

# **O**ttoman Diplomacy and the “Eastern Issue”

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## **Abstract**

In the nineteenth century Europe there was a contrasting picture of peoples, states and empires which were not confused with territories their population live on, with the forms of political organization they had, with the religion or habits they practiced or with the language they spoke. If at the beginning of the century, the Ottoman Empire continued to control, more or less in a direct way, most of the Mediterranean space, from Algeria to Egypt, from Arabia to Asia Minor and in Europe, the Balkans. Under the impact of the nationalist current and the politics of “balance of powers”, the occupied nations have tried to release one after another from the tutelage of the Ottoman Empire. The Paris Congress of 1856 represented for the Ottoman Empire the beginning of a new reform period that would evolve into a campaign of repression against peoples who refused assimilation. As a reaction to the defeats suffered on external level and to the riots that started as a result of the increasingly intense national

movements on internal level, in the Ottoman Empire emerged Turkish nationalism, a current which has campaigned against federalization and for national homogenization under the pressure of the Turkish centralism. The events in the second half of the nineteenth century have spread across Europe, prompting the development of new trends and guidance lines in the politics of the existing states and empires, and the creation of new principles and diplomatic methods.

**Key words:** Organic Regulation, Trusteeship of Civil hospitals, Health Committee, Medical Commission, Superior Medical Council.

After 1848-1849, the Balkans became the epicentre of intense turmoil which was to engender ample conflicts between the great powers (the Crimean war, the great oriental crisis of 1875-1878 (Ciachir, 1997: 127-130), the eighth Russian-Turkish war), preparing in the long term the favourable prerequisite for the breaking out of the first world war (1914-1918). The increase in intensity of the national movement threw the dynastic empires, already in a period of decay, into a crisis that affected their very existence and to which they will react in a similar manner.

The Ottoman Empire adopted a form of domination unsuitable for the 19th century. The people under its domination preserved their characteristic features, language and religion. The sanguinary intrigues of the Seraglio enhanced what a European would call the exotic feature of the sultan's political and religious power (Avram, 2003: 59). The Empire started to become the object of dispute for Russia (which was dreaming of the possibility of freely getting to the Mediterranean), the United Kingdom (which wished to make her way to India), and Austria, which was disputing with the tsars the right of "protection" of the Slavs. Turkey also offered an economic space which was intensely disputed by the great European powers. On the other hand, the Greeks, and then the Romanians, the Serbians and the Bulgarians emancipated and the growing number of nations reaching the awareness of their existence as entities increased the chances of conflict, thus contributing to the dissolution of the

empire to its expulsion from Europe. The problem of the Ottoman Empire as seen by the Europeans was reduced to "the Oriental issue".

In the middle of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was undergoing a consuming crisis, being called "Europe's sick man" (Carpentier & Lebrun, 1996: 306). The Ottoman statesmen were well aware of the dangerous decline of their power and realized that the very existence of their empire was at stake. The Ottoman system had functioned well for five centuries. The emphasis on Muslim domination and on religious division had resulted in building an omnipotent empire. But this was faced with strong internal convulsion and ethnic-religious conflicts, brought about by the emancipation struggle of the subjected peoples. Reforms were needed in order to modernize the political and economic structure of the empire. The secularization and modernization of the Muslim society was also required by the necessity to resist when faced with the pressure exerted by the great powers, which turned the Balkans into a "gunpowder barrel" (Zbucea, 1999: 25).

After settling the Egyptian issue, during the first half of the 19th century the Ottoman Empire had the respite for focusing on its internal problems. So "the great period of reforms" started, known under the name of Tanzimat (Reorganization). In the sixth decade of the 19th century, the reforms process was interrupted by the crisis which led to the Crimean war. This conflict, the only general European war during the interval of the years 1815/1914, was caused by the ordinary matters associated with "the Oriental issue": the necessity felt by most of the European powers to preserve the integrity of the Ottoman Empire and, implicitly, the balance of powers in the Near East.

The issue of the religious protectorates had been discussed through the Treaties of Karlowitz (1699), Kuciuk-Kainargi (1774) etc. when Austria, France and Russia had attained certain rights concerning religious jurisdiction over the Sacred Places of Jerusalem, in which the Catholic church and the Orthodox church were involved. In February 1853, the Russian government sent to Constantinople a special emissary, the prince Alexandru Menşikov.

