

# PRE-WORLD WAR II ROMANIA FROM LATVIAN PERSPECTIVE: AN ENVOY'S VIEWS

*Ēriks Jēkabsons*

University of Latvia, E-mail: eriksj@lu.lv

**Abstract:**

*The paper approaches the working environment and observations of Latvian envoy Ludvigs Ēķis in Romania from the autumn of 1939 when the Latvian Legation was opened in Bucharest until the summer of 1940 when the State of Latvia was liquidated. The main focus is on the Latvian-Romanian relations in this period of time, the Romanian foreign and economical policy and the reaction of Romanian statesmen and society to the events and processes of the first stage of World War: the policy of Soviet Union, Germany and Hungary, the Soviet-Finnish War and other conflicts in region and in Europe. The article is based on the materials stored in the State Archives of Latvia and particularly on Ludvigs Ēķis' reports. In a time when war was raging in Europe, Romania, too, was subject to considerable international pressure. Some similarities can be detected between the developments in this region and in the Baltic States.*

**Rezumat:**

*Lucrarea abordează mediul de lucru și observațiile ministrului leton în România Ludvigs Ēķis începând din toamna anului 1939, când Legația letonă a fost deschisă la București, până în vara anului 1940, când statul leton a fost lichidat. Lucrarea se va concentra în principal asupra relațiilor letono-române în această perioadă de timp, asupra politicii externe și a celei economice, a reacției oamenilor de stat și a societății românești față de evenimente și procese desfășurate în prima etapă a primului război mondial: politicile Uniunii Sovietice, Germaniei și Ungariei, Războiul sovieto-finlandez și alte conflicte regionale și europene. Articolul se bazează pe materiale păstrate în arhivele de stat din Letonia și în special pe rapoartele lui Ludvigs Ēķis. Într-un moment în care războiul făcea ravagii în Europa, România a fost, de asemenea, supusă unor presiuni internaționale considerabile. Unele similitudini pot fi detectate între evoluțiile din această regiune și cele din Statele Baltice.*

**Keywords:** Latvia, Romania, World War II, international relations, Ludvigs Ēķis

## **Introduction**

The present article aims at briefly outlining the main aspects of the relations between Latvia and Romania at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century until the Second World War. It will focus particularly on the working environment and observations of Latvian envoy Ludvigs Ēķis<sup>1</sup> in Romania from the autumn of 1939 when the Latvian Legation was opened in Bucharest until the summer of 1940 when the State of Latvia was liquidated. The article is based on the materials stored in the State Archives of Latvia and particularly on Ludvigs Ēķis' reports. In a time when war was raging in Europe, Romania, too, was subject to considerable international pressure. Some similarities can be detected between the developments in this region and in the Baltic States. For this reason they attracted the attention of the Latvian envoy.

## **The Establishment of Contacts and Relations before 1939**

The contacts between Latvia and Romania were established in early January 1919 when Latvia's diplomatic representative in Warsaw Atis Ķeniņš was instructed to contact the Romanian diplomatic mission to arrange the transit of Latvian refugees through their country from the south of Russia. He met the representative of Romania in Poland Alexandru Florescu who promised him to inform the Romanian government of the request of the Latvian side and remarked on the complexity of the problem (the issue was eventually resolved through the military attaché of Poland to Romania)<sup>2</sup>. In September 1920 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania Take Ionescu received the diplomatic representative of Latvia to Italy Miķelis Valters and informed him that the Envoy of Romania in Helsinki would soon be accredited with the Government of Latvia. „In lengthy discussion the Minister demonstrated

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<sup>1</sup> Ludvigs Ēķis (1892–1943), a Latvian politician and diplomat. He studied in Riga Polytechnic Institute, in 1914 was mobilised into the Russian Army and captured by Germans in Eastern Prussia. He remained in captivity until 1918. In 1919 he joined the Latvian Army and was promoted to an officer's rank for valour. As of 1920 he worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. From 1931 to 1934 he headed the Western Department, in February - May 1934 served as Envoy to Lithuania, from May 1934 he was Minister of Finance. In 1938 he was appointed Envoy to Poland and Hungary with residency in Warsaw and in October 1939 he was appointed Envoy to Romania and Hungary (from April 1940 also to Turkey) with residency in Bucharest. He did not return to Latvia after its occupation in the summer of 1940, instead moving to the USA where he served as a councillor in the Legation in Washington.

<sup>2</sup> Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs [State Historical Archives of Latvia; further: Latvia], 2575. f., 15. apr., 11. l., 69.lp.; 3601. f., 1. apr., 469. l., 59., 265. lp.

vivid interest in Latvia and the agrarian reform there and wished „bright future to the free Latvia”, the official governmental newspaper wrote.<sup>3</sup>

On 26 February 1921 Romania recognised Latvia *de jure*<sup>4</sup> and in the beginning of 1922 diplomatic relations between the two countries were established. The diplomatic missions of the two countries had set up official bilateral contacts already earlier. For example, the Latvian Envoy Kārlis Zariņš reported from Helsinki that on 15 April 1921 he had received the visit of the Romanian envoy Dimitrie Plesnila who had voiced his country's desire to establish an alliance not only with Poland, but also with the Baltic States and recommended the opening of a Latvian Legation in Bucharest. In response to Zariņš' inquiry the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs evaluated the idea of the alliance as a serious one, but noted that Latvia's relations with Romania were still basically limited to mutual exchange of information (in late April the Latvian Envoy in Warsaw had even inquired the Romanian Envoy Florescu about this proposal, but the latter knew nothing about it). In his second meeting with the Latvian Envoy in Helsinki in order to support his earlier arguments Plesnila referred to his long-standing friendship with Romania's Minister of Foreign Affairs Ionescu (being aware of his position) and continued to persuade the Latvian side of the need to form a joint alliance against Russia<sup>5</sup>.

