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Modernization Mixed with Nationalism

Abstract: This essay reflects on a particular manner in which modernisation have taken place in the Balkans in modern history, from the 1878 Berlin Congress onwards. The Balkan countries faced twofold difficulties in their development: they had to overcome their backwardness stemming from the centuries of the Ottoman yoke and catch up with modern Western Europe, and resolve their numerous mutual territorial and political disputes. The latter task was especially difficult due to the constant interference in Balkan affairs on the part of Great Powers. This interference further aggravated nationalistic tensions between the Balkan states. The peculiar mixture of modernisation efforts and nationalism remains to this day when the entire region strives to join the European Union.

Keywords: modernisation, nationalism, Balkans, Serbia, Yugoslavia, Europe

It is rather difficult to find a region in Europe which has seen so many conflicts, redrawing of borders, ethnic and political changes as the Balkans has. Plans for different re-arrangements of the Balkans have been even more numerous.[1] That is hardly surprising: these occurrences were provoked by the proverbial Balkan fragmentation.

The conflict-prone nature of the Balkans was particularly conspicuous during the nineteenth and early twentieth century when independent national states were formed and then tried to extend their borders in accordance with what was very broadly-conceived as ethnic territory. Contrary to West Europe, the process of national delimitation has never been fully completed.

Great Power interference with the relations in the Balkans played considerable role in facilitating national tensions. In fact, ethnic fragmentation and plethora of territorial disputes stemmed from such interference. The rival national programmes of Balkan states clashed one with another and, in parallel, had to overcome the centuries of backwardness. In the wake of the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the majority of Balkan states regained their independence after a long period of time while Bulgaria was granted an autonomous status within the Ottoman Empire.

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[1] See more in *Balkany v evropeĭskikh politicheskikh proektakh XIX–XXI vv*, eds. Ritta P. Grishina, Konstantin V. Nikiforov & Galina V. Lobacheva (Moscow: Institut slavjanovedenija RAN, 2014).

Figuratively speaking, these countries came back to Europe after having been taken into Asia following the Ottoman conquests. Nonetheless, it was not enough to make a formal come-back; it was necessary to return to Europe in a real sense of that word which meant to Europeanise all the aspects of a largely patriarchal way of life; it was necessary to turn the people into true Europeans in a socio-cultural sense of that word. Therefore, modernisation (or Europeanization) became an essential idea for the Balkan states in the period from the Berlin Congress to the Great War. For the developing countries, there was no more actual or pressing task.

The period from the 1878 Berlin Congress to the First World War in 1914 was that of the so-called "first globalisation". It seemed that new opportunities opened for the Balkan states. Yet, neither European nor Balkan states seized that chance. The Balkan countries became "poor cousins" of the Western world and, moreover, were threatened to become dependent again, but this time dependent on European states rather than the Ottoman Empire. In case of Serbia, the danger came from Austria-Hungary. Incidentally, it was then that the Balkans was dubbed a "powder keg in Europe". Instead of the expected era of prosperity, the world slipped into international conflict.

It can never be stressed enough that the history of Balkan nations in the real sense of that word started only after the Berlin Treaty. And it was compressed in thirty-six years — until the outbreak of the First World War. And the Balkan countries had a great deal of things to accomplish in the field of modernisation over those thirty-six years. This period is sharply divided in two phases: a relatively calm first phase which ended around the coup d'état in Serbia in 1903 or slightly afterwards and the second phase which led to the tumultuous war years.

The decisions reached at the Berlin Congress remained in full force until the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913, but some of its terms had been questioned much earlier. In 1885, Bulgaria was unified and then the Serbo-Bulgarian war broke out. In 1896–1897, there was the uprising on the Island of Crete which escalated into the Greco-Ottoman war.[2] In 1908, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina and thus initiated yet another Great Power-induced redrawing of the Balkans.

It has long been noted that the growing influence of Serbian officer corps, the increasing prestige of a military career and the partial militarisation of Serbian politics constituted an important feature of modernisation in Serbia. This aspect has always been actual and one of the most significant

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[2] For more details see Olga V. Sokolovskaia, *Velikiǐ ostrov Sredizemnomor'ia, Gretsiia i mirotvorcheskaia Evropa. 1897–1909 gg.: K 100-letiiu prisoedineniia Krita k Gretsii* (Moskva: Institut slavjanovedenija RAN, 2013).

for Serbian historiography. It was associated with the problem of the incomplete social structure of Serbian society. In a certain phase of the country's development senior officer corps tried to fill the void caused by the lack of a hereditary elite which had been annihilated in Serbia, and some other Balkan countries, after the Ottoman conquest. The sole exception in the Balkans in this respect was the "boyar Romania" due to its distance from Constantinople. Some Serbian historians present army officers as a substitute to the "middle class" of Serbian society.[3]

The result was that the army rather than state apparatus, clerks, political parties and partially intelligentsia became one of the pillars of, and at the same time a limited threat to, the Serbian democratic regime. This exaggerated role of Serbian officer corps persisted from 1903 until the Salonica trial in 1917 and the execution of Colonel Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis, the unofficial leader of the clandestine officer organisation "Black Hand".