He claimed an unequivocal acknowledgement of Russia's rights to protect the Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire and to speak on behalf of the 12 million Turkish. The claim was accepted by neither the Porte, nor the great powers because that would have led to Russia's domination of Turkey and to a total deterioration of the diplomatic balance in the eastern Mediterranean area.

The Turkish diplomats accepted England and France's offer to defend "the Ottoman Empire's integrity" only for maintaining its territories of that time, but not for possible intentions of expanding the Turkish conquests realizing the fact that the European balance requirements would impose the restoring of any new conquests of territories to the detriment of other states (Türkgeldi, 1960: 321-327; Mehmet, 1976: 326-327).

When Turkey refused to submit to the Russians' ultimatum, whose claims also included the question of protection, in July 1853 a Russian army was sent, which occupied the Romanian Principalities. In October, the same year, the Ottoman Empire declared war on Russia. The Western Powers successively became involved in the war, on the side of Turkey. The British and the French fleets got into the Straits in order to support the Turks. In November, at Sinope (Samsun), the Russian fleet of the Black Sea sank the Turkish fleet, destroying all the ships and causing losses of about four thousand sailors and soldiers. In March 1854, France and Great Britain also joined the conflict.

France incidentally intervened in this conflict. England, directly interested in everything that represented "problems" for the Ottoman Empire, attracted Napoleon III into a far-reaching military expedition. The regime of Napoleon I's nephew needed military glory in order to consolidate his position and favourable opportunity in order to break away from his diplomatic isolation. Napoleon III endeavoured to destroy the Europe created by the Congress in Vienna and for this purpose he encouraged the setting up of a nationalities' Europe, whose arbiter he wanted to become. For this reason he profited from the occasion offered to him in 1854 for allying himself with England against the tsar who had just attacked Turkey.

In June 1854, the Habsburg government sent an ultimatum to Russia asking it to withdraw from the Principalities, after which the Habsburg and the Ottoman forces got into the area. At the same time, the Habsburg monarchy and the German states reached an agreement so that Central Europe should stay neutral. Under these circumstances, the allies (Piedmont, France, Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire), were forced to attack in a place unsuitable for waging a battle, the Crimean Peninsula. After a year of fighting, the allied forces conquered the Sevastopol fortress, which led to the capitulation in August 1855 (Mehmet, 1976: 329).

During the siege, destructive battles took place, but the heaviest losses were caused by the hygiene conditions which brought about epidemics of typhus and cholera. The fall of Sevastopol, which was immediately followed by the death of the tsar Nicolae I, made his successor (Nicolae II) accept the negotiations. Having severe difficulties in defending its own territory, Russia was bound to sue for peace, Austria's role in resolving the conflict proved to be decisive; forgetting the service done by Russia during the revolution with Kossuth and fearing the tsar's domination of the Slavic population in the Balkans, Austria refused to support the tsar and came to an agreement with his opponents about the peace conditions.

Napoleon III considered that the time had come for him to put into practice his ideas regarding the organization of Europe and summoned the belligerents as well as other continental powers (Austria and Prussia) to the Congress in Paris which was held between 25 February and 8 April 1856 (Mazilu, 2006: 189-193).

The treaty of Paris, signed on 18/30 March 1856, granted a range of advantages to the Ottoman Empire and humiliated Russia (Mehmet, 1976: 331), though most of its provisions were to be infringed in the next quarter of century. The military defeat as well as the conditions for concluding peace represented a severe blow for the Tsar's Empire. From that moment onwards, Russia was compelled to focus its efforts on the internal reforms and not to venture again into the Balkans for the next 20 years. For the Porte, the most important stipulation of the treaty referred to the neutrality status of the Black

Sea. In order to guarantee the Ottoman safety and to protect the British interests, it was established that neither Russia, nor the Ottoman Empire were allowed to have warships in the waters of that sea or fortifications on its coasts. However the Turks were permitted to keep an operational fleet, standing in the Straits.

Three counties in the south of Bessarabia were given back to Moldova, a fact which excluded Russia from the riverside countries with access to the Danube. The treaty also brought the Danube Delta back under Ottoman control, a measure of great importance for Austria.