After the establishing of Latvian - Romanian diplomatic relations, Latvia's diplomatic representatives to Romania resided first in Warsaw (January 1922 - September 1934) and then in Prague (November 1935 - May 1939). In the autumn of 1939 the diplomatic corps residing in Warsaw together with the Polish government moved to the eastern part of Poland and on 17 September crossed the border into Romania<sup>6</sup>. Initially Romania likewise had a non-residing Envoy to Latvia who resided in Warsaw from 1924. The opening of a Romanian Legation in Riga was discussed in diplomatic circles already in early 1928: during his visit to Bucharest in June 1928 Latvian Envoy to Romania Antons Balodis who resided in Warsaw, directly inquired about the candidacy for the residing envoy<sup>7</sup>. It

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<sup>3</sup> *Valdības Vēstnesis* - 1920. - 20. Sept.

<sup>4</sup> The telegram of the Envoy of the Kingdom of Romania in Denmark and Sweden on the recognition of Latvia see: LVVA, 2570. f., 3. apr., 1148. l., 60. lp.

<sup>5</sup> LVVA, 2575.f., 15.apr., 3.l., 45., 65., 66. Lp.; 17.apr., 44. l., b.p.

<sup>6</sup> For more details see: Ēriks Jēkabsons, "Latvijas sūtniecība Polijā Otrā pasaules kara pirmajās dienās 1939. gada septembrī" [Latvia's Legation in Poland in the First Days of the Second World War in September 1939], *Latvijas Arhīvi* 2 (2005): 115.-151. Available also: [http://www.arhivi.lv/sitedata/ZURNALS/zurnalu\\_raksti/115-151-VESTURE-Jekabsons.pdf](http://www.arhivi.lv/sitedata/ZURNALS/zurnalu_raksti/115-151-VESTURE-Jekabsons.pdf); The same text in the Polish language: "Poselstwo Łotwy w Polsce we wrześniu 1939 roku", *Przegląd Nauk Historycznych* [Łódź], IV, Nr. 1 (7), 2005 [2006]: 111-144.

<sup>7</sup> LVVA, 2570.f., 1.apr., 209.l., b. p.

was in May 1929 that Romania sent a residing diplomatic representative to Riga: initially a *charge d'affaires*, then an envoy. Moreover, Latvia's capital became the site, where Romanians tried to gather information about the Soviet Union. The following Romanian diplomats worked in Riga as Envoys: Mihail Sturdza (until 1935)<sup>8</sup>, Constantin Vallimarescu (1935 - 1937), Vasile Stoica (1937- 1939) and Grigore Niculescu-Buzesti (1939-1940). The two countries also had relatively broad consular contacts. As of 1923 Latvia had an Honorary Consul in Bucharest (Mr. Theodor Orghidan) who was later promoted to General Consul and in 1928 was joined by Honorary Vice-consul in Bucharest (Mr. Jules Sfetea). As of 1925 Latvia had Honorary Consul in Galati (Mr. Panait Avghenio) and as of 1926 Honorary Vice-consul in Constanta (Mr. Constantin Constantinescu) and in 1921 - 1922 Honorary Consular Agent in Kishinev (Jānis Viksne). Romania had Honorary Consul in Riga as of 1925 (Mr. Jānis Zēbergs, in 1927 replaced by Alexandre Percy von Zimmermann).

All through the inter-war period the diplomatic circles cherished a - mostly theoretical - idea about an alliance stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Romania and Latvia were both assigned a concrete place in this scheme with Poland serving as a conjunctive link<sup>9</sup>. In 1930s the bilateral economic contacts also developed rather actively<sup>10</sup>.

In 1930s the radical nationalist organisations of both countries - such as the Latvian "Thundercross" (*Pērkonkrusts*) and Romanian "Iron Guard" - also maintained rather active contacts. As late as 1938 head of "Thundercross" Gustavs Celmiņš, who was banned from Latvia, visited Romania and met Cornelius Codreanu who was his personal friend. The Latvian political police paid increased attention to this meeting. In a confiscated letter to Latvia Celmiņš described this meeting and the fact of his deportation from Romania that had taken place "not without the help from police" as he put it<sup>11</sup>. A few citizens of one respective country lived

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<sup>8</sup> From 1933 M. Sturdza's son Elie Vlad Sturdza studied law and state administration in Herder's German Institute in Riga; for more details see: LVVA, 4772. f., 2.apr., 273.l., 1.-3.lp.

<sup>9</sup> For more details see: Ēriks Jēkabsons, "Stosunki polsko-rumuńskie w oczach dyplomacji łotewskiej w latach 1931-1939," in *Stosunki polsko-rumuńskie w XX wieku. Wybrane zagadnienia*, pod red. M. Patelskiego, M. Białokura. Toruń-Opole: Wydawnictwo Naukowe GRADO, 2010, 89-103.

<sup>10</sup> More details for this and other aspects of co-operation see: Florins Angels [Florin Anghel], "Starp paralēliem spoguļiem: Rumānijas un Latvijas attiecības starpkaru laikā" [Between Parallel Mirrors: Romania - Latvia Relations in the Interwar Period], *Latvijas Arhīvi* 4 (1999): 86-97; Silviu Miloiu, "Exploring the newborn in-between Europe: Romania, the Baltic States and the concept of collective security during the 1920's", *Valahian Journal of Historical Studies*, 1 (2004): 62-73.

<sup>11</sup> LVVA, 3235.f., 1/22.apr., 709.l., 188.lp.

permanently or visited the other respective country (for example, Romanian Vasily Andrianov who was born in Bessarabia served in the Latvian Army in 1919 as lieutenant, later worked as a driver in Riga and was a member of centre oriented political party "the Democratic Centre"<sup>12</sup>, in December 1931 citizen of Romania Kocz Beni was detained on the Latvia - USSR border as he tried to cross it to the Soviet side<sup>13</sup>, Latvian Lutheran pastor Aleksandrs Simsonis worked in Bessarabia until his death in 1938 etc.). The two sides also tried to resolve the issue of two estates confiscated from Romanian citizens in Latvia as part of the agrarian reform<sup>14</sup>, etc. On the eve of the Second World War contacts between the students and sportsmen of the two countries also started to develop<sup>15</sup>.

