

ENTANGLED HISTORIES OF FEMINIST ADVOCACIES IN THE INTERWAR BALKANS AND CENTRAL EUROPE

KATERINA DALAKOURA

BALKAN CONFERENCES (1930-1937) AND THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS

1.0 The idea of Balkan federation and Alexandros Papanastasiou

The idea of a Balkan federation including all nations of the Aimos peninsula dates back to the 18th century, with Rigas Ferraios being one of the main representatives and supporters of the idea. The establishment of the first Balkan nation states (Greece 1830, Serbia 1815 on limited autonomy, and 1878 as an independent state), the rival nationalisms that formed since the mid-19th century and the emergence of new Balkan states (Bulgaria in 1878, and as an independent state in 1908, Romania in 1859/1878, Montenegro in 1878) made the vision of the federation unfeasible.

At first, the idea of a Balkan federation revived after the mid-19th century in the circles of socialist groups in the Balkan countries; it ceased though under the rapid development and expansion of nationalism and in particular rival nationalisms in the region. It emerged again in the early 20th century, even before the final solution of the Eastern question, in the visions for the Balkans of few politicians (Greeks, Romanians and Serbs), such as Alexandros Papanastasiou, strengthened by the end of the WWI, and encouraged by ideas of even wider 'state zones' in Europe or a 'federal European Union' expressed by other European politicians, such as Tomas Masaryk and Aristide Briand, respectively¹⁰⁰ and by the international diplomacy for the Balkans. Finally in the early 1930s as the risk of a new Great War was "ante portas" the implementation of a Balkan federation/union idea was embraced by of foreign policy of most of the Balkan countries.

In more detail, understanding and cooperation among the Balkan countries with the ultimate goal of creating a Balkan federation had been a central pillar of Alexandros Papanastasiou politics. Alexandros Papanastasiou, was a liberal politician with socialist influences, and a consistent supporter of the idea of a Balkan federation, and the person who initiated the Balkan Conference institution. As early as 1910, the goal of "confederacy" among the Balkan states was included in the programmatic plan of the People's Party,

¹⁰⁰ See Tomas G. Masaryk, *The New Europe: The Slav Standpoint*. 2nd ed. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode Limited, 1918 (1st έκδοση 1917); Aristide Briand, "Memorandum on the Organization of a System of Federal European Union [Mémorandum sur l'organisation d'un régime d'union fédérale européenne], 1930.

