

THE RUSSIAN DOCTRINE FOR THE EASTERN QUESTION

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The doctrine are a patent of the American foreign-policy ideologists, analysts strategists who outline by it their objectives in time and space and mostly indicate the borders and sphere of their interests at a global and regional level. In the European political thought, the meaning of this term is mostly connected with and plans and actions of the USA during the last two centuries rather than with the concepts and actions of Great Powers of the old continent in the international processes. The attempt to apply this term to the Russian foreign-polity ideas, projects and results in the European Southeast during the last quarter of the 19th century is subordinate to the idea of outlining the priorities of the imperial diplomacy in that region and the principles of their building. The investigation of this process at a conceptual level poses also the question whether Russia has had a precisely outlines doctrine and to what extent a situation and opportunities for its realization have existed.

In the late seventies of 19th century, the Russian Empire coped rather successfully with the challenge organized in the sphere of the Eastern Question by its ally since 1873, Germany . For Berlin as well for the other states of the “European concert”, the revolt in Bosnia and Herzegovina of 1875 the April Revolt of 1876 were a strong stimulus and a good opportunity to play the Balkan card in a direction favourable for them and with predetermined results. The foreign-policy and military elite of Russia in the person of the minister of foreign affairs Gorchakov, the minister of war Milyukov and ambassadors in Berlin, Vienna, London and Constantinople

were put to a hard test. The elite group passed through the scanty and contradictory information coming from the capitals of the Great Powers and the hot spots of the Balkan region, through the struggle for superiority between the participants in the solution of the concrete tasks, through breaches of secret agreements with allies (potential and real), through the fear of treachery and the awareness of the risk, before to start and win a war, in which the force of the arms competed with the art of the diplomatic game.

The landmark for the actions of the Russian diplomacy in the eve of the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878 was the opinion of the weighty Russian ambassador in London, Shuvalov, from January 1877. According to him, “the conduct of Austria-Hungary is treacherous, and that of England ambiguous” . In the height of the war (on November 27, 1877), the Russian Emperor specified the three objectives of the empire in the war: 1) to protect the Christian subjects of the Sultan from the Turkish rule; 2) to avoid such an Eastern Crisis; and 3) to recompense Russia for the sacrifices it made . Any of these points is actual for any of the wars Russia made against the Ottoman Empire since the Russian Empress Catherine II. And whereas the first two issues were oriented toward the subjugated Christian population in the European Southeast and the international relations in this region, the last one was of great importance for Russia. Here lied the main objective of the Russian foreign policy concerning the Eastern Question. In this point Alexander II concretized the Russian claims, namely the defence of the rights of Russia in the Bosphorus and Dardanelles . The victory in the war made possible an adventure, which could be defined as a conscious challenge. The victory of the Russian arms in the war, the defeated Turkish army, the participation of the Russian Ambassador – the Slavophile Count Ignatiev – in the elaboration and signing of the San Stefano Treaty

predetermined the well-known results from the preliminary treaty. The diplomatic triumph of March 3, 1878 was a concrete expression of the concealed hopes and bold plans fostered in the offices and headquarters of the Russian diplomatic and military elite. Besides, they coincided with the geographical borders of the Bulgarian ethnos.

The quick change of the euphoria from the achieved in San Stefano with the despair from the political defeat in Berlin in July 1878 faced the Russian strategists with new problems and trials. Instead of Petersburg gathering the fruits of its military success, which resulted in the big Bulgaria of San Stefano, the so much awaited Russian outpost in the Balkans was faced with serious obstacles. Berlin 1878 outlined a finished Balkan regional system with a great number of unsolved national and territorial problems, which originated a long period full of political storms and military conflicts. The status quo in the Balkans was permanently questioned and situations were created where the young Balkan states tried to satisfy their territorial appetites for the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire. An experiment was also put in the decisions of the Berlin Congress – the tributary Principality of Bulgaria, in which the state organization was at an initial stage of building. Both the Russian ambitions and the wish of the Great Powers to formalize the diplomatic dependence of Sofia from the Sublime Porte were interwoven in its destiny. A proof of this was the fact that as early as in July 1879 the states of the “European concert” started sending representatives with the rank of general consuls and diplomatic representatives to the capital of the Principality of Bulgaria. The new geopolitical configuration in the European Southeast predetermined the new accents in the foreign-political plans of the Russian Empire.

The strategists of the Russian foreign policy (where actively was going shares professional diplomats and high-ranking military men) concentrated their efforts and plans on a several aspects of the Eastern Question. These were Bulgaria as a geopolitically suitable object of formation and influence, its neighbours (mainly Greece and Serbia) in different periods as well as the Ottoman Empire, in which the appetites of the Great Powers mingled with the growing ambitions of the young Balkan states.