### **The First Months of the Latvian Legation in Bucharest: October - November 1939**

L. Ēķis received letters of accreditation already on 7 October 1939 and was about to leave for Budapest. On the same day he sent a cable to Riga reporting that he had heard on radio the text of Latvia - USSR Mutual Assistance Treaty, which had been signed in Moscow on 5 October, and required instructions on how to reply to the numerous questions he was asked in this regard. He also expressed "his deepest condolences" to the President and Ministers, remarking that he shared with them "heartache" about the developments. On 10 October the President of Latvia officially appointed Ēķis as Envoy to Romania. On 18 October he presented his letters of credence to the King of Romania in Cotroceni palace. In his report Ēķis gave a detailed account of the accreditation ceremony (the King had spoken in a free, "improvising" manner, instead of reading out a speech from paper, the official ceremony was followed by about a 10 minutes long informal discussion, during which the King had inquired Ēķis about his adventures in Poland and about "the concerns that our country [Latvia] was feeling". The Envoy observed that the King's "gestures were vital, but his eyes showed exhaustion" and the King's Aide-de-Camp had also told him that His Majesty used to work until 3 A.M.)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> LVVA, 5601.f., 2.apr., 47.l., 2.-6.lp.; 3710.f., 1.apr., 30.l., 146.lp.

<sup>13</sup> *Latvijas Kareivis* - 1931. - 19.dec.

<sup>14</sup> LVVA, 2570.f., 8.apr., 43.l., 8.lp.; 1313.f., 1.apr., 152.l., 3.lp.

<sup>15</sup> See: N. Štūls "No Varšavas līdz Melnai jūrai" [From Warsaw to the Black Sea], *Universitas*, 1938. 1. dec.; Rīgā ierodas Rumānijas „Studentu Sporta” basketbolisti un volejbolisti [Basketball and Volleyball Players from Romania's "Students' Sports" Come to Riga], *Universitas*, 1939. 1. Febr.; Briedis P. Bukaresta un tās studenti [Bucharest and Its Students], *Universitas*, 1939. 5.okt.

<sup>16</sup> LVVA, 2570. f., 1. apr., 375. l., 251. - 252., 259.-264. lp.; 5. apr., 63. l., b. p.

Already on 9 October Ēķis had insisted that Romania “should definitely be given the top priority” among the countries of the respective region. However on 20 October the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs officially declared that the Envoy should reside in Budapest (Ēķis was also officially Envoy to Hungary and as of March 1940 – also to Turkey). As the Latvian authorities were hesitating in choosing the best place of residence, on 26 October 1939 L. Ēķis wrote from Budapest asking for the Legation to be moved to Bucharest. He wrote: “The capital of this country [Hungary] indeed provides greater personal comfort and quieter life; however the only criterion that matters is that I should be where I could be of most use for our government and department. And in this regard I have only one reply – it is in Bucharest.” As the main argument he mentioned the availability of information sources in Bucharest and the fact that there “much was going on while here [in Budapest] everything was quiet and peaceful.” The economic considerations (life was cheaper in Romania) as well as the principle of reciprocity (Romania had a Legation in Riga, but Hungary – in Helsinki) also spoke in favour of Bucharest. Also in Bucharest in case of need the Envoy could use the diplomatic carriers of the Scandinavian countries and – as he put it – “in case of any perturbations in the Balkans, it would more or less concern all the countries of the region. As a result the Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave in and on 6 November officially named Bucharest as the place of residence of the Envoy of Latvia (in the capital of Romania the Envoy of Latvia lived in a hotel for almost a half of a year, but for the remaining term in office rented an apartment, which also functioned as the official Legation)<sup>17</sup>. On 12 December Ēķis took over consular matters from Honorary General Consul in Bucharest Th. Orghidan. The latter kept his title. (However on April 1940 L. Ēķis wrote that while during the democratic period Mr. Orghidan had indeed played an important role and had stood close to the leadership of the National Farmers’ Party, after the exclusion of this party from the political life he had been completely pushed aside from topical processes and had no influence whatsoever, but still liked to boast. Yet the Envoy admitted that due to his past merits and reputation Orghidan was “fully acceptable” as a consular representative.)<sup>18</sup>

In his first extensive report, which was dispatched to Riga with a Swedish courier on 9 November, Envoy Ēķis wrote that “the uncertain future” had worked Romanians into a clearly perceptible nervous state (he

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<sup>17</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 375. l., 243. lp.; Latvijas Ārlietu ministrijas arhīvs (Archives of Foreign Affairs’ Ministry of Latvia; further: LĀMA), Londonas arhīvs, 490. kaste, 3. lp.

<sup>18</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 72.-73. lp. (report of 4<sup>th</sup> April); LVVA, 2574. f., 14. apr., 375. l., 256.-257. lp.

attributed the fact that in Budapest difficulties had been much less pronounced to the difference in the Hungarian and Romanian mentalities). Yet, according to him, the grass-root people paid much less heed to the difficulties. He observed the general hope that "Russians would act as gentlemen and not impose heavy concessions". The first impression that Ēķis received about Romania was "somewhat Polish". For this reason he predicted that in case "war was imposed on Romania" the outcome could be similar to that in Poland. In his observation the ruling circles "tried to shift and shuffle and live at peace with the large neighbours" as attested by the visit of Romania's top officials to the USSR's Legation on 7 November on the anniversary of the October coup d'état. Ēķis remarked that "Romania co-operated closest with Turkey and Yugoslavia and tried to leave an impression to Germany and Russia that the received English-French guarantee did not mean much". The Envoy related rumours that the King was considering appointing a younger and more energetic head of government at the time when "unreliable and strong" ethnic minorities were destabilising situation in the country and the ethnic Romanian community was not unanimous about the "brutal methods of force" applied by the Minister for Public Order. Ēķis came to the conclusion that the Romanian society was on the whole interested in the Baltic problems, yet the information at its disposal was mostly wrong and scarce, even compared to Hungary. He also remarked on his efforts to fight the misbelief that Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were Soviet protectorates and Finland was about to become one. Ēķis insisted that such misconception had largely grown out of the British "propaganda"<sup>19</sup>.