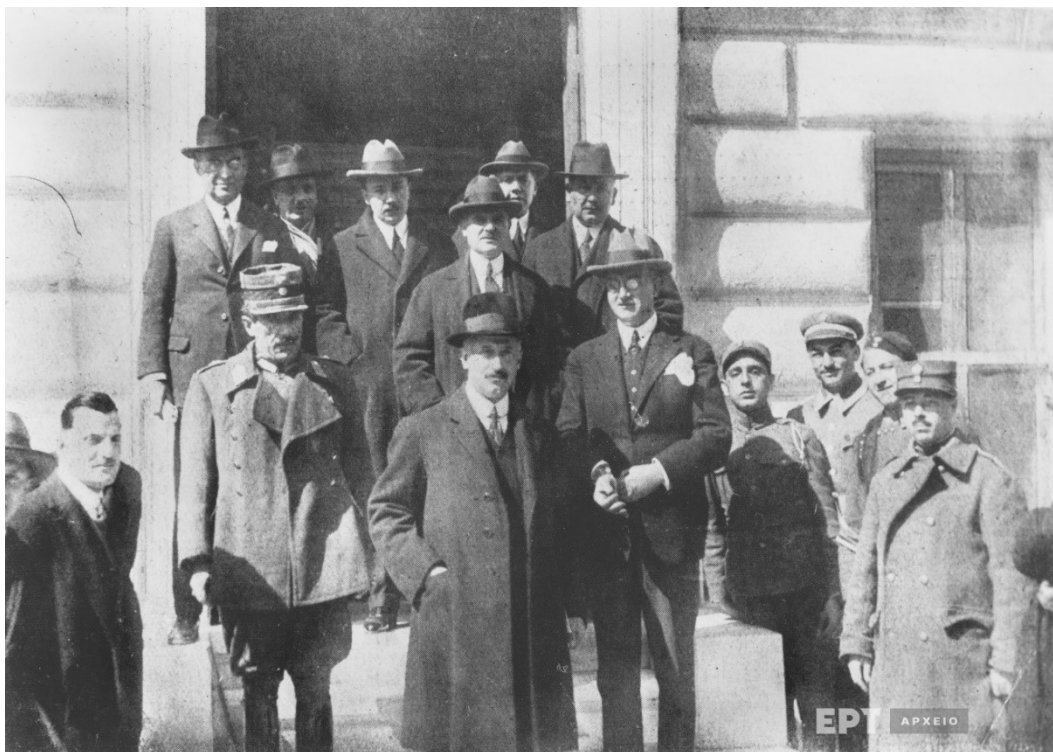


Image 1. A. Papanastasiou Government (1924). In the middle of the photo is A. Papanastasiou, and around him Georgios Kondylis, Panagiotis Aravantinos, D. Pazis, Ioannis Lymeropoulos, Anastasios Bakalmpasis (source: Hellenic Radio Television Archive).

which Alexandros Papanastasiou founded in the same year. The same goal of pursuing collaboration among the Balkan states toward a Balkan federation featured again in the programmatic plan of the Democratic Union Party, a new political party which he founded in 1923. Next year, in 1924, Alexandros Papanastasiou, as Prime Minister of the newly formed Second Greek Republic, promoted more actively the idea of a “League of Balkan states”, while throughout these years he published many articles in journals and newspapers on the issue.¹⁰¹ By and after the end of WWI some other European politicians envisioned also an organic connection, such as a “zone” or federation of states, among the counties of a European region wider than the Balkans; the Czechoslovak philosopher and politician Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, e.g., in his book *New Europe* (1917), outlined explicitly a plan for an organized zone of small nations extending from the Baltic to the Aegean,¹⁰² while Aristide Briand outlined a plan of a

¹⁰¹ Maria Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou, “Ο Alexandros Papanastasiou kai i Valkaniki Synennoisi” [Alexandros Papanastasiou and the Balkan Entente], *Dodoni* [Dodona] 16 (1987), 135–157; Katerina Dalakoura, “Feminisms and Politics in the Interwar Period. The Little Entente of Women (1923-1938)”, *ASPASIA. THE INTERNATIONAL YEARBOOK OF CENTRAL, EASTERN, AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN’S AND GENDER HISTORY* 16 (2022): 37-55 (49).

¹⁰² “The Foreign Policy of the Little Entente,” *The Slavonic Review* 5, no. 15 (March 1927), 523-536, here 523, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4202107>.

“European federation”.¹⁰³ The League of Nations, negotiating disputes between Balkan countries, had also put forward the concept of a “Balkan entente” or “pact” in 1923, while Great Powers (such as Britain and Italy) had stressed the importance of a “Balkan Locarno” on various occasions since then (e.g. in 1926 when discussing the Treaties of Locarno).¹⁰⁴

Until the early 1930s the Balkan foreign policy of the Greek state (which was actually the foreign policy defined by Eleftherios Venizelos, leader of the Liberal Party), was in favor of bilateral state agreements for resolving inter-Balkan disputes and maintaining peace in the region, under the auspices of the League of Nations. Venizelos considered a “Balkan alliance” or “entente” including all the Balkan states as an unrealistic plan, due to the complicated history of the Balkans and the different problems each Balkan country had to resolve. On the contrary, an inter-Balkan alliance, without intervention of non-Balkan powers (including the League of Nations¹⁰⁵), was the idea which Papanastasiou was promoting. In the early 1930s, with the shifting alliances among the Balkan countries, the Italian interventions in the Balkans, and the revival of revisionism, the bilateral “treaties of amity” were no longer sufficient to serve the states’ and regions’ security and defense against the new war looming on the horizon. Thus, an inter-Balkan entente including all Balkan countries became crucial to Greek foreign policy, embracing Papanastasiou’s Balkan federation vision and activities to that end.

2.0 The Institution of the Balkan Conference

The implementation of the idea of a Balkan federation or union began with the initiative (according to Greek sources) of Alexandros Papanastasiou, as mentioned above. He put the issue forward at an international level, at the 26th Peace Conference, organized by the International Peace Bureau in Geneva in 1928. In the favorable international conditions of the time for such endeavors, his proposal was approved and he was encouraged to act towards this end.¹⁰⁶ At the next Peace Conference in Athens (6–12 October 1929), the institution of the Balkan Conference was established

¹⁰³ Briand, “*Memorandum on the Organization of a System of Federal European Union*”.