A series of stipulations proved to be detrimental to the Ottoman authority in the Balkans, though their implications were not apparent from the very beginning. Russia was asked to withdraw any claims on protecting the Balkan Christians, a fact which would allow the interference of those who had assumed the role of common guarantors. The problems also became complicated because some clauses of the agreement were contradictory. In Article no. 7, the signatories promised "to respect the independence and integrity of the Ottoman Empire territory". Regarding the Christian nationalities, the sultan sent to the great powers the text of a decree entitled "Hatt-i Humayun", through which the principle of equality between Muslims and non-Muslims was proclaimed (Vatikiotis, 1997: 217), and the Empire started some reforms with this end in view. The treaty article no. 9 stipulated the interdiction for the other powers to interfere, together or separately, with the relationship between the sultan and his subjects or with the internal administration of his empire (Jelavich, 2000: 254), a stipulation which was actually cancelling the previous Russian-Turkish treaties that had offered the tsars the possibility to intervene in favour of the Orthodox Christians in the Empire. These provisions brought about confusion and enabled the interference of the great powers in the crises that appeared between the sultan and his Christian subjects.

Through Paris Treaty, Great Britain obtained what it wanted: the guaranteeing, by means of the other powers, of the Ottoman Empire integrity.

Owing to its adroit political game, Austria got a considerable advantage-free navigation to the Mouths of the Danube, whose safety was ensured since 1857 by two inter-national commissions having their headquarters in Galați.

In principle, through its intervention, so expensive from a financial and a human point of a view, France obtained only moral advantages: above all, the implicit acknowledgement of its right to protect the Christians in the Ottoman Empire. But Napoleon III also attained two important advantages for the continuation of its European policy: a breach in the absolutist powers front as well as the position of guarantor of the emancipation effort of the European nationalities (Mazilu, 2006: 189-193). Abandoned by Austria during the war of the English and the French, Russia approached France from then on. The Tsar's Empire did not intervene when Austria, in conflict with France, lost a large part of its Italian territories (Salvatorelli, 1939: 590). He inaugurated a liberal and Francophile policy until the Polish revolt in 1863 as well as Napoleon III's sympathy with the Polish nation made him give up.

The Congress in Paris meant not only peace concluding after the Crimean war, but also the end of the Holy Alliance and the replacing of the "legitimacy principle" with that of the "European concert", promoted by France at the Congress in Vienna in 1815, also marking "the mingling of the means and methods of the open diplomacy with those of the secret diplomacy, with a view to attaining the desired strategic ends" (Mazilu, 2006: 193).

Though it had become apparent that certain problems could not be resolved by diplomatic way (Procacci, 1975: 341), the Paris Congress in 1856 set forth the problem of nationalities for the first time. Thus, the major goal of the national liberation movements in the Balkans was for the most part achieved at the end of the 19th century. A large part of this geo-political area was under the control of the native governments. The Ottoman domination was confined to Tracia, Macedonia, Epir and Albania. Turkey had no more any influence over the administration in Bosnia, Herzegovina and Bulgaria, though they were Ottoman possessions.

After the Congress in Paris, the Ottoman Empire started a new period of reforms which was to develop into a campaign of Turkish assimilation. The situation became complicated owing to a growing display of the interests of the neighbouring Great Powers that would exert pressure on the power void in the south-eastern Europe. Russia had shown its interest in the area ever since the 18th century, while immediately after the setting up of the Reich (1871), Germany also came into view. England and France disputed their influence within the Ottoman Empire, having claims also in this part of the European continent.

The southern Slavs issue and the agony of the dynastic empires in the south-eastern area enhanced the European existential crisis for the Turks, while for the Habsburgs it became a survival question. Through their reactions, both the Ottoman Empire and the Austrian-Hungarian Empire displayed their force of imperial people with dominant position (Turkish, Hungarians) combining the conservation and the modernization of their power structures with the assimilating nationalism conceived in the West. In the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish nationalism appeared as a reaction to the defeats suffered at the external level, to the revolts rising from the growing national movements at the internal level and also under the influence of the Western ideas. The new current, meant to be democratic - parliamentary, struggled for federalization and national homogenization under the pressure of the Turkish centralism (Avram, 2003: 59).

The consequences of this nationalism were apparent in the repression against the people who refused to be assimilated. The most dramatic conflicts were the revolts in 1862, the uprising in Herzegovina (1875), the national liberation movement of the Bulgarian people (1876) and the tense relations between the Romanian Principalities and Turkey.

But this dying empire did not lack renewing forces. The "Turkish young men" initially called the "New Ottomans" coming from the bourgeoisie, the intellectuals and the officers, wished to restore the power of the empire through modernization. As a reaction

to Panislamism, they wished to found a powerful state, based on a homogeneous nation, which they should transform into a real Commonwealth (Toynbee, 1954: 254).