For this reason in his half an hour long meeting with Prime Minister Constantin Argetoianu on 16 November Envoy Ēķis tried to present an optimistic picture of the developments in the Baltic and to "refute the very negative impression" that the Romanian statesman may have received about "the role of the Russians and the domination of the Russian armed forces" in Latvia from what he had read or heard. The Prime Minister in turn said that the Latvian government had done right to yield to the Soviet demands. In his opinion resistance to an incomparably stronger adversary could bring much worse result as shown by the Polish example (moreover he believed that even in case of a "complete victory" by the Allies it would be impossible to restore Poland in its earlier borders). The Prime Minister voiced his belief that the nation's right to self-determination, the issue of ethnic minorities, etc. could not be settled by force, not permanently at least. On the other hand Mr. Argetoianu pointed out the "danger posed by

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<sup>19</sup> LVVA, 2575. f., 7. apr., 2540. l., 10.-11. lp.

the Russian imperialism": if it grew, demands postulated to the Baltic States could grow, too. He recommended being "flexible" and saving energy for the final phase of the war when it would be of decisive importance. The Prime Minister expressed belief that Finland, too, would have to give in. Describing the situation in Romania he said that "for the time being everything was quiet, the Russians treated Romania in a correct manner without postulating any demands to it, probably out of fear of military complications". The Prime Minister predicted a quiet winter and a turn towards peace or exacerbation of warfare in spring that could engage the Balkan countries, too. Romania, however, "would do its utmost to avoid it", he said.

In the same report Ēķis gave an account of his discussion with an Envoy of a neutral state, who had worked in Bucharest for seven years already. The latter had told him that Romania's difficulties were mostly due to "the bad organisation of economy", an excessive number of mediators and profiteers and large corruption in state apparatus. Efforts were exerted to fight it, yet generally with poor results. Nevertheless, the country was rich and social life "continued in a rather normal way", but there was a sharp contrast between the obvious wealth in the cities and deep poverty among peasants who were discontent with the fact that "profiteers from Bucharest and other centres were pocketing huge profit at the poor peasants' expense" (as the Latvian Envoy found out himself during his trip through a Carpathian district in the South of Romania)<sup>20</sup>.

On 28 November L. Ēķis gave a rather detailed account of the change of government in Romania, describing the replacement of the Germanophile Argetoianu by Francophile Tatarescu who was known as "the king's absolute confidant". In the Envoy's opinion under the new Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister Gafencu "felt more on the crest of a wave" than under the previous governments, which had not given him complete freedom of action. The Envoy also noted the first signs of difficulties both in Romania and even more clearly – in Hungary<sup>21</sup>.

In December the Latvian Envoy was received in an audience by new Prime Minister G. Tatarescu who left on him the impression of "a very energetic man". During the meeting the Prime Minister explained to the Envoy the situation in Southeast Europe (including the problems of the German and Hungarian ethnic minorities in Romania in the past and present) and asked questions about the situation in Latvia and in the North of Europe in general. He remarked that "he found it difficult to work as

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<sup>20</sup> LVVA, 2575. f., 7. apr., 2540. l., 14.-15. lp. (L. Ēķis' report of 17<sup>th</sup> November 1939)

<sup>21</sup> LVVA, 2575. f., 7. apr., 2540. l., 13. lp.



Romania's Prime Minister because for centuries the nation had lived loosely and had developed dislike for discipline unlike us, in the North. In his opinion the Romanian peasant preferred poverty to modernization of his production and was a great individualist: he hated both co-operation and orders from above. In this regard hard struggles against laziness and ignorance still had to be won." Speaking about foreign policy the Prime Minister said that Romania did not want to be part of "the international game" and would protect "its neutrality and borders to the last. Yet outside Romania and among its closest neighbours were forces that Romanians could not influence." However, if Romania was endangered, the Romanians would fight without a thought for the outcome. In the Prime Minister's opinion everything depended on what kind of forces would reap the final victory - "the brutal ones or the ones with high moral standards" - if the latter won, all grievances would hopefully be repaired. Tatarescu admitted that in any case the peoples of Europe would face "dark days". Speaking about Russia, he said that he wanted to improve Romania's relations with it, yet he was not sure the Russians wanted the same. The Prime Minister voiced hope that developments in Finland would make the Russians think twice before embarking on a "new adventure". Tatarescu was informed about the treaties between the Baltic States and the USSR and, same as his predecessor, said that he regarded them as fully justified, adding that "many things may take a turn for the better at the final settlement". He also expressed his country's interest in importing linseed, flax and, possibly, other products from Latvia, if the transportation could be arranged. The Prime Minister pledged to Latvia "the friendship of Romania's government and its support on all issues" and said that "Romania felt for Latvia the deepest feelings of affinity and in many aspects regarded it as a paragon, in spite of the fact that our country was still rather young in the international community<sup>22</sup>".

### **The Situation in Late 1939 - the First Half of 1940**

#### *Foreign policy*

The Soviet attack on Finland in late November left a depressive impact on Romania although in geographic terms it was rather far from Northern Europe. Envoy Ēķis wrote on 4 December: "Here, too, the ruling circles cultivate optimism and display great bravado and readiness to fight if demands are postulated that would harm Romania's neutrality and sovereignty. A vague hope had persisted that the Russians would not dare to use force because their army is weak, with low morals and poor fighting

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<sup>22</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 4. lp. (undated report).

capacity, its military equipment is unfit and incomplete and logistics is in a disastrous condition etc. Now, when the Russians with unsurpassed brutality have openly waged war against the Finns, here too, spirits have dropped and belief is increasingly taking root that when the Russians "are done" with the Finns, this region will be the next [...] If it comes to a war with the Russians, this link of the chain [i.e. Romania] would definitely turn out to be weaker than the Polish one and thus no better outcome can be expected."<sup>23</sup>