¹⁰⁴ Tufan Turan, “**The Rise of the Concept of a Balkan Pact and the First Balkan Conference,**” *History Studies—International Journal of History* 4, no. 4 (2012), 433–446, here 434–438.

¹⁰⁵ The Greek governments were criticized by other Balkan politicians for their policy of turning to the League of Nations for the resolution of the problems that Greece faced with Balkan countries, as was the case with Bulgaria; in 1925 Greece had turned to the League of Nations regarding border and minority issues raised by Bulgaria.

¹⁰⁶ Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou, “Ο Alexandros Papanastasiou και η Valkaniki Synennoisi”, 137–139.

at his proposal, as a means of attaining cooperation and gradually forming a federation of states.¹⁰⁷

The regulatory documents of the Balkan Conference, such as its statutes, were agreed and signed during the first meeting of the national delegations of the Balkan states in Athens, next year, October 5-12, 1930. This meeting as well as the ones which annually followed took the name “Balkan Conference” 1st, Balkan Conference 2nd etc. According to the statute, which was amended at the 4th Balkan Conference, the governing bodies of the Balkan Conference institution were:

- The General Assembly
- The Council
- The Bureau and the Secretariat
- The National Delegations¹⁰⁸



Image 2. The flag of the Balkan Conference (source: Greek Literary Society)

¹⁰⁷ XXVII International Peace Conference, XXVII Διεθνές Συνέδριον της Ειρήνης: Απόφασις [XXVII International Peace Conference: A Decision], n.d. Β. Χειρόγραφα - Πολύφυλλα, Φάκ. 8, ΣΤ- Εισηγήσεις, Αρχείο Αλέξανδρου Παπαναστασίου, Μουσείο Αλέξανδρου Παπαναστασίου, Λεβίδι Αρκαδίας [Museum of Alexandros Papanastasiou, Levidi Arcadia, Greece].

¹⁰⁸ Ανακοίνωσις των αποφάσεων της Α' Βαλκανικής Διασκέψεως [Announcement of the Decisions of the 1st Balkan Conference], pp. 9-14, n.d. Ε. Έντυπα, 3. Ποικίλα, Φάκ. 120, Α. Ανακοινώσεις, Αρχείο Αλέξανδρου Παπαναστασίου [Fonds-Alexandros Papanastasiou Archive]. Μουσείο Αλέξανδρου Παπαναστασίου, Λεβίδι Αρκαδίας [Museum of Alexandros Papanastasiou, Levidi Arcadia, Greece]; «Statuts de la Conférence Balkanique», *Les Balkans*, no 2 (1.11.1930): 7-9.

The General Assembly was the supreme governing body of the Balkan Conference in which participate all members of national delegates. It had a Chair who usually was the President of the Council (the same goes for the vice-chairs).

Each **National Delegation** included up to thirty members, excluding the experts and secretaries. The delegates were appointed among the Parliaments', Civil Services' and local governments' members, the universities' faculty, the intellectuals, press, as well as pacifist, professional and women's organizations.

The Council was the supreme executive body of the [General] Assembly. It consisted of the heads and two members of each national delegation that participated in the previous [General] Assembly of the Conference. It represented the Conference in the intervals between General Assemblies, approved the budget, and set the date and agenda of the next [General] Assembly. The Council was renewed each year before the close of the annual conference.

The Secretariat consisted of the General Secretary and five other members, one for each national delegation.¹⁰⁹

Besides its governing bodies, the Balkan Conference had set up committees which worked all year through and presented the work in the annual Conferences according to each conference corresponding agenda. The committees were:

1. The Organizing Committee (it is different for each annual conference)
2. The Political Approach Committee (towards a political union)
3. The Intellectual Approach Committee (e.g. education, exchange of students/faculty)
4. Committee on Economic Relations
5. Committee on Communications (transportation, press etc.)
6. Health and Social Policy Committee.¹¹⁰

The main means of work of the BCs were the committees and the annual meetings/conferences, where the General Assembly was taken place, the work of the committees presented and discussed, and the decisions taken. This work was accompanied with social and cultural events making each conference a major public, political and cultural, event for all participating countries and for the host city/country, in particular. Four Balkan Conferences were organized (Athens, October 5-12, 1930; Istanbul–Ankara, October 19-26, 1931; Bucharest, October 22-27, 1932; Thessaloniki, November 5-12 1933) and a fifth one in 1934, which although planned it was canceled, towards the implementation of the Balkan federation/union. The four conferences were concluded by a Balkan Entente –also called Balkan Pact– which was signed in

¹⁰⁹ Ανακοίνωσις των αποφάσεων της Α' Βαλκανικής Διασκέψεως, 9-14; «Statuts de la Conférence Balkanique», 7-9.