The foreign minister Gorchakov was categorical in his instruction from April 1878. “Prince Dondukov-Korsakov? must carry on the administrative system introduced by Prince Cherkaski? during the war.” The Berlin Congress did no eliminate but only concretized the concept of Gorchakov for the Bulgarian lands – to eliminate any kind of external intervention into the state system of the Principality under construction, and in Eastern Rumelia the Russian task was to deliver finished establishments to the Turkish General Governor. The minister of war, Milyutin, was another partisan of this opinion and he put stress on the creation of the Bulgarian police and gendarmerie and the organization of a local military force . The pragmatic estimates and guidance of the Russian diplomatic and military elite ware confronted with the pessimism of Count Ignatiev who was very well acquainted with the Balkan affairs. In August 1878, the Russian Ambassador in the Ottoman Empire acknowledged that Serbia expanded at the expense of Bulgaria, which was deprived of contested land . His pessimistic forecast for the future relations between Belgrade and Sofia was built on his conviction that “the seeds of discord between the two countries were thus sown” . He yielded to temptation and evaluated the good opportunities emerging before Austria-Hungary. According to Ignatiev, the

Bulgarian west part of Macedonia was delivered to Vienna and Hellenism with the consent of the Porte and of the pasha. This new for the European Southeast distribution of forces explains his forecast for the place of the Ottoman Empire in the new Balkan configuration. The count noted with fear that “the New Turkey is stronger on the European coast of Bosphorus than the old Turkey that was ruling over Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Bulgaria” . His only hope was that the Berlin treaty would be violated in the future as the London and Paris treaties were. His forecast came true but its foundation was totally wrong. The territories detached from the Ottoman Empire, on which were built the Balkan states, helped to increase the tension and the number of enemies of the Supreme Porte whose objective is to divide between themselves the Turkish territories. The pessimism of Count Ignatiev was complemented by the scepticism and annoyance of the minister of war Count Milyutin about the situation created in the Balkans where the tension increased instead of decrease. Two years later, Milyutin was categorical in his proposal to “solve the old “Eastern Question” by the collapse of this abnormal political mechanism” . In his opinion, the problem could be easily solved by “a combination of the European diplomacy intended to satisfy the legitimate needs of the different nationalities in the Balkan Peninsula” . For the minister of war that would be a guarantee for the maintenance of peace and order in this part of Europe. The idea he launched was based on the idea for a Balkan confederation that periodically emerged in the concepts and forecasts of the European diplomacy. For its members Milyutin recognized Rumania, Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Albania and Greece. Milyutin was complying with the decisions of the Berlin Congress about the Austro-Hungarian interests and left Bosnia and Herzegovina under the rule of Vienna. Milyutin was categorical that in case of a possible

restoration of the big Bulgaria, the Adrianople vilayet should become a part of it . In the plans of the Russian minister of war Milyutin, the Balkan federation was the formula for the success of the centuries-old dream of the Russian Empire – to liquidate the coast fortifications at the Bosphorus and Dardanelles and thus ensure the neutrality of the Sea of Marmara and the Straits.

During the next years, the collision between the excessive ambitions and incompetence of the Bulgarian politicians and the outright rudeness and inconsistency of the Russian diplomats in the Principality of Bulgaria caused the origination of the Bulgarian problem in the international relations. In the autumn of 1883 it was a subject of lively talks between the author of many European combination, Count Bismarck, and the leaders of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Girs and Vlangli . In this dialogue, the German chancellor expressed the doubts of the naval minister Kaprivi about the ability of Russia to cope unaided with Bulgaria, especially after the termination of the Procuration Regime in the Principality. For Bismarck, that was a serious signal for the stability of the positions of Petersburg in the Three Emperor's League , which both Russian diplomats had to deny. No doubt, the uncertain position of the bipartite dialogue, especially of the Germanophile Girs, was due to the idea of preserving the place of Russia in the Three Emperor's League.

In this triangle of competing empires (Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary), Vienna also laid claims to Petersburg. The Austro-Hungarian foreign minister did not conceal his resentment toward Russian and the chancellor Bismarck obligingly informed his Russian colleague about that. At the back of the unstable situation in the Principality of Bulgaria after the restoration of the Tarnovo Constitution in 1883, unknown dangers for the

Russian political presence in Sofia were also lying . The plans of the Russian strategists about the strengthening of the imperial positions in the Bulgarian capital, which were a reliable guarantee for the positions of Petersburg in the European Southeast, also were called in question. The crisis in the Three Emperor's League was quickly surmounted. The assurances of Bismarck and Girs that both of them wanted to preserve the Turkish integrity and the Balkan status quo consolidated the foundation of the League. The comment of the German chancellor about the negative position of Kalnoky towards Petersburg and the Russian foreign minister belonged to the sphere of emotional opinions. Bismarck was categorical that the emotions could be an obstacle for the solution of the Bulgarian problem as well as for the future relations in the alliance between Berlin, Vienna and Petersburg. The domineering position of the German chancellor in the Three Emperor's League was confirmed once again. Besides, the increasing dependence of Vienna from Berlin and the impersonal and subjugated position taken voluntarily by Petersburg in the person of Girs confirmed and stimulated the ambitions of the German chancellor.

The zones of tension in the Balkans traced by the Berlin decision of 1878 put on the test both the principles and accents of the Russian foreign-political strategy. The geopolitical situation in the European Southeast radically changed since 1878 put Russia in a different situation where it had to comply with a number of political units whose foreign-political programs and actions increased the tension in the region. The new participants complicated the diplomatic game and increased the number of unknown objects and unpredictable results.