On 9 December the Latvian Envoy offered an insight into the rumours that were aplenty in the Romanian public (the USSR had presented an ultimatum, the "Russians" had already arrived in Bessarabia and Constanta, etc.) and reported that Romanians hurried to build frontier fortifications, Prime Minister Tatarescu hoped to reorganize the Army by the spring and expected "help from Turks, Greeks and the English" etc. He also added that a few days ago fear had spread in the public and many people "had even started to pack suitcases". Ēķis was pessimistic: "Romania is in the following situation: if it cedes something to the Russians, it must cede something to the Hungarians and Bulgarians, too. Yet it is impossible to make everybody happy and thus Romanians do not know what to do. Fighting would be the correct choice, but it requires something more than a good will in the ruling circles. Bessarabia is in dire poverty. The people - peasants, the unemployed - in fact expect the Red Army as a liberator and a carrier of humane living conditions. It is no good." The Envoy also noted that the rumours about the imminent German - Soviet conflict were becoming more and more intense and "the supply of German-made weapons to Finland and Romania for use against the Russians was observed with irony" in his country of residence.<sup>24</sup>

On 15 January 1940 the Latvian Envoy reported that a high-ranking official from the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had told him: "if the Finns held out for 3 more months or so, nobody could do us any harm". Ēķis wrote that in Romania "all eyes and hopes were on Finland" and the course of war there "had given a boost to courage and confidence". According to him the sense of security in Romania grew after the Red Army Units withdrew northwards from Galicia, where they had been concentrated at the border after "the easy Polish campaign". The relations with Bulgaria had also improved and Bulgarian King Boris had told an

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<sup>23</sup> LVVA, 2575. f., 7. apr., 2540. l., 4. lp.

<sup>24</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 2. lp.

Envoy of a neutral country that, being aware of the consequences, he did not want Dobrogea with the Soviet help.<sup>25</sup>

Envoy Ēķis attributed special weight to the German factor. On 4 December he wrote a detailed account of his discussion with Ambassador of Germany Wilhelm Fabricius, whose confidence and arrogance – according to Ēķis – had been “sky-high”. With exaggerated optimism Fabricius had spoken about Germany’s and Führer’s prospects in the war. Speaking about Romania, he had said that Germany produced so much fuel that the amount due from it according to treaties did not exceed Romania’s peace-time export amount. Fabricius had said that the thoughtlessly accepted British-French guarantees would “rebound” heavily on Romania; he had repeatedly recommended the King “not to miss the chance to establish friendship” with Germany because the entire Balkan region depended on it. He also had said that Romania “had a very bad government and its administrative system was thoroughly corrupt. Many eyes had begun to open to this fact but it might be too late.” Ēķis developed an overall impression that an intense “peaceful German penetration into the Balkans” was taking place “with all kinds of means”, but the Romanian King “had not yet lost command of the situation and for the time being did not yield much to the influence of foreign advisors.”<sup>26</sup>

The German Ambassador’s optimism, however, soon faded. When he paid Ēķis a return visit on 23 December, the latter observed that Fabricius’ “bravado and arrogance had considerably deflated and he no longer kept back the great difficulties that Germany was facing nor his own warm feelings for Finland.” On 30 December Ēķis wrote that since cold weather had set in it had become difficult to transport goods along the Danube and railway and “Germany’s supplies would grow scarcer, in spite of its treaties with Romania.” In his report of 15 January 1940 Ēķis again focused on various obstacles in the commercial contacts between Romania and Germany and noted that Romania’s ruling circles were becoming increasingly confident about the imminent British and French victory because in Germany conditions had become “desperately hard”<sup>27</sup>.

His subsequent reports from late January onwards focused on foreign policy issues. The Latvian Envoy described the role of the factor of other countries “in Romania’s chaotic oil industry” where Germany’s growing influence was becoming more and more obvious. (He wrote that the Romanians in their efforts to remain neutral were facing a complicated

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<sup>25</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 9. lp. (L. Ēķis’ report of 15<sup>th</sup> January 1940).

<sup>26</sup> LVVA, 2575. f., 7. apr., 2540. l., 5.-6. lp.

<sup>27</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 6., 10., 11. lp.

situation. It was becoming increasingly difficult, however the King as a member of the Hohenzollern dynasty tried to preserve his country's neutrality, "aspiring to balance and reign as well as it was possible under rather chaotic conditions and with corrupt staff". Ēķis also believed that there was no reason at all to ascribe to the King affinity for the Nazi regime.) The Latvian Envoy also described the competition between the German Legation on one hand and the British and French Embassies on the other (all these Legations had recruited additional staff) and observed that the public opinion was more on the latter's side. Writing about the complications regarding the consolidation of the Balkan states, Envoy Ēķis linked them with the controversies existing between Hungarians and Romanians. He also noted Romania's readiness for war ("Sometimes courage here is very great, but we, neutral observers, must admit that here any open large-scale conflict would quickly end with a disaster. This is not Finland, either in topographic terms, or in terms of the nation's mentality. The peasants' and workers' stock is very good though and under a good government this country could be able to resist a great force", he wrote). Among the issues covered in the Latvian Envoy's reports were also the course of the Conference of the Balkan Entente states in early February and the improvement of Romania's economic and political relations with Bulgaria and Italy after it. Ēķis gave an account of his discussion with the German Ambassador, in the course of which the latter had informed him about his audience with Minister of Foreign Affairs Gafencu at 1 a.m. before the above-mentioned conference. During the audience the German Ambassador had demanded that Romania met the obligations under its economic treaties (the German Ambassador said he had been "embarrassed to disturb a high-ranking official in the middle of the night and to talk to an interlocutor wearing pyjamas". He had told the Minister that "as long as Romanians supplied Germany with petrol, wheat, corn, timber, pulp and some required types of mineral ore, everything would be OK, as soon as the supplies stop "hier wird es keine 18 Tage dauern"). The Latvian Envoy also wrote about the banning of Hermann Rauschning's book „Hitler m'a dit" on demand of the German Legation because the author had spoken scornfully about Romanian soldiers, as if wrongly ascribing this attitude to Hitler. Rumours related to international events circulating in Bucharest also found a place in the Envoy's reports ("in terms of political rumours Bucharest probably is one of the most prolific "factories" of rumours in Europe. The things we get to hear here!" he wrote).

On 6 March the Latvian Envoy noted that the Germans were winning the propaganda war in Bucharest thanks to the composition and size of their Legation's staff and the weakness of their "opponents". (He

wrote that there indeed “was an active gentleman or two” in the French Legation, but Envoy Adrien Thierry played no role whatsoever because he “behaved too haughtily and arrogantly and it did not impress Romanians. The Romanian diplomats were saying that it was almost like France did not have any representative here at all. British Ambassador Reginald Hoare on his turn left an impression “as if he was always partially asleep” and seemed to dislike “the plot-filled public life in Bucharest”; Romanians believed that this Legation also was too weak to neutralize what the Germans were doing and to counter their activities<sup>28</sup>.

The report of 15 March 1940 focused on the end of the war between the USSR and Finland on 12 March. Envoy Ēķis wrote: “For Romanians who share with us and Finns the same eastern neighbour, Finnish war was of great benefit because it has at least clarified two issues, which had been uncertain before: a) Russians are ready to wage war if they fail to achieve their goals with diplomatic tools and b) war with Russians is not that very dangerous, if resistance is well organized, soldiers are dutiful and the government is smart enough. Desire was secretly cherished here for Finns to inspire awe in Russians and to engage them as long as possible so that bad thoughts about Bessarabia and about Romanian and Bulgarian ports in the Black Sea do not come into the Russian heads. Guesswork is in full swing regarding what the Russians will do after the pitiful (especially for Finns) end of the Finnish affair. A part of prominent foreigners residing in Bucharest believe that the Russians will not keep us waiting long and after the land dries up a little a larger havoc will begin here than the one that has just finished in the north [...]. The fact is that the Romanians and Turks are well prepared to withstand anything, with military force, if necessary. I have heard good things about the Turks while opinion about the Romanians is divided [...] Putting all my observations and what I have heard together, I may predict with relative confidence that peace will be preserved in this region for some time to come because the Romanians and the other Balkan nations are trying hard to meet the economic needs of Germans and those of the Allies as well.”<sup>29</sup>

In his report of 27 March 1940 the Latvian Envoy revealed how he was gathering information. He wrote that “it was difficult to get anything out of the officials of the Foreign Affairs Ministry who, besides, were poorly informed themselves.” In general he was critical also of the composition of the diplomatic corps admitting though that there were “a

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<sup>28</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 28., 35., 44.-46., 54., 56., 58.-60., 87.-89. lp.; 13. apr., 1842. l., b. p. (the 2<sup>nd</sup> report of 29<sup>th</sup> January; the first and second reports of 31<sup>st</sup> January, 9<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> February and reports of 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> march and 4<sup>th</sup> April).

<sup>29</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 62. lp.

bright man or two" among its members. The press, according to him, was completely at the mercy of censorship and it would be futile to look for important information there. At this time Ēķis was looking forward to the homecoming from Ankara of the former Envoy to Turkey Vasile Stoica (who had also served as Romania's Envoy to Latvia and whom he had met earlier), although the latter was said to be very disappointed about being recalled from Turkey (due to a love-affair with a typist who "had outrivalled the extravagant Mrs. Stoica"). The Latvian Envoy also asked for instructions as to which country to move to in case "it got too hot here" (i.e. the war broke out in Romania). In a different report written the same day Ēķis noted that "gentlemen from the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were very unwilling to talk about the German matters" (at that time a journalist from "Reuters" agency who had reported on "categorical" economic demands from the part of Germany had been expelled from Romania and relevant negotiations with the representatives of Germany were taking place in Bucharest).<sup>30</sup>

Romanians were following "with feverish attention" the "sensational" talks between Hitler and Mussolini in late March and other developments because it was clear that the fate of Balkans, too, was at stake. According to Envoy Ēķis, at that time Germany was yielding an increasing pressure and "Romanians had to wriggle and make unexpected moves to feed this "crocodile", which was looking for an opportune moment to swallow the feeder". What Bucharest feared most was agreement among Germany, Italy and the USSR. The Latvian Envoy also gave a detailed account of Romania's policy vis-à-vis Italy at that time, the amnesty of radical organisation Garda de Fier (The Iron Guard) as a result of pressure from Germany and the related transformations in Romania's domestic policy. Ēķis came to the conclusion that "in spite of official bravado, Romania would be ready to accept compromises and yield to pressure, no matter where it came from."<sup>31</sup>

As the situation grew increasingly strained, on 13 April 1940 Envoy Ēķis wrote about the nervous state and acute uncertainty in the politico-diplomatic circles in his country of residence after Germany had postulated categorical demands to Romania although outwardly the bilateral relations did not manifest strain. As concerns the position of the USSR, Romania's Minister of Foreign Affairs had personally described it to Ēķis as "threatening". The Envoy observed active but chaotic military preparations and noted that spring farm work had not even started yet. He also related

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<sup>30</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 70., 71. lp.

<sup>31</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 66.-68. lp.

rumours about strict demands from the UK for Romania to stop meeting demands of Germany etc. (on 24 April Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vilhelms Munters forwarded this part of the Envoy's report to the President of Latvia) and about upcoming general mobilization etc. Ēķis likewise reported on an incident involving boats belonging to Greece and transporting German cargos along the Danube: after explosions on these boats British sailors were detected among their crews, German Legation had filed a protest and postulated demands in this regard. A Latvian businessman was said to be advised by the USSR's Legation "to get out of Romania as soon as possible" without giving a reason. The Romanians were "rather optimistic" about the situation in the Baltic States at that time, considering these countries "as more or less protected from the direct misery of war", however the Latvian Envoy had been inquired about the expected moves from the part of the Russians.<sup>32</sup>

In his report of 22 April Envoy Ēķis again underlined the nervous state, uncertainty of tomorrow and the preparations for defence in Bucharest. *Charge d'affaires* of the USSR in "a friendly discussion" had told him that "the Soviet Union did not need plots of land and it would not launch war for the sake of Bessarabia. Molotov in his speech had told Romanians loud and clear that he did not recognize the occupation of Bessarabia and thus the Romanians had to find a different possibility and way to resolve this matter. Russians were still waiting in vain for Romanians to come forward with proposals in this regard. But if something happened in this region, the Soviet Union would not remain a passive observer." The Soviet official had spoken scornfully about the military preparedness of Romania: "What are they going to defend themselves with? Are they going to put living meat against steel and iron, like the Poles did? Apart from masses of haggard peasants in the famous Carol's line Romanians have nothing else to counter well-armed forces with." He also predicted "British provocations", after which "things would get loose here as well". At the same time the Soviet diplomat was lavish with praise of the Baltic States, which by reaching an agreement with the USSR "had safeguarded their positions and avoided the threat of war. He had said that he and his government often mentioned us [the Baltic States] as a paragon for the others (most likely for Romanians, too)".<sup>33</sup> Five days later – on 27 April – the Latvian Envoy reported on the ongoing German - Romanian economic talks, the continued influx of "tourists" from Germany and the other Western countries into Romania and rumours about the

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<sup>32</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 74.-76., 83. lp.