¹¹⁰ Ανακοίνωσις των αποφάσεων της Α' Βαλκανικής Διασκέψεως, 11.

Athens in October 9, 1934 by Greece, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Turkey (Bulgaria and Albania did not signed it).¹¹¹ Annual meetings/sessions of the Permanent Council of the Balkan Pact/Entente continued to be convened after the signing of the Balkan Pact until 1939, the year in which the final meeting took place in Bucharest. These meetings are not included in the research, as representatives of women's or other social organizations/collectivities did not participate; only representatives (ministers of foreign affairs and prime ministers) of the Balkan governments which signed the Pact, participated.

Balkan Conference (BC) did not obtain the goal pursued; while the BC aimed to an inter-Balkan cooperation or even to a federation of the Balkan states, the Balkan Pact It ended up being an intergovernmental defense agreement, to secure the status quo of the countries that signed it and to safeguard them from attacks by third countries. An important element to understand this change of aims and objectives is that while the Balkan Conference as an institution was an initiative of non-governmental actors, the Balkan Pact was the result of negotiations between governments.¹¹²

3.0 Feminist and Women's Organizations Participating in the Balkan Conference

In Balkan Conference project undertaken under the auspices of the League of Nations and in close cooperation with the governments of the respective states, women's and feminist organizations of the region were officially invited and involved.¹¹³ And this is

¹¹¹ Nystazopoulou-Pelekidou, "Ο Alexandros Papanastasiou kai i Valkaniki Synennoisi", 140-141; Spyridon Sfetas, "Valkanika Symfona Filias, 1913–2011" [Balkan treaties of amity, 1913–2011], in *Valkania 1913–2011: Ekato chronia thyelles kai chimaires* [Balkans 1913–2011: A hundred years of turmoil and chimeras], ed. Nikolaos Mertzos, Spyridon Sfetas, Ioannis Zoukas, et al. (Thessaloniki: Kyriakidis Brothers, 2012), 103–118 (here 105).

¹¹² Both Alexandros Papanastasiou and Eleftherios Venizelos, as well as the rest of the opposition leaders, expressed strong objections to the signed Balkan Pact, as it did not fulfill the goals of the Balkan Conferences, while putting Greece at risk of war. See Sfetas, "Valkanika Symfona Filias, 1913–2011," 104–106; Stefanos Chelidonis, "Symfono Balkanikis Synennoisis" [The Balkan Entente], *I Kathimeri* [Daily] (21 February 2010), 30.

¹¹³ See (indicatively), Anonymous, "Η πρώτη Βαλκανική Διάσκεψη" [The first Balkan conference], *O Agonas tis Gynaikas*, no. 118 (1930): 1; Papanastasiou, Alexandros and Periklis Papadopoulos, [Επιστολή Αλέξανδρου Παπαναστασίου και Περικλή Παπαδόπουλου προς το Λύκειο των Ελληνίδων και το Ελληνικό Τμήμα της Γυναικείας Διεθνούς Ένωσης για την Ειρήνη και την Ελευθερία] [Letter from A. Papanastasiou and Periklis Papadopoulos to the Lyceum Club of Greek Women and the Greek Section of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom], 25.06.1930. Correspondence 1930, no. 79, Historical Archive of the Lyceum Club of Greek Women, Athens, Greece; Papanastasiou, Alexandros and Periklis Papadopoulos, [Επιστολή Α. Παπαναστασίου και Περικλή Παπαδόπουλου προς Λύκειο των Ελληνίδων] [Letter from A Papanastasiou and P. Papadopoulos to the Lyceum Club of Greek

of particular importance for the relationship between “feminism and politics” we are exploring in this project. According to the 1st statute, in addition to politicians, intellectuals and the press, representatives of social and labor collectivities also participate in the national delegations; among them collectivities are named women's organizations, too, as already aforementioned.¹¹⁴ The Statute as reformulated at the 3rd and 4th Balkan Conference defines even more specifically the participation of women, citing precisely the number of women among the members of each national delegation. This number is set at 5 members.

This invited participation could be perceived as women's/feminist organizations' recognition as potential political actors and Balkan policy's co-designers; though, to my approach it rather reflects the organizers' concern to make 'Balkan cooperation' a cause for the whole civil societies of the region. Nevertheless, women's collectivities seized this invitation 'as an opportunity' that they had (long) sought. According to the decisions of the Women's Balkan Conference (Belgrade, 1931) in each Balkan country a women's committee was established within each national delegation at the Balkan Conferences with the aims of collaboration among them, the submission of memoranda at the Balkan Conference committees, as well as participation with some of their members in them.¹¹⁵



Image 3. 2nd Balkan Conference, Istanbul 1931 (Source: Alexandros Papanastasiou Museum)

Women], 26 December 1930, Correspondence 1930, no. 199, Historical Archive of the Lyceum Club of Greek Women, Athens, Greece.

¹¹⁴ Ανακοίνωσις των αποφάσεων της Α' Βαλκανικής Διασκέψεως, ό.π., άρθρα 5, 11.

¹¹⁵ “Η γυναικεία Επιτροπή της Βαλκανικής Διάσκεψης» [Women's Committee at the Balkan Conference], *Ο Αγώνας της Γυναίκας* [The Woman's Struggle], nos. 146-147 (August 1931): 4.

It is interesting, however, that there is an encouragement for as many women's organizations as possible to support/participate in the Balkan conferences and activities organized in their context. In 1930 during the preparation of the 2nd Balkan Conference, Alexandros Papanastasiou sent a letter to Kallirroï Parren and asked her to involve the Lyceum Club of Greek Women, whose president she was at that time, in the organization of the activities of the Conference, and also to contact as many organizations and women activists as she knew and urge them to participate in the Balkan conferences. I do not know whether this attitude of Alexandros Papanastasiou reflects a "Balkan Conference strategy" towards the participation of women's organizations or it stems from his personal political views and personality. Nevertheless, some further indications might support the former; Alexandrina Cantacuzino in a letter sent to Dimitrana Ivanova asked her to participate in the third Balkan conference which was to be held in Bucharest. Dimitrana Ivanova in her answering letter rejected the invitation, explaining that Bulgarians were not going to participate, due to the issue of minorities which had not been discussed and resolved so far,¹¹⁶ Also the 1st Women's Balkan Conference which was held in Belgrade in 1931, was organized on the suggestion of the Balkan conference initiators (according to Greek sources).¹¹⁷

3.1 Issues to be considered and explored

3.1.1 Which feminist/women's organizations were involved in the Balkan Conference:

In the Balkan Conferences and the governing bodies of the Balkan Conference institution, both national feminist/women's organizations-members of the LEW, as well as non-LEW members participated. In the 1st Balkan Conference, for example, representatives of the following women's/feminist organizations participated: the Hellenic League for Woman's Rights, the Ženski Pokret (Yugoslavia), and the National Council of Romanian Women, all three members of the LEW; From Greece also participated representatives of the Lyceum Club, and the National Council of Greek Women, which both were not LEW member organizations.¹¹⁸

Regarding the participation of the LEW as an organization in the Balkan conferences, I have come across sources evidencing that it had at least participated in the 1st Balkan

¹¹⁶ Dimitrana Ivanova, [Letter to Alexandrina Cantacuzino], archival collection 584 (Dimitrana Ivanova), a.e. 299, pp. 1.3-5.

¹¹⁷ Anonymous, "Η γυναικεία Βαλκανική Διάσκεψη" [The Women's Balkan Conference], *Ο Αγώνας της Γυναίκας* [The Woman's Struggle], no. 143 (1931):3-4; Anonymous, «Η γυναικεία επιτροπή της Βαλκανικής Διάσκεψης» [The Women's Committee of the Balkan Conference], *Ο Αγώνας της Γυναίκας* [The Woman's Struggle], nos 146-147 (1931): 4.

¹¹⁸ E.g. from Romania participated also Priebez and Pop, and from Albania Emine Topani (no affiliated organizations have been identified so far).

