

KOSOVO QUESTION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: The Congress of Berlin of 1878 was of great importance for the Balkan states as Serbia, Montenegro, Romania and Bulgaria gained independence. Nevertheless some of these states' claims were fully satisfied. For instance Serbia didn't manage to annex Kosovo and Metohija which under the Treaty of Berlin remained under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Serbia which thought these territories to be the «Cradle of Serbian statehood» as Serbian medieval state was located in Kosovo thought it great injustice and started to put effort to annex them. By various means Serbia was trying to expand its influence there as well as win support of the local Serbian population. As time went by some other claimants to Kosovo vilayet emerged, namely Montenegro which was ruled by an ambitious monarch who wanted to expand his territories and influence and Bulgaria which was mostly interested in Macedonian lands, which were in Kosovo vilayet, but wasn't sure which territories in the Kosovo vilayet would eventually become part of the Bulgarian state. Moreover the Albanian national movement was gaining steam and according to their programmes Kosovo would also be integrated into Albanian independent state. Austria-Hungary and Italy were not interested in occupying Kosovo but still wanted to maintain influence in the Balkan region and thus were going to use tensions over Kosovo there for their own benefit. To sum up, at the beginning of the 20th century Kosovo problem ceased to be a merely Serbian matter of interest and transformed into an international issue.

Key words: *the Balkans, Kosovo, international relations in the 20th century, Serbia, the Balkan states*

INTRODUCTION

In 1878 the Great Eastern Crisis which started in 1875 finished with emergence of a few new independent states on the Balkan Peninsula. The independence of Serbia, Montenegro, Rumania and Bulgarian lands was stipulated in the Treaty of Berlin. From that moment on Balkan peoples could choose their own future. Nevertheless decisions taken at the Congress of Berlin in 1878 were not satisfactory for the new independent states as some of their claims were not fulfilled. For instance, Kosovo and Metohija which Serbia saw as an integral part of its state remained in the Ottoman empire. Montenegro and Bulgaria also expressed dissatisfaction with what they got. As for the Albanian people, their claims were totally ignored and the status of Albanians didn't change, i.e. they even didn't get autonomy let alone independence.

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There have been quite many research papers dedicated to the preparatory work Serbia was doing to eventually annex Kosovo lands. These papers pay attention to the methods which Belgrade resorted to, namely providing support to Serbian schools and monasteries asъ Serbian population in Kosovo. Moreover there are papers devoted to the relations of Serbia with other Balkan states such as Montenegro and Bulgaria at the beginning of the 20th century, in particular creation of the Balkan Union and the role of Russia in this process. Some works cover the topic of Albanian national movement. At the same time not much attention is given to the question of when Kosovo problem became an international matter as well as what factors facilitated this process. The purpose of this article is to detect when and how it happened.

SERBIA AS THE MAIN CLAIMANT TO KOSOVO

In 1878 Serbia finally became an independent state. Nevertheless some territories populated by ethnic Serbs remained under the Ottoman rule. It was a heavy blow for Serbia as the Serbs thought Kosovo to be the centre of the medieval Serbian state which made them think they were rightful claimants to these territories.

According to the opinion of some prominent Serbian historians, namely Dr Slavenko Terzić, «every people has their places of respect and admiration», and for the Serbs that place is Kosovo, which is the basis of «cultural and spiritual hierarchy of the Serbian world» (Терзић 2002, p. 65), and «Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo and Metohija are an integral part of Serbian self-identity, the basis of collective national identity and the entire folk culture» (Терзић 2010, p. 142). Another Serbian historian Dusan Bataković believed that the Kosovo myth is «a key determinant of modern Serbian identity», and that Kosovo for the Serbs is the place, which is «imbued with historic memory, religious tradition, national identity, historic right, while moral code and reflection of the state interests stem from the religious and epic heritage» (Батаковић 2006, pp. 5-6).