Nevertheless, Serbian officers continued to play a political role in their country's history. This was the case with the royalist anti-fascist movement of General Dragoljub Draža Mihailović in the Second World War, the attempts of the post-Titoist Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) leadership to prevent the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation in the early 1990s, and finally, the emergence of the special intelligence services on the political scene towards the end of Slobodan Milošević's rule in the Federal republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

The increasing influence of the military in Serbia following the May 1903 coup was not a random and isolated occurrence in the Balkans. In 1908, the pan-Greek Military League was formed while at the same time the Young Turk revolution took place in the Ottoman Empire executed by junior officers. Therefore, militarisation was a regional process.[4]

The Serbian modernisation remains a matter of lively debate in both Serbian and Russian historiography. It centres on the extent of Europeanization, the extent to which Serbia was prepared to adopt European values. Occasionally, this discussion becomes rather strange when its participants persistently point out the obvious - they "knock at the open door". It is crystal clear that Serbia was far from "a modern European state" at the beginning of the twentieth century with regard to infrastructure and industrialisation. However, that cannot be a reason for criticising Serbian politicians

[3] Cf. Dušan T. Bataković, "La Main Noire (1911–1917): l'armée serbe entre démocratie et autoritarisme", *Revue d'histoire diplomatique*, No 2, Paris 1998, 95–144.

[4] Dimitrije Djordjević, "The Role of the Military in the Balkans in the Nineteenth Century", in *Der Berliner Kongress von 1878. Die Politik der Grossmächte und die Probleme der Modernisierung in Südosteuropa in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts,* eds. Ralph Melville & Hans-Jürgen Schröder (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1982), 317–347.

because they embraced French-inspired doctrines (liberalism and radicalism), constitutional monarchy, parliamentary system and other European political institutions.[5]

The speed and extent of political reforms remain a matter of polemics. The avoidance of reform implementation had grave consequences. The policy of Milan Obrenović serves as an ample illustration of this rule. However, the Balkan rulers often *de facto* carried out more consistent policy of modernisation than some of their predecessors. They often merged a policy of modernisation with nationalist slogans under which, in fact, the struggle against previous modernisation efforts started. It was important to give modernisation a form that was apprehensible and acceptable to the people at large.

The period from the Berlin Congress to the First World War has lately been drawing a lot of attention. The books of Russian scholars A. L. Shemyakin, A. J. Timofejev, IA. V. Vishniakov, P. A. Iskenderov[6] no doubt expanded our knowledge and understanding of the complex processes that took place in the Balkans in the early twentieth century.

Finally, the choice of a road to civilisation often in practice meant the choice between pro-western (in case of Serbia pro-Austrian) and pro-Russian course. A. L. Pogodin has noted a remarkable contrast in the life of Serbs between "European taste of a few […] and the deep-rooted affection for Russia among the mass [of people]".[7] A similar situation exists even today.[8]

There was also a matter of Balkan territorial issues. Those have been resolved in various manners but mostly in a traditional way — by war. It is sufficient to observe that the twentieth century saw the two Balkan Wars,

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[5] More on French influence in pre-1914 Serbia: Dušan T. Bataković, *Les sources françaises de la démocratie serbe: 1804–1914* (Paris: CNRS, 2013).

[6] *Russkie o Serbii i serbah*. T. I. *Pis'ma, stat'i, memuary*, ed. Andrej L. Shemjakin (Saint Petersburg: Aletejja, 2006); *Russkie o Serbii i serbah*. T. II. *Arhivnye svidetel'stva*, ed. Andrej L. Shemjakin (Moscow: Indrik, 2014); Aleksandr Ĭ. Timofeev, *Krest, kinzhal i kniga. Staraja Serbija v politike Belgrada 1878–1912 gg* (Saint Petersburg: Aletejja, 2007); Jaroslav V. Vishnjakov, *Voennyj faktor i gosudarstvennoe razvitie Serbii nachala XX veka* (Moscow: MGIMO-Universitet, 2012); Petr A. Iskenderov, *Serbiia, Chernogoriia i albanskiĭ vopros v nachale XX veka* (Saint Petersburg: Aletejja, 2013).

[7] Aleksandr L. Pogodin, *Istorija Serbii i Chernogorii, Bosnija, Gercegovina, