

Russian Stroke to Eastern Question 1894-1904

(Ambition and Plans of Empire Diplomacy)

SUMMARY

The Russian Empire was a permanent factor in the international relations during the 19th century. Its role was extremely important in the complex and interrelated relations, existing among the great powers as far as the Eastern question is concerned. The interpretation of the facts, as well as the various projects and ideas of the empire diplomacy were an important part of the shaping up of the Russian foreign policy. In conjunction with the existing situation in Europe, respectively on the Balkans, they lead to concrete decisions and certain behaviour of official St. Petersburg.

In the middle of the last decade of the 19th century Russia launched two contradictory foreign programmes as far as their direction and aims are concerned. The first one was the voluntarily chosen Far Eastern issue, the second one was the Eastern question, imposed on Russia by developments and circumstances, an issue, marked by big Russian ambitions but limited possibilities. During the ten year period, when the Straits and the Balkan affairs forcefully engaged St. Petersburg's time and attention, the Far East was practically neglected in Russian diplomatic analyses and projects. However, in spite of the fact, that the Far East was not an issue of specific priority and deep knowledge for the Russian foreign ministers, its presence in the political, financial and military life of St. Petersburg could not be neglected.

Russian diplomatic correspondence and activities reveal a growing dependance of the Empire on external factors and phenomena. This tendency gradually diminished the possibilities of St. Petersburg for independent

choice. The formula for the preservation by all means of the existing status quo on the Balkans, adopted by Russia, presupposed not only the enforced initiative of the Empire on the Eastern question, but also its limited activities, in form and scope, in the region.

Russian diplomatic stands and activities in the developments, defining the different aspects of the Eastern question, are reflected in the correspondence between Pevcheskyi Most and its subdivisions. The information, present in the minister's instructions and the reports of his subordinates in the last decade of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, reflects the attitudes, ideas and plans of the imperial diplomacy towards the Ottoman Empire, Austro-Hungary and the Balkan states. Their implementation was directly related both to the established traditions in the diplomatic practice and to the administrative and personal interrelations in the state hierarchy.

During this period substantial changes in the administrative and technical procedures of foreign policy discussion and decision-making process took place. The joint structure (The Singular Council under the auspices of the Emperor) under the foreign ministers Lobanov-Rostovskyi and Shishkin still preserved the existing traditions of discussing and elaborating positions on the complex Near and Far East issues. Their successors however closed the process information-discussion-decision-making within the frames of the Foreign Ministry and its subdivisions. The explanation for this changes lied in the spheres of personnel and cadre approach. The first six years of NicolayTs reign were marked by the dynamic changes in Pevcheskyi Most's higher staff and in the diplomatic elite in Eastern and Southern Europe. From 1990 on the stable ambassadorial and diplomatic agent staff in the Balkan region allowed, and

the escalation of the Near East problems required, the working out of an efficient mechanism for action. The development of the imperial positions and stands took place in the frames of the St.Petersburg-Vienna-Belgrade-Sofia-Istambul-St.Petersburg circle on the basis of the epistolary discussion. Ideas, recommendations and plans based on experience, emotions and prejudices were exchanged in this process.

Most of them remained only as an example of the assumptions, desires and ideas of the high-ranking Russian bureaucracy. Just a few of the projects became an element of the foreign policy of the Empire. Of paramount importance for the implementation of a certain idea was the personality, developing and promoting it, his place, authority and relations in St.Petersburg official circles. The implementation of any idea was directly dependent on the political situation in Pevcheskyi Most and in the Palace, on the alignment of forces in the respective capital on the Balkans and in Europe.

A characteristic feature of the ideas put forward for discussion was the biased position of their authors and promoters - in most of the cases diplomats, working in the respective country. Quite often these diplomats, under the influence of the existing realities and the pressure of the local politicians, unvoluntarily became instruments of the ambitions and desires of the political elite in the respective country, sometimes even to the detriment of Russian interests. This being a characteristic feature of the activities of the Russian diplomats in the Balkan countries, confronted a completely different approach by the ambassadors in the capitals of the two empires - Austro-Hungary and Turkey. Here solidarity, understanding and consent with the overall policy of Vienna and Istambul, defending Turkish integrity and Balkan peace, were the predominant feelings. The diplomats in the

Danubean Empire were steady in their rejection to the attacks and the appeasement of the doubts of Pevcheskyi Most, while Russian ambassadors in the Ottoman Empire were undeviating in their support to the Serbian interests in the European part of Turkey, in their protection to the Greek cause and in their sporadic wardship to the Bulgarian berat policy. The diplomatic reports shape St.Petersburg attitude towards the nature and the aspects of the two Eastern crisis, which were substantially differing each other. In the 90-es the interest and the fears of the Empire were concentrated mainly on the Straits, the Crete problem and the Balkan church disputes in the Ottoman Empire. During the second Eastern crisis Russian diplomacy focused its attention on Turkish activities in the Macedonian vilayets and on Bulgarian military propaganda in the region, a fact reflected in Russian diplomatic demarches and reform programmes.

During this period the Empire formulated also its priorities in South Eastern Europe. The confrontation with Balkan aspirations, sultan's flexibility and ambiguous Balkan partnership of Austro-Hungary determined Russian orientation towards Serbia, the withholding of its support to Bulgaria, its wavering policy towards Greece and its enforced conformism to Habsburg Empire and Turkish integrity. The information, available in diplomatic documentation reveals the aspirations of St.Petersburg to control Balkan ambitions and desires and to overcome fears of potentially dangerous enemy-ally Austro-Hungary, as well as to maintain its advantages in the Turkish capital.

In the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century Russian diplomacy examined and clearly formulated the geopolitical interests of the Empire concerning the Eastern question. During the first and the second Eastern crisis the Straits and the Balkans were continuously changing

priority places in the framework of the discussions of different views and projects, depending on the alternatives, launched by each and everyone of the protagonists. The foreign policy concepts, addressed to Pevcheskyi Most reveal ambitious plans for reshaping Balkan boundaries in favourable for the Russian Empire direction. The diplomatic heretage of Russia is an unmistakable proof for the firm conviction of its representatives in South Eastern Europe about the necessity to affirm its emperial positions in the region and to ensure the implementation of its aspirations in the future. It reveals both the logic, inspiring the behaviour of each emperial power and the specific features, singling out Russia of all other states.