In fact Serbia started its activities in the areas which lay to the south of Serbia's border right after gaining independence in 1878. From that moment on Belgrade was proving financial support to Serbian school, churches and monasteries as well as Serbian population of Kosovo. This support was the following: sending books to Serbian schools, teacher training for the subsequent work at these schools, paying salaries to the teachers, providing Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries with books and church ware, as well as opening Serbian consulates in the Kosovo vilayet for the protection of Serbian population there (i.e. consulates in Skopje and Pristina).

Let us draw a few examples. For instance in 1878 Serbian Ministry of education included certain sums of money into its budget which would cover the costs of supporting schools in Kosovo, namely 12,000 Turkish kuruses. The same amount was set for the next year, and in 1880-1883 financial support accounted for 5,052 dinars (Недељковић 2012, p. 212). According to the reports of Serbian consuls in 1896 total spending on Serbian schools in Pristina and areas around it was 33,170 dinars. The money was spent on teachers' salaries, support of pupils and the construction of a new school in the village called Sirinić (Перуничкић 1985, p. 192-193). More money to provide financial aid in Kosovo was approved by Vladan Đorđević government in 1897, as the Cabinet decided to spend 49, 000 dinars on various school needs there².

2 Записници седница Министарског савета Србије, 1862-1898. Књ II., 479.

All these figures illustrate the scale of Serbia's activities in Kosovo and prove that Serbian ruling circles were taking this matter seriously.

In 1903 after the assassination of king Alexander Obrenović and Peter Karađorđević coming to power designated the beginning of a new era in history of independent Serbia. But one question still remained on the political agenda — future annexation of Kosovo lands.

At the beginning of the 20th century Serbian politicians strongly supported the idea that Kosovo lands have to be given back to Serbia. This idea was reflected in the programmes of major Serbian political parties.

During the period of 1903-1914 the Old Radical party headed by Nikola Pašić was a dominating force in Serbia's politics. According to Pašić only his party «could save and strengthen Serbia» and fulfil its political ideals (Шемякин, 2011, p. 37). In the programme of the Old Radical party of 1904 it is stated that their main purpose was to unite all part of the Serbian people, scattered across the Balkan Peninsula, within «its geographical borders in political and religious terms, as «free and independent Serbia can't feel happy while its kins in neighbouring states are suffering from barbaric zulum and cruel massacres», and it is the duty of Serbia «to do its best and direct all its energy at the protection of these people» (Ђурић 2000, p. 275). The key area which was supposed to be incorporated into the Serbian state was Kosovo.

At the beginning of the 20th century Serbia continued its activities in Kosovo though Ottoman authorities there were trying to hinder them by introducing laws that would prevent Serbian aid. For example on July 30th, 1910 interim head of the ecclesiastical seminary in Prizren V. Katić was informing Belgrade about the act enacted in Kosovo according to which «persons who were not Ottoman subjects could not work in local schools». All foreign teachers working there would have to pay fines³. Later this information was confirmed by a Serbian Vice-consul in Pristina M. Rakić⁴.

These new difficulties however didn't stop Serbia from fulfilling its plan to prepare for the subsequent annexation of Kosovo and the preparatory work continued up to 1912 when the First Balkan War broke out.

KOSOVO QUESTION IN THE SERBIA-MONTENEGRO AND SERBIA-BULGARIA RELATIONS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

Serbia's claims to Kosovo were quite straightforward and clear, but there were two more countries that were planning to create their own «Great» states and incorporate some lands of Kosovo vilayet into their new states. These were Montenegro and Bulgaria which got their independence in 1878. Both countries were not satisfied with the boundaries set at the Congress of Berlin and ruling circles in Sofia and Cetinje were working on plans aimed at expanding the territories. By the beginning of the 20th century Montenegro and Bulgaria gave everyone to understand what their plans were and obviously became rivals to Serbia in Kosovo.

Montenegro and Serbia had a rather intricate relationship. Montenegro's ruler Nikola I Petrović-Njegoš was very ambitious and thought that his country had

3 Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903-1914, Књига IV. Свеска 2/1. 1./14. Јули-30. септембар/13.октобар 1910., 379.

4 Ibid. С. 400-401.

«an understandable and natural strives for expanding its territories»⁵. Nikola was dreaming about «making Montenegro the ‘Piemonte’ of the Balkan confederation which would encompass Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Old Serbia (Kosovo), parts of Northern Albania, Boka Kotorska, Dalmatia, Serbia and even Bulgaria (Струнина-Бородина, 2014 p. 217). According to this plan Montenegro was going to compete with Serbia who was working on subsequent annexation of Kosovo.

What’s more Nikola had very difficult relations with Serbian king Milan Obrenović. To make matters worse future Serbian king Peter Karađorđević from the rival Serbian dynasty was Nikola’s son-in-law. As a result in 1900 the relationship between Belgrade and Cetinje reached the bottom and Serbian diplomatic mission in Montenegrin capital was withdrawn (Хитрова 1993, p. 191).

The dialogue was renewed in 1903 when the Karađorđević ascended to the throne. On 17 (30) December 1903 Montenegro’s foreign minister Gavro Vuković was writing to the head of Serbia’s government Sava Grujić to remind him about the meeting that took place in Constantinople in September of the same year. During the meeting these two officials came to the conclusion that the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro was strained because of the «malign regime» in Serbia and now there was a great need in improving the situation. What’s more the state of affairs on the Balkan peninsula concerned Vuković and in his opinion posed threat to Serbia and Montenegro⁶. Grujić and Vuković continued their communication and on January 28th 1904 there was a memorandum written in Cetinje which suggested a few ways of responding to the situation should some unexpected events take place in the region and in the Kosovo vilayet in particular. The so-called Kosovo issue emerged in the document too. It was highlighted that the purpose of the two states would be «protection of their compatriots from outright extermination in Old Serbia and Albania till the moment when both Serbia and Montenegro would be forced by circumstances to sacrifice in the name of their common goal»⁷. Moreover the document had a provision covering possible activation of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans. If the Dual Monarchy started «to cut a path to Thessaloniki», Serbia and Montenegro «would have to protect their existence with the use of force» because if Austria-Hungary settles in Old Serbia there will be no room there for Serbia and Montenegro⁸. What’s interesting the memorandum also raises the question of future border drawn between Serbia and Montenegro in case «the was is victorious for them» or if «Turkey breaks up or its European territories are divided»⁹.

This idea has been expressed by a Russian historian Varvara Khlebnikova, who stated that «key reason to constant tensions and hostility between Serbian and Montenegrin rulers was quite banal — they couldn’t reach agreement on “distribution of Turkish inheritance”, and the fate of Old Serbia» (Хлебникова 2016, p. 163).

In 1905 there was an attempt to sign a trade deal between Serbia and Montenegro. After lengthy negotiation Serbian foreign minister Nikola Pasić and his Montenegrin counterpart Gavro Vuković managed to reach consensus¹⁰. But in the end

5 Российский государственный военно-исторический архив (РГВИА). Ф. 2000. Оп. 1. Д. 2808. Л 15об.

6 Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903-1914, Књ. 1. Свеска 1.29. мај-11. јун 1903 - 14-27. фебруар 1904., 805.

7 Ibid, 923.

8 Ibid, 924.

9 Ibid.

10 Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903-1914, Књ. 1. Свеска 3/1.1/14. јануар - 31. март/13. април 1905., 340-341.

the deal wasn't signed as the parties didn't come to an agreement in future division of territories, namely Prince Nikola thought that Serbia was going to deprive him of his dream «to make Pristina the capital of his state» (Хитрова 1993: 205).

Rivalry between Serbia and Montenegro continued up to 1908 when the Annexation crisis broke out and two states interests of which were violated sided against Austria-Hungary that occupied Bosnia and Herzegovina. However this temporary thaw between Belgrade and Cetinje actually didn't help them settle their dispute over Kosovo.

Later Montenegro started to act more actively in Kosovo and tried to establish friendly relations with Albanians. For example, according to the telegram from the Russian charge d'affaires in Montenegro N. Dyachenko sent in 1910 Montenegrins «set hopes on kinship ties» which «remained between some Arnaut (Albanina) clans and Montenegrin tribes». He also added that «generous handing out of weapons and money had to contribute to the fulfilment of a broader plan» connected with Albanians worked out by Defence Minister Martinović¹¹.

Moreover during the Albanian riot in 1911 Montenegro supported Albanians with the aim of using «unrest in Albania for its selfish territorial gains»¹². However Montenegro wasn't the only rival of Serbia in Kosovo vilayet. This administrative area was quite vast and encompassed the territories of present day Macedonia, in fact the capital of the vilayet was Skopje.

Bulgaria traditionally considered Macedonian lands as their territory and though they had a right to claim it. After the Congress of Berlin of 1878 Macedonian lands also remained under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and later were integrated into Kosovo vilayet. Thus the interests of Serbia and Bulgaria met in this area.

Serbia-Bulgaria relationship was rather complicated as both countries were fighting for the dominant position in the Balkan region. Moreover both states had an aim to annex some European territories of the Ottoman Empire, but did not manage to reach any consensus.

Serbia and Bulgaria made attempts to improve their relationship at the beginning of the 20th century when the situation in Serbia changed (i.e. new dynasty ascended to the throne and the Old Radical part came to power). In February 1904 Serbian foreign minister Nikola Pašić and Bulgarian military attache Hristofor Hesapchiev started to discuss future agreement which Belgrade and Sofia intended to sign¹³. One of the main issues was future division of territories.

Nikola Pašić supported the idea that Macedonia is populated by Serbs and Bulgarians and thus the territories that «are more inclined» to Serbia should belong to Serbia while the rest should become part of Bulgaria. Bulgarian attache Hesapchiev agreed with this¹⁴. But Bulgarian diplomat Dimitar Rizov with whom Pašić spoke earlier didn't agree with it and said that thus Serbia wanted to divide Macedonia the way that would benefit it. Pašić responded that Serbia was more interested in annexing Old Serbia which was part of Kosovo vilayet and the remaining territories would be divided between Montenegro and Bulgaria¹⁵.

11 Албанский фактор в развитии кризиса на территории бывшей Югославии. Документы. Т. I (1878–1997 гг.). С.53.

12 РГВИА. Ф. 2000. Оп. 1. Д. 2808. Л 15об.

13 Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903-1914, Књ. 1. Свеска 1.29. мај-11. јун 1903 - 14-27. фебруар 1904., 984.

14 Ibid, 987.

15 Ibid, 988-989.

The negotiations continued up to 1905 but didn't lead to any positive results as in the end Belgrade and Sofia didn't sign any agreement. However as both Serbia and Bulgaria were preparing for a war with the Ottoman Empire it was obvious that they would have to reach a consensus in the question of drawing border. Negotiation resumed in 1911 but according to the memoir of a Russian Vasily Strandtman, it wasn't an easy process as both countries didn't trust each other (Штрандтман 2014, p. 79).

The situation was aggravated by the fact that there was no unity in the views of Serbian officials as Serbian foreign minister Milovanović thought that in the name of friendship with Bulgaria Serbia could give up its plan to occupy some territories of Macedonia while Nikola Pašić believed that Serbia could claim more vast territories in the south up to Thessaloniki which of course violated Bulgarian interests as well as Turkish and Greek (Писареv 1985, p. 87).

However on November 4, 1911 Milovanović presented his draft agreement. One of the provisions covered future division of territories between Serbia and Bulgaria. For instance Serbia had to refuse from occupying «Adrianople vilayet and parts of Kosovo to the south of Šar-planina» while Bulgaria had to cede «Scutari vilayet and Kosovo vilayet to the north of Šar-planina» to Serbia (Штрандтман 2014, p. 85).

Eventually the treaty between Serbia and Bulgaria was signed on February 29, 1912. The parties managed to reach consensus in the majority of matters. However the question of division of the lands between Šar-planina, the Rhodopes and Ohrid lake remained unsolved¹⁶.

To sum up, Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria whose interests met in Kosovo vilayet had very complex relationships at the beginning of the 20th century as they couldn't find common ground on the number of problems the most crucial of which was the division of territories.

ALBANIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT AND ITS PLANS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

At the end of the 19th century another force started to emerge in the Balkan region — Albanian national movement. This movement began in 1878 when the Albanian (Prizren) League was formed. Its delegates addressed European diplomats at the Congress of Berlin in order to draw their attention to the problem of recognition of Albanians as a nation with subsequent autonomous status within the borders the Ottoman Empire. The delegates' claims were rejected and the status of Albanians remained unchanged.

However it didn't discourage Albanian nationalists and they continued their activities up to 1881 when the League was dissolved. What's interesting the Albanian League even had a document called «Kararname» which included some provisions dedicated to the creation of the Albanian state. It was stated in the document that the Albanians «would fight to the bitter end against any annexation of Albanian territories» (which already were claimed by Serbia, Bulgaria and Greece), and that they would strive for unification of «all lands inhabited by the Albanians», that is Kosovo, Scutari, Janina and Bitola vilayets (Искендеров 2013, p. 13). Albanian national movement which first emerged on the territory of Kosovo, in Prizren, clearly stated its plans to incorporate Kosovo into its new independent state.

¹⁶ Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903-1914, Књ. V. Свеска 1. јануар - 14/27. јули 1912, 376-378.

After the dissolution of the League Albanian national movement didn't come into the spotlight much. Although in 1902 one of the Albanian national leaders Ismail Qemali said that he was against violations of national and cultural interests of Albanians, but at the same time he didn't believe that the right moment for gaining independence had come as at that moment «the surrounding was hostile and the great powers were also planning to divide the Balkans among themselves» (Искендеров 2013, p. 31).

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 marked the new stage in the development of the movement. In November 1908 the Pan-Albanian Congress took place in Bitola. During the Congress delegates discussed create of the Albanian alphabet and what's more important the programme of the development of Albanian lands and their government (Искендеров 2017, pp. 391-392).

Moreover Albanians started to express their negative attitude to decisions taken by local Ottoman officials and even rebelled against them. The centre of these riots as well the national movement was Kosovo. The riots took place there in 1910, 1911 and 1912.

According to the reports of Russian envoy in Belgrade this situation bothered Serbia as Albanian «rebellions were organised in Kosovo which was the sphere of influence of Serbia» (Искендеров 2013 (2), p. 663).

Albanian national movement reached its apogees in 1912. Russian journalist from the newspaper «Rech» («Речь») V. Viktorov had a conversation with a leader of the Albanian rebellion Riza-bey who said that their struggle «was just at its first stage» and that he and his supporters demanded «special rights for four vilayets, namely Scutari, Janina, Bitola and Kosovo» (Искендеров 2014: 246). It meant that in 1912 along with Serbia, Montenegro and Bulgaria there was another claimant to Kosovo, i.e. Albanian national movement which considered it as an integral part of its future independent state.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY'S AND ITALY'S INTERESTS IN THE BALKANS

Technically Austria-Hungary and Italy cannot be considered as claimants to Kosovo, but their involvement in all Balkan matters also contributed to transformation of Kosovo issue into an international issue.

It is a well-known fact that Austria-Hungary didn't want Serbia to become too influential. Vienna succeeded a lot in this sphere when Milan Obrenović reigned in Serbia. The Dual Monarchy forced Serbia to sign a trade agreement in 1881 which was not beneficial for the latter. Knowing that Serbia had no access to the sea Austria-Hungary manipulated Serbia in questions of export of Serbian pigs and other agricultural products by closing the Serbia-Hungary border when it wanted Serbia to change its behaviour.

The situation started to change when the Obrenović dynasty was eliminated and the Karadžević family which was less friendly with Austria-Hungary took the throne. Serbia immediately became more active and aggressive in its foreign policy.

At the same time Austria-Hungary was quite concerned about Serbia's plans to expand its territories and to get access to the sea and to finally break away from its dependance on the Monarchy's mood swings. The shortest cut to the Adriatic Sea was through the territory of Kosovo and North Albania. With this access Austria-

Hungary lost one of its most important and beneficial trading partners which provided the Monarchy with cheap meat and in exchange bought Austrian industrial products. For example, in a conversation between Serbian ambassador M. Vujić and Austrian foreign minister Agenor Gołuchowski which took place at the diplomatic reception in Vienna on January 6, 1905, the latter expressed his concern about some «backroom dealing» that was going on in Belgrade the aim of which according to the foreign minister was aimed at expulsion of Austria-Hungary from Serbia's new trade deals¹⁷.

