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The First Balkan Alliance (1860-1868) and the Bulgarians

The continuing existence of the Ottoman Empire after 1830 (when the autonomous Serbian state and the independent Greek state were established), together with the desire of the Balkan countries to liberate their unredeemed brethren still groaning under the Turkish yoke, formed the basic link in the collaboration between Greece and Serbia in the second half of the nineteenth century, as also among all the Balkan countries.

Those with the greatest interest in the fate of the Balkan peninsula in this period were, of course, the peoples who lived on it. But it was only natural that the Balkan peoples should rally around the Serbs and the Greeks, who had already established states of their own; even though one of those states, Serbia, had not gained full independence, and even though both were small and weak. But the Great Powers continued to take an interest in the Balkan peninsula and the Ottoman Empire, which is to say that they showed a concern that certainly could not rival the ideological and moral depth of that of the Balkan peoples. The Balkan peoples were the rightful heirs to European Turkey, but others had to decide whether they were worthy and when they would be worthy of winning that right. So at this time there were essentially three forces at work on the Balkan peninsula: the first was the Ottoman Empire, the second was the Balkan peoples, and the third was the Great Powers, who had to stand between the first two in order to maintain the fragile equilibrium in the Balkans. This was not always possible, because the Great Powers themselves were often engaged in rivalry with one another.

Within this system of fragile equilibrium, if they were to realize their national dreams the Balkan peoples had to exploit the rivalry among the Great Powers and win one or some of them over, the most powerful at least, and finally unite and act with one accord against the common foe, the Turkish conqueror. The unification of the Balkan peoples was the

crowning achievement of considerable efforts, made chiefly by the autonomous Serbian state. More specifically, Prince Michael Obrenović ascended the Serbian throne in September 1860, following the death of his father, Miloš. Obrenović *père* and *fils* had been restored to the leadership of Serbia in 1858 and their return meant that the Serbian government had adopted a genuinely dynamic policy, both at home and abroad, which manifested itself mainly during Michael's reign.

It must be stressed that Michael Obrenović's national programme mapped out Serbia's entire future domestic and foreign policy. The central axis of this national programme was war against the Ottoman Empire, for only by a military attack on Turkey could Serbia win its full independence, expand its territory, and liberate its unredeemed brethren. There were unredeemed Serbian brethren in the Habsburg Empire, of course, and they had not escaped the Serbian ruler's attention. But first and foremost was the question of war against the Turks. But before this war against Turkey began, Michael considered it necessary to deal with a number of issues: to abandon or abolish the Constitution of 1838 and thus concentrate all power in his own hands; to expel the Turkish garrisons from the Serbian towns, since their presence signified Serbian subjugation to the Turks; and lastly to unite all the Balkan peoples in an alliance against the Turkish oppressor.

Michael Obrenović's main support for his foreign policy came from Ilija Garašanin, who became foreign minister in 1861. Garašanin is regarded as the first Serbian statesman to have grasped the diplomatic problem that Serbia had to address. As foreign minister in 1843 under Prince Alexander Karageorgević, he had realized that it was not difficult for Serbia to liberate itself from Turkish dominion, because the Ottoman Empire was in decline; the problem was for Serbia to protect its independence against the two dangerous powers with direct interests in the Balkan Peninsula: Russia and Austria. Garašanin feared that Serbia's complete liberation from the Sultan's hegemony would automatically lead to dependence on Austria or Russia. As he saw it, Serbia could safeguard its independence only by creating a Balkan alliance; which is to say only if all the Balkan countries and all the peoples on the peninsula joined forces against the Ottoman Empire, and against Russia and Austria too. The Serbs and the Croats in the Habsburg Empire could also join in the alliance.

The Serbian efforts to create a Balkan alliance resulted in an alliance between Serbia and Montenegro in 1866; an agreement with the leaders of the Bulgarian revolutionary organizations early in 1867; the Greek-Serbian alliance of 4/26 August 1867; and a peace treaty with Romania early in 1868. These treaties all together led to a formation that has become established in the historical literature as the "First Balkan Alliance".