<sup>33</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 78.-79. lp.

concentration of the German troops in Slovakia and elsewhere. However, according to Ēķis it was impossible to obtain any information from the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs because week-long Easter holidays had begun and air temperature had almost reached 30 degrees Celsius.<sup>34</sup>

In his report of 14 May, under the influence of the events of the war in Europe, the Latvian Envoy was emotional. He wrote: "In this region the repercussions of the dramatic developments in Western Europe take the shape of grim contemplation, silent concern and consternation. One gets an occasional glimpse of joy and relief about the fact that this region (the south of Europe) was not the next one to be "grabbed by the throat" after Scandinavia [...] Yet there is general awareness here that sooner or later this region will face the same trial." Envoy Ēķis also talked to many Romanian politicians and members of the diplomatic corps and drew conclusions. "A very high-ranking" official of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had remarked that the course of events in Europe and in its south-eastern part in particular was very serious and "one should be prepared for the worst," yet one thing was clear: "Romania would fight even against superior force and on two fronts" (Latvian Minister of Foreign Affairs Munters had added a comment to this sentence: "Who believes it?!"). The same Romanian diplomat believed that Romania may lose the war and have to endure occupation, but the country already had experience in this regard and the ruling circles did not doubt much what the outcome of the war in Europe would be like. They thought that, although Germany had gained some very impressive victories and would gain more, it did not mean that the Allies were losing the war. They relied that all things that are in human power to rectify, eventually would be put right. The ruling circles of Romania admitted that "nothing good was coming out" of the collective defence of the Balkan Entente, but were committed to do their utmost for their country to safeguard "absolute neutrality and to avoid engagement in warfare" although it seemed hardly possible. The Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was confident that the moment was not right for Germany to launch war in the south as well.

The Latvian Envoy reported that in the light of what had happened in the course of the last few days (attack on Belgium and the Netherlands) the general mood in Romania was very nervous and Romania's relations with the USSR had not improved from "the rather strained state" caused by Molotov's speech on 29 March; Romanian Envoy was "cold-shouldered" in Moscow yet relations with Hungary had grown somewhat less strained. Ēķis remarked that "the mixture of rumours and truly alarming news

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<sup>34</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 90. lp.



contributed to the nervous state" in Romania, the pressure of German propaganda was obvious and "for money many broke Romanian intellectuals were simply making the policies as dictated by Germans and brainwashing the youth and the most naïve part of the Romanian public". He wrote: "The vanguards of the fifth column had already conquered very strong positions here and if war breaks out here, these internal forces, which are in the German service, will play a very important if not the decisive role." He also commented on the struggle against the so-called German-speaking "tourists" and noted that the German language remained broadly used on the streets and in cafés and "everywhere where people got around" in Bucharest. Envoy Ēķis also described the parade of 10 May, remarking that it was less grand than usual, yet he had observed that some units looked well-armed and equipped. At the same time he admitted in province having seen completely ragged soldiers and sergeants of the gendarmerie corps wearing peasants' leather footwear and gaiters. "But it is business as usual, as my colleagues who have worked here for some time say," he added. In the same report Ēķis also mentioned that he was still expecting promised information from the Romanian Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Transportation about the transit possibilities for Latvian cargos, yet voiced concern that "all this exploration may turn out to be in vain, if active warfare in the Mediterranean Sea and in the air began that was being anxiously expected here in the not very distant future."<sup>35</sup>

Envoy Ēķis attributed special attention to the issue of Polish military and civil refugees because at that time this issue was topical also for the Latvian government. He reported on the crossing of the Polish - Romanian border on 17 September, on the farewell of Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Josef Beck, on his contacts with Polish diplomats residing in Bucharest, on the mood of the Polish statesmen who were interned in Romania (including stories spread by Romanians' about J. Beck's addiction to alcohol and his sumptuous life-style), on the Poles' attempts to flee from Romania etc.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Domestic situation in Romania*

As late as 4 December 1939 the Latvian Envoy described the domestic situation in Romania as overshadowed by uncertainty about the future of the country's economy (the new government had not yet decided on its economic policy either), which so far was still functioning rather well

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<sup>35</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 92.-93. lp.

<sup>36</sup> More details about the published documents from the Latvian State Archives (LVVA) pertaining to this issue see: Jēkabsons 2010, 99-103.

that allowed the Envoy to assume that Latvia could trade with Romania if the transportation of goods could be arranged.<sup>37</sup> On 9 December Ēķis reported on the alarming fires in the Romanian districts of oil fields and the peculiar competition between Germany and the other Western powers in the respective districts. In the same report he also predicted changes in Romania's domestic policy: the King was behaving in a dictatorial manner as he appointed members of government without the approval of his former friend Prime Minister Tatarescu.<sup>38</sup>

In late 1939 Ēķis described the situation in Romania as being "quite Polish-like". He wrote: "Nobody knows exactly what tomorrow will bring and continues living in a devil-may-care manner, so to say". In his report of early 1940 the Envoy noted that the National Revival Front was not having much success with the building of "national unity" because "the masses were indifferent": the rural population did not care for what was going on outside the limits of their respective village, the urban proletariat was immersed in struggle against the rising cost of living, but merchants, aristocracy and even intellectuals had "plunged into profiteering". Yet he observed that in spite of that shops were still full of goods and he interpreted it as a sign of Romania's wealth. Ēķis reported having heard very unflattering things about the army, but mainly from foreigners, who, in his opinion "were not quite impartial".<sup>39</sup>

Starting from January 1940 Ēķis wrote reports rather regularly, compared to his first months in Bucharest. In these reports he covered various issues, such as the fortification of Romania's borders by the authorities, mobilisation of reservists (on 6 March Ēķis observed that often the mobilised reservists returned back to the civil life soon after mobilisation thanks to a bribe of "a couple thousand lei"<sup>40</sup>), commandeering of cars, rising prices, the governmental measures to stimulate production, the activities of the National Revival Front and its role in domestic politics (it was "aping after the Fascists and National Socialists with their uniforms salutes, etc.", the Latvian Envoy wrote and voiced the opinion that in Romania "the building of the structure of the political organisation had started from the roof without concern for the foundations"), the possible change of Prime Ministers, the activities of leader of the National Farmers' Party Iuliu Maniu (after this Party was cast into the shade Ēķis lost a valuable source of information: the Party's Secretary General and former Minister of Finance Virgil Madgearu who

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<sup>37</sup> LVVA, 2575. f., 7. apr., 2540. l., 6. lp. (L. Ēķis' report of 23<sup>rd</sup> December)

<sup>38</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 2., 3. lp.

<sup>39</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 6. lp. (reports of 30<sup>th</sup> December and 15<sup>th</sup> January)

<sup>40</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 58. lp.

was exiled to a monastery in the back country), changes for the better in February and March thanks to “the settling down of the foreign affairs”, transformations in the domestic policy in late March, the King’s and Heir’s to the Throne manner of reigning and behaviour, export embargo on grain and the planned further economic restrictions. As late as 14 May 1940 the Latvian Envoy wrote that nothing had changed in Romania’s economic life, prices continued to rise, but no shortage of either foreign or Romania-made goods was observed.<sup>41</sup>

### **The Closure of the Latvian Legation in Romania**

On 17 June 1940 the Baltic States were occupied by the USSR. The occupant annihilated their independence by force and deceit, deliberately trying to avoid armed resistance: in the first phase of occupation it promised to respect the independence of the Baltic States under the condition that during the war they would remain allied with the Soviet Union or submit to its protection (the pretence ended only in the second half of July 1940 when it became obvious that annexation was being prepared but resistance was no longer possible). In the first phase of the occupation the Baltic diplomats abroad – L. Ēķis among them – continued to cooperate with the new governments of their respective formally still independent states (initially the entire staff of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs remained in place).

On 4 July Envoy Ēķis wrote a detailed account of the public security regulations (including the penalties for their violation) that were issued by the Bucharest commandant’s office and clearly implied preparations for war. On 5 July he reported on the composition of the new government, its position on the key issues and the course of evacuation from the territories ceded to the Soviet Union. He also described the passionate debates in the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Commission on the ceding of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina and wrote that some politicians had called for military resistance against the USSR. The Latvian Envoy ended this report with the following words: “Strong efforts are exerted to put down the rumours, but there is an endless amount of rumours in the air, which fact points to the somewhat nervous state of the population. The political orientation of Romania is now making a sharp turn towards the “Axis states” hoping thus to salvage what there still remains to be salvaged. We may expect all

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<sup>41</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7664. l., 24., 26., 35.-36., 48., 63., 67.-68., 71., 93. lp.; 2570. f., 13. apr., 1842. , b. p. (reports of 18<sup>th</sup>, 29<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> January, 14<sup>th</sup> February, 15<sup>th</sup>, 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> March, 16<sup>th</sup> April and 14<sup>th</sup> May)

kinds of surprises and changes.”<sup>42</sup> This was the last report that the Latvian Envoy sent to Riga.

On 23 July the Latvian Envoy was received by Romania's Minister of Foreign Affairs M. Manoilescu. In the discussion with him Envoy Ēķis rejected information spread by the Soviet side as “fantastic lie” and asked for any “possible support” that would allow him to “demonstrate the truth”.<sup>43</sup> This tragic step, which could yield no result at that moment, marked the end of the first phase of Latvia-Romania relations. Romania was forced officially to recognise the pro-Soviet government formed in Riga. However the Romanian Foreign Affairs Ministry continued to co-operate with Ēķis: it advised him to resign from Envoy's post on his own initiative thus allowing the Romanian officials to take over the Legation's archives and promised him diplomatic immunity. At the same time Envoy Ēķis admitted that the USSR Legation was putting pressure on Romanians in this regard. On 10 August he officially resigned from the post of Latvia's Envoy. On 16 August Romania's Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that it could not take over the Legation's archives and had to hand them over to the Soviet Legation. On 18 August Ēķis in the capacity of a private person handed the Legation's archives over to another private person – the Legation's secretary V. Āboltiņš. A part of the archives was burned and another part with the help of diplomats of friendly countries was sent to Budapest where L. Ēķis, too, resided for some time.<sup>44</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The general conclusion to be drawn from the above-said is that the final phase of Latvia - Romania relations, i.e. 1939 - 1940 was an extremely difficult period both for Latvia and Romania. This conclusion clearly follows from the reports of Envoy Ēķis on his activities, observations and talks with Romanian statesmen and diplomats.

The activities of Envoy Ēķis can hardly be described as very crucial from diplomatic perspective. First, the level of bilateral co-operation achieved in the previous years could not be recognised as adequate for countries that in a large extent shared similar geopolitical situation. Second, in the respective period the war, which had already broken out, increasingly burdened the bilateral contacts. However, the Latvian Envoy's reports reveal striking similarities in the destinies of the two countries and nations in the tragic time. These reports also confirm the view dominating

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<sup>42</sup> LVVA, 2574. f., 4. apr., 7456. l., 1., 4. lp.

<sup>43</sup> Anghel, 94. lpp.

<sup>44</sup> LĀMA, Londonas arhīvs, 490. Kaste, 4.-8. lp.

in Romanian historiography on the respective processes and events and probably add new aspects to it (through the expressions of Romanian statesmen, through Ēķis' "bystander's view" and through his discussions with the diplomats of other countries, such as Germany and the USSR.).

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