Rising against the sultans' absolutism, "the Turkish young men" requested a series of changes in the political and social structure of the Turkish society, among which the ignoring of the differences between Muslims and the non-Muslims, with the purpose of preserving the integrity of the Ottoman Empire through weakening the subjected peoples' liberation struggle, as well as the great European powers interventions (Mehmet, 1976: 342-343). Though less categorically, they also asserted the supremacy of the Turkish element over the other nationalities of the empire, a reason for which their initiatives did not enjoy a large support from the component peoples of the empire.

Abdul Hamid II ascended the throne in 1876, in an empire torn by social and political contradictions and by consolidation efforts of various ethnic-religious groups. He witnessed two of his predecessors being removed as a result of palace revolts. At the beginning of his rule, the sultan showed fear and suspicion in the relationship with his counsellors and with the foreign representatives. At the moment of his ascension to the throne, Abdul had promised to institute a constitutional government though he did not trust that system. Immediately after ensuring his position, he dissolved the assembly and exiled the main reformers. Later, the sultan restored his autocratic powers and re-established the centralized government, which he considered the best solution for tackling the empire's problems. It was the palace, not the bureaucratic apparatus which became the centre of authority. The sultan personally took over the control and management of the state affairs. In spite of these methods, Abdul Hamid II was a reformer; he paid due attention to the territories administration and instituted an efficient centralized control (Avram, 2003: 60). The Constitution of 1876, which was in action only two years, emphasized the development and the application of the idea of "Ottomatism", the article no. 8 stipulating the principle that "all the citizens who are

subject to the Ottoman Empire, irrespective of the religion or sect they belong to, are called, without exception, *osmanlı* (Ottomans – our note)” (Mehmet, 1976: 341).

Despite all the serious territorial losses especially in Europe, at the crossing point between the centuries (19th-20th), the Ottoman Empire was still an important power, though the whole rule of Abdul Hamid II was marked by a series of military and diplomatic disasters. He was compelled to wage war with the Balkan states and with Russia during the first year after his taking the power. These events influenced his attitude towards powers and towards the people around him.

On 23 December 1876, the debates of the Conference in Constantinople began, for the purpose of discussing the new crisis of the “Oriental issue”, debates in which the Porte had accepted to participate so that it should avoid an interference with its internal affairs.

The Porte was faced with the great European powers’ proposals which referred to the dismemberment of the Empire by diplomatic means, the introduction of administrative, fiscal, military and judicial measures for the regions Bosnia, Herzegovina, Bulgaria, among which the designation of Christian governors for various periods of time and the making up of mixed commissions with the participation of the foreign powers, proposals that would have “totally annulled the prestige and sovereignty, the honesty and honour of our state” (Türkgeldi, 1957: 12). Consequently, the Porte chose to turn down those proposals assuming the risk of war. Putting forward the fact that “the refusal of the proposals compels us to take arms”, Russia declared war on the Porte on 12/24 April 1877. Being sure of Austria-Hungary’s neutrality in exchange for the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as of Romania’s support through concluding a convention for the Russian army’s passing through Romanian territory to the south of the Danube (14/26 April), Russia took advantage of this situation and tried to consolidate its political influence in the Balkans, shattered after the Crimean war.

The bombardment of the Romanian towns near the Danube by the Ottoman artillery set off the state of war between Romania and Turkey and on 10 May 1877 the Principality of Romania, officially under the Ottoman suzerainty, declared its independence. The conquest of the redoubts Grivița I, Grivița II and Opanez by the Romanian troops, as well as the fall of Plevna produced general panic among the Turkish political people and diplomats because this opened the allies the way to Constantinople. Some people proposed the government's moving to the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus, other considered the moving of the capital to Gallipoli, while another group hoped for England and France's help in exchange for the cession of the islands of Crete and Cyprus to the English and Egypt to the French, in order to preserve the regions called "the Ottoman Europe" (Türkgeldi, 1957: 36, 300). But, under the circumstances, the sacrificing of Egypt was unacceptable, for which reason the only way out of this situation was the acceptance of all of Russia's peace proposals.

The peace negotiations started with the truce of Adrianople and ended with the concluding of the Peace Treaty of San Stefano, signed on 3 March 1878, which represented "a really complete submission" of the Ottoman Empire, a fact that alarmed England and Austria-Hungary (Mehmet, 1976: 349). On the pretext of the infringement of the clauses in the Paris Treaty (1856) and London Convention (1871), the great western powers decided to organize the Congress in Berlin in order to manage to modify for their benefit a series of provisions of San Stefano Treaty.

The Congress of Berlin (15 June-13 July 1878) brought together the main European powers of that time - Germany, Great Britain, Austria-Hungary, France, Italy and Russia and the representatives of the Ottoman Empire. Romania was invited to the Congress in Berlin, but its representatives had only the right to make a declaration during the proceedings. The congress marked the settling of the conflict between the Tsar's Empire and the Ottoman one (1877-1878), having as main aim the Balkan states reorganization. It was Otto von Bismarck who tried to restore the balance between

the divergent interests – in this area – of the three great empires: British, Austro-Hungarian and Russian. The western powers were dissatisfied with the fact that, through the stipulations of the Russian-Turkish treaty of San Stefano, the Tsar's Empire had obtained a too large influence in the Eastern Europe. In contrast with the Russian-Turkish treaty, which specified the creation of an autonomous Bulgaria, that was actually and outpost of the Russians' interests in the Straits area, as well the Russian's right to intervene in all the affairs of the Christians in the Ottoman Empire, through Berlin Treaty the autonomous Principality of Bulgaria was diminished, by establishing the autonomous province Rumelia led by a Christian governor, appointed by the Porte. Austria-Hungary got the administration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while England received the island of Cyprus, as a result of an agreement with Turkey. Regarding the Romanian state, the provisions of San Stefano treaty were maintained. They recognized the independence of Romania and gave back to it Dobrogea, the Danube Delta and the Snakes' Island, but offered Russia the south of Basarabia (the counties of Cahul, Ismail and Bolgrad) (Oțetea, 1970: 432).

The decisions of the Berlin Congress in 1878 largely reduced the extent of the Ottoman territories in the Balkan Peninsula, confirming the process of political disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. But, as concerns the Balkan area, the flagrant breach of the Balkan peoples' interests by the great powers continued to maintain the acute conflicts of this area.

The end of the revolutionary epoch and the setting up of national regimes had not led to diminishing the seriousness of the problems of the Balkan social and economic life. In certain areas, the difficulties of the national liberty put into shade those of subordination to the Ottoman Empire. The major problem was the financial one, because the independent states were forced to bear the burden of the expenses for defence, internal administration and diplomatic representations which formerly were met by the Porte. Even if the Balkan regimes did not always function efficiently, at least progressive governmental institution had been introduced which

could serve as basis for a future improvement of the situation. There were national administrative systems which covered the area of the whole nation and provided safety and police services.

After 1878, the most part of the Balkan states enjoyed real liberty of action. The great powers could still force them to submit to their dictates, but the small nations sometimes managed to take advantage of the mutual envies and rivalries between the European governments. Apart from instituting the independent regimes, the Balkan state carried out the great transition from what was an Oriental or Ottoman way of life to one based on European models. This change occurred especially at the superior levels of the national life, radically changing along the century not only the international relations, the diplomatic methods and proceedings, but also the social structure, the property structure and, to a certain extent, mentalities. The rulers of the Balkan states became more and more familiar with the Western Europe and the elite began to wish that their capital cities look like Paris, Vienna and London etc.

By creating the independent states, the revolutionary principle of nationalities triumphed over the imperial one, at least in the case of the Ottoman Empire. But the nationalities principle was contaminated, especially in the south-eastern area of Europe, by the idea that the continuous development of a nation depended on possessing certain territories. The developing nations became marred by the habits of the former imperial conquerors. The Balkan society originated in the rural environment. Both the liberal and the democratic institutions were introduced progressively in the new states which determined the great majority of population made up of peasantry to get involved in the functioning of their social organization. The Balkan states would not have come into existence without the peasantry's revolutionary potential. After being set up, the states directed this potential to the performing of the national programmes, trying to exploit the discontent of the peasants from the other side of the imperial boundaries (Avram, 2003: 65).

Thus, the Balkans reached the highest level of their development within the limits of an old European political

organization originating in 1815 and of its evolution as a consequence of the Oriental issue. The gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire as well as the divergent interests of the great powers favoured the struggle for national emancipation in the area. Still, at the beginning of the World War I, the Balkan nations had not yet settled their territorial problems.

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