In November 1860, Michael Obrenović sent the Serbian writer and intellectual Vuk Karadžić to Cetinje, the capital of Montenegro, to make contact with the ethnarch, Nicholas, and ask him to take part in a joint plan to spread national propaganda among the unredeemed Slavs and to make military preparations, so that the two countries would be ready to take action against Turkey. And indeed, on 5 October 1866 the two countries signed a treaty of alliance¹.

Apart from its *démarches* towards Montenegro, Serbia was also in constant close contact with the Bulgarian national revolutionary movement. At this time Belgrade was regarded as one of the two main centres (the other being Bucharest) of the Bulgarian national revolutionary movement, from which centres Bulgarian intellectuals tried to rouse the national consciousness of the Bulgarian peasantry, who were oppressed by the Turks but at the same time owed spiritual allegiance to the Oecumenical Patriarchate in Constantinople².

Until 1863, the capital of the Serbian state was the seat of the revolutionary activity and above all of the Bulgarian ideologue Georgij Rakovski. He envisioned the liberation of the Bulgarian people from the Turks with the help of all the Balkan peoples and was in favour of establishing a Balkan alliance, which, naturally, ought to be under the leadership of Michael Obrenović. By and large, the Bulgarians' national leaders maintained friendly relations with Serbia and expected it to help

1. For a detailed account of the negotiations leading up to the alliance, see Grgur Jakšić and Vojislav Vučković, *Spolna Politika Srbije za vlade Kneza Mihaila. Prvi balkanski savez* (Serbian foreign policy under Prince Michael: the first Balkan alliance), Belgrade 1963, pp. 281 ff. The same volume also includes the text of the treaty, pp. 486-489, under the title *tajni govor* (secret treaty); L. S. Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation: History of the Movement toward Balkan Unity in Modern Times*, Archon Books, Hamden, Conn 1964.

2. The Bulgarian national movement found its expression both in the revolutionary struggle for liberation from the Turks and in liberating the Bulgarians from the hegemony of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

them in their struggle against the Turks, as Serbia was regarded as a brother state and had shown itself willing to act as protector of its Slav brethren. Rakovski was working in Belgrade to organize a Bulgarian legion and also, with the permission and assistance of the Serbian government, publishing political pamphlets and a newspaper for Bulgarian migrants, *Dunavski Lebed* (Swan of the Danube). Many Bulgarian fugitives found a safe refuge in Serbia and a number of Bulgarian students attended Serbian schools³.

Serbia included the Bulgarians in its plan to organize the southern Slavs into a single state and to create a Balkan alliance against Turkey, and this was why it tried to assist the Bulgarian national movement. It is nonetheless true that Michael Obrenović and Ilija Garašanin did not have high hopes of Bulgaria's participation in a concerted Balkan effort against the Turks, because the Bulgarian peasantry as a whole was passive, unorganized, and still immature from a national point of view. The Bulgarian national leaders were not in agreement about the mode of action to be adopted, and some of them actually courted the Sublime Porte⁴. By and large, it was not certain that the Bulgarian leaders represented the desire and the will of the entire Bulgarian people. A further reason why the Serbs hesitated to co-operate with the Bulgarians was the fact that most of the Bulgarian national leaders were under Russian influence. The Serbs were suspicious of Russia's interest in the Bulgarians, because, owing to its location near the Dardanelles, Russia, and most notably its Pan Slavist circles, favoured the creation of a Bulgarian state which would be under Russian influence and would serve as a bulwark against Austria's designs on the Balkan Peninsula⁵.

3. In 1863 Rakovski visited Athens to sound out the Greek government on the subject of the Balkan alliance and then to brief Michael Obrenović on the government's response. For Georgij Rakovski and his activities, see M. Laskaris, *To Ανατολικόν Ζήτημα*, pp. 256 ff.; L. S. Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation*, pp. 87-88.