This situation illustrates that Austria-Hungary knew that things are going to be very different and Serbia is not going to obey to Vienna. As a result Austria-Hungary that was aware of Serbia's plans concerning Kosovo started to provide support to Albanians who were to become a counterforce to the Serbs (Словић 2010, p. 286).

A well-known Serbian Social Democrat Dimitrije Tucović stated in one of his articles that Austrian foreign minister Alois von Aehrenthal openly offered Albanians to rely on Austria-Hungary (Шемякин 2010: 435-436). What's more Vienna was trying to build friendly relationship with leaders of Albanian clans (Стојанчевић 1976, pp. 555-556).

The Dual Monarchy focused its efforts on proving support to Albanian Catholics and through its missionaries distributed religious books and helped them to fulfil other needs. But Austria-Hungary wasn't the only state that supported the Catholics there.

Italy which underwent the process of unification only in the last quarter of the 19th century was trying to strengthen its position in Europe and to expand its influence on the Balkan Peninsula. A Russian military agent Potapov wrote in one of his reports that for Italy it was very important to entrench itself in the Adriatic Sea in order not to become a «second class power» in Europe (Потапов 2003: 246).

It is believed that Italy made its first step to expanding its influence in the Balkan region after the Young Turk Revolution on 1908. Rome exhibited its strives to become more influential in the Balkan region (Яхимович 2004: 640). As for Albania in 1904 Italian foreign minister T. Tittoni said that Albania itself had no importance but it had harbours on the Adriatic coast possessing of which meant «unhindered domination over the Adriatic Sea» (Искендеров 2017: 394).

Serbian consul in Skopje J. Jovanović wrote about Italy's increase in activity on the Balkan peninsula on September 14, 1910. In his letter to Serbian foreign minister M. Milovanović the diplomat said that when he worked in Cetinje he noticed rivalry between Austria-Hungary and Italy in Albanian lands and that Italy was trying hard to force Austria-Hungary out of the region by means of Catholic propaganda. In Jovanovic's opinion for Italy it was easier to succeed in this because of the Young Turks' religious freedoms policy, and because France refused to protect Christians in Turkey. The diplomat also noted that Italy's policy became more aggressive not only in Albania but in Kosovo vilayet too as there were Italian consulates in Skopje, Thessaloniki and Prizren. Moreover Jovanovic reported that Italy used lack of activity by Austria-Hungary in the region for its own benefit. For instance he drew an example of an exam at a Catholic school in which a pupil couldn't answer where Austria-Hungary was situated while a Catholic priest couldn't recognise Austrian national anthem when it was played by the Austrian consul. To cap it all this school

17 Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903-1914, Књ. 1. Свеска 3/1.1/14. јануар - 31. март/13. април 1905., 142-143.

as well as the priest's parish are funded by Austria-Hungarian consulate. Joavnović comes to a conclusion that Italy works more effectively in this region and in general Catholic priests tend to address Italians more often¹⁸.

CONCLUSION

Considering all the facts mentioned above it's possible to say that by the beginning of the 20th century Kosovo question, which was a merely Serbian matter of concern at the end of the 19th century as it was the only and the most likely claimant to Kosovo territories, transformed into an international matter. At the turn of the 20th century some more states showed their interest to this region and started their activities there. Nascent Albanian national movement also couldn't remain unnoticed as its leaders made themselves clear and declared that they considered Kosovo as an integral part of their future independent state. Austria-Hungary and Italy didn't express desire to occupy these territories very openly but they were planning to use them as political currency to reach their own goals.

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¹⁸ Документи о спољној политици Краљевине Србије 1903-1914, Књига IV. Свеска 2/1. 1./14. Јули-30. септембар/13.октобар 1910., 586.

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