Conference, with Alexandrina Cantacouzino as its representative. Its participation in the other Balkan Conferences has not been sufficiently investigated so far. However, it is quite difficult to understand the LEW's participation, while at the same time its member organizations participated too. So it is possible that Cantacouzino just claimed herself the "identity" of the LEW representative, while the actual participation of the association was limited in building on the work done at its own conferences by promoting this work in the context of the Balkan Conferences. Cases of such use of the work done within the LEW have been found in the sources. For example, Avra Theodoropoulou presented at the Intellectual Approach Committee, during the first Balkan Conference, the decision of the fourth LEW Conference in Prague on examining the history books of the LEW member countries, and proposed to be included in the Balkan Conference's decisions.¹¹⁹

3.1.2 Women's activity within the Balkan Conference and the question of political power:

The representatives of women's and feminist organizations participated in the Balkan Conference as members of the national delegations,¹²⁰ and/or as experts on particular issues/topics, as each national delegation, in addition to its officially defined 30 members, could employ and bring to the conferences a number of specialized members. Members of national delegations staffed the Balkan Conference committees according to their expertise and interests.

A very interesting issue that arises is that women seem to participate in only two Balkan Conference committees (out of the six existed ones), namely the Intellectual Approach Committee, and Health and Social Policy Committee, and possibly in a third one, the Organizing Committee; in the Greek case, some feminists and organizations were invited by the Greek organizers to help organize events, or welcome foreign delegations, etc.¹²¹ So women may also be members of the Organizing Committee and not just acting in a subsidiary way.

¹¹⁹ Anonymous, «Η συμβολή των γυναικών στη Βαλκανική Διάσκεψη» [Women's Contribution in the First Balkan Conference], *Ο Αγώνας της Γυναίκας* [The Woman's Struggle], no 126 (1930):2-5 {here 2-3}.

¹²⁰ The decision of the Balkan Conference that national delegations should include women representatives their members, seems that had not been applied by all national delegations. For this reason, the 4th Balkan Conference re-includes this decision among its resolutions. See, Anonymous, «Η Δ' Βαλκανική Διάσκεψις» [The Fourth Balkan Conference], *Ο Αγώνας της Γυναίκας* [The Woman's Struggle], nos 172-173 (1933): 2-3 (here 3).

¹²¹ Papanastasiou, Alexandros and Periklis Papadopoulos, [Επιστολή Αλέξανδρου Παπαναστασίου και Περικλή Παπαδόπουλου προς το Λύκειο των Ελληνίδων] [Letter from Alexandros Papanastasiou and Periklis Papadopoulos to the Lyceum Club of Greek Women], 26.12.1930, Correspondence 1930, no. 199, Historical Archive of the

Therefore, women did not participate in the Political Approach Committee, the Committee on Economic Relations or the Committee on Communications (transportation, press etc.). However, the issues which they did not seem to elaborate within the Balkan Conference were issues that they had addressed systematically in the context of the LEW. The question therefore which arises is whether their participation in the political initiative of the Balkan Conference strengthened their role as co-designers of policy and diplomacy for the Balkan region, a goal they pursued, or it reduced their political role to a “marginal” one, 'limiting' their activity to social and cultural diplomacy, namely to a rather far more 'feminine' aspect of policy-making; For example, the aforementioned proposal on including the LEW decision of the conference in Prague on the history books, though it was appraised and discussed in the Assembly, it was not included in the Conference Decisions text.¹²²

3.1.4. What after the Balkan Conference?

Another important issue that remains to be explored is the role and outcome of these women's collaborations after the signing of the Balkan Pact. The Balkan conferences continued to be convened until the beginning of World War II, but as a governments' affair now, as already mentioned above. Did national women's organizations continue to act as advisory agents or contribute in some way to them, or were they completely sidelined in the post-Pact period? And on the other hand, was there any attempt to continue women's inter-Balkan cooperation or was the effort abandoned with the prevalence of totalitarian and fascist regimes (as in the case of Greece) and the shifting of national concerns to the already looming risk of a new great war?

Concluding: The presentation has actually been limited to the issue I am going to explore, which is the participation of women's organizations and their collaborations in a private agents' collective endeavor of re-approaching the political relations of the Balkan countries. The sources studied have been limited and the issues clarified are also very few. The systematic study of all available sources will then probably provide answers to the questions raised above, which in my view are crucial for understanding the issue of "feminism and politics" in this particular historical period and region. Undeniably, new, additional questions may arise from the study of the material that has been collected - and not yet studied, which will be also addressed.

Lyceum Club of Greek Women, Athens, Greece; Anonymous, “Η πρώτη Βαλκανική Διάσκεψη” [The first Balkan Conference], 1.

¹²² Anonymous, «Η συμβολή των γυναικών στη Βαλκανική Διάσκεψη» [Women's Contribution in the First Balkan Conference], 3.