4. In 1867, the secret Bulgarian central committee put to Sultan Abdul Aziz (1830-1874) the notion of the creation of a dual Turco-Bulgarian state, in which the sultan would also be tsar of the Bulgarians. Between 1866 and 1869 certain Bulgarian national leaders showed a clear tendency to collaborate with the Turks, a tendency that was connected with the Bulgarians' struggle to separate the Bulgarian Church from the Patriarchate of Constantinople (see L. S. Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation*, pp. 89-90).

5. For the Russian Pan Slavist movement and the actions of Pan Slavist circles in Slavonic circles, see Michael B. Petrovich, *The Emergence of Russian Pan Slavism (1856-1870)*, New

But for all its reservations, in this period and especially after 1866, in the spirit of its desire to create a Balkan alliance, Serbia made contact and forged links with the Bulgarian revolutionary circles. Early in 1867, the Bulgarian revolutionary organization that was active in Bucharest under the name of the "Benevolent Society" approached Serbia with a view to collaboration. Its members were known for their Panslavist views and believed that the Balkan peoples could win their freedom with Russia's help. So, urged on by Russia, on 27 January 1867 the Benevolent Society presented the Serbian government with a draft agreement, titled "Programme for Serbo-Bulgarian political relations; or: cordial agreement between them" (*Program političkog odnosa Srbobugaru-Bugarosrbe ili njihov srdačun sporazum*) and proposed setting up a Serbo-Bulgarian state headed by the Serbian Prince Michael. The agreement did not define the borders of the new state, but went into some detail regarding its organization. There was to be a common government, common legislation, a common army, and a common capital. It also mentioned that the national religion would be Orthodox Christianity, while stressing the need for an independent patriarch of the Serbo-Bulgarian Church. The Serbian government accepted the programme; but Garašanin questioned whether it was generally accepted by the Bulgarian people or whether the proposal came only from a small group of Bulgarian patriots⁶.

Being in a hurry to have a formal treaty signed with Serbia, the Bulgarian organization convened a kind of national assembly in Bucharest. It consisted of some eighty representatives from all parts of Bulgaria and its resolutions supposedly reflected the will of the entire Bulgarian people. On 17 April 1867, the assembly adopted a programme that became known as the "protocol"⁷. It made no mention of the creation of a Serbo-Bulgarian state, but proposed that Bulgaria and Serbia would unite and form a single state under the official name of the "Yugoslav [i.e. South Slavonic] Empire". Its importance, however, lay in the fact that it clearly defined the territories that would constitute

York 1958, *passim*. Regarding the Greek-language literature, the reader will find details in M. Laskaris, *Το Ανατολικόν Ζήτημα*, pp. 228-245.

6. For the negotiations between the Benevolent Society and Serbia, see Jakšić & Vučković, *Spolna Politika Srbije*, pp. 363 ff.

7. See Jakšić & Vučković, *op.cit.*, pp. 505-506, for the text of the protocol.

Bulgaria; and those territories were, quite simply, those that constitute present-day Bulgaria, Thrace, and Macedonia. This was the first time that Bulgarian aspirations in areas to which Greece had a claim were expressed clearly and officially. So we can say that the rivalry among the Balkan peoples had already come out into the open.

Garašanin accepted the Bulgarian protocol in a letter written on 3 June 1867; however, he diplomatically refused to sign the agreement with the Bulgarian organization on the grounds that it could not be confirmed just how representative the assembly had been⁸. I am inclined to believe that Garašanin was reluctant to commit himself by signing an official agreement with the Bulgarians, because he knew that Greece—with which he was already conducting negotiations—was laying claim to the areas in question.

The first Balkan alliance (1860-1868) failed to help the peoples of the peninsula to realize their national dream. But this came about in 1912, with the so-called Balkan alliance of 1912.

8. L. S. Stavrianos reproduces Garašanin's reply to the Benevolent Society in *Balkan Federation*, p. 94.