A concrete expression of the anxiety and of the attempts to canalize the activity of the Russian diplomacy in the European Southeast was the

large memorandum of the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, Nelidov, of January 1885 г. Again, the objectives, problems and enemies of Russia in the Eastern Question were updated there.

A large place in the first part of the document was devoted to the consecutive plan intended to solve the basic problem for Russia in the Eastern Question – the Straits. All the three geographical points to be surmounted and after that retained were considered. The first step was connected with the permanent objective of Russia – to establish itself at the Bosphorus coast . However, the declarative character of the phrase did not explain the ways and actions to achieve this objective. The next task set by the author was to seize the Dardanelles and to prevent England or the western states from establishing at the outlet of the Sea of Marmara . These desires did not go over the border of the theoretical considerations that repeatedly were to be found in reports and concepts of Russian ambassadors and high-ranking military men.

According to Nelidov, the cause Russia not to solve yet this most important for it problem with the Straits was lying in the dissipation of its efforts with “the particular manifestations of the national strivings of the slaves that were still under Turkish yoke or were partially liberated” . The Russian Ambassador expressed his indignation at the deepening ecclesiastical question, which opposed Russians to Greeks, especially with the growing needs of the Bulgarian Exarchate . He was convinced the Russia should not fight against the peoples liberated by it in the Balkans where the external enemies were more. To his opinion, when solving its problems in the European Southeast, the Russian Empire should take into consideration the fact that the enemies to fight with are strictly determined and oriented in concrete spheres. These were Austria-Hungary in the sphere of the religious

propaganda, Germany in the Turkish capital, England in the sea, and all Great Powers impeding the realization of the Russian aspiration for the Straits . According to the ambassador's scenario, the Russian Empire should maintain a permanent perimeter defense in order realize its idea – to possess the Straits. However, although Nelidov made reference to the deepening religious problems between the Orthodox churches of the Balkan States, he was not trying to find a way out of the situation but paid attention to subjects and problems that were more familiar to the people of Pevcheski Most?

As any other memorandum with conceptual character, this one also ended in alternatives for solution of the questions raised. And as in any other report, the proposed way was mostly theoretical rather than with real chances for realization. Most of Nelidov's suggestions for the attitude of Petersburg in the Ottoman Empire and Balkan states belonged to the sphere of the impossible.

The suggestion to conclude a trade agreement between Russia and Turkey similar to this between Austria-Hungary, France and the Ottoman Empire also remained in the sphere of wishes. The Russian Empire did not have strong and traditional economic positions in the European Southeast. Besides, its inability to compete successfully with the other Great Powers on the Turkish and Balkan market also preordained the unreality of this suggestion. His recommendation "Russia to oppose the attempts of the European states to prevent Russia from establishing on the Bosphorus" deserves the same appraisal. Again the general terminology unsupported by a concrete plan prevails and casts suspicion on the realistic criteria and real significance of the Nelidov's report.

In conceptual and strategic aspect, the position of the Russian ambassador in Constantinople did not differ much from the suggestions and

projects of other colleagues of him concerning the solution of the East Question. The alternatives the report of the Russian ambassador disclosed were mostly connected with the past. However, the prospects were obscure, and the doubts and queries remained. They multiplied and intensified after the most important event in the modern Bulgarian history – the Unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia. Russia faced a series of challenges that opposed it not only to the members of the European concert”. The serious mistakes of the imperial diplomacy started a process that culminated in November 1886 with the rupture of the diplomatic relations with the state liberated and created by Russia – the Principality of Bulgaria. A fundamental defect of the Russian actions during and after the Unification of the Principality of Bulgaria and Easter Rumelia was the breach of the principles, on which was grounded the Russian concept about the Eastern.

In the ten-year period of severed bilateral relations with the Bulgarian state after 1886, Russia continued to follow but not to anticipate the events in the European Southeast. The imperial diplomacy did not stop trying to control the processes in the Balkans, mostly through the medium of its ambassador in the Ottoman Empire, Count Nelidov. In this period, he distinguished himself with his staunch policy in defense of the Greek Patriarchy and Turkish integrity, sometimes even to the detriment of the Slave and Christian population in Turkey. The distance between the ambitions of Petersburg towards the Balkans and the plans of the neighbouring states of the Ottoman Empire kept increasing. Now these states were requesting and getting help mostly from Austria-Hungary and England – the permanent rivals of Russia in the region.

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The term “doctrine” is applicable to the Russian foreign-political thought and actions in the European Southeast in so far as Petersburg was clear about its strategic goal – the Straits. All things that affected to a certain degree the region around them were becoming a part of the sphere of interests, which was more and more obeying the conjuncture than the main goal. The desire of the Russian diplomacy, at Pevcheski Most as well as in the Balkan region, was to achieve a relative balance between the impossibility to realize the general goal and the attendance in most of the processes that would take the rivals away from the region. In the period from 1878 to the Unification of 1885, the actions of Russia concerning the Eastern Question obeyed the setting of new ambitious goals and the gradual loss of the positions gained in the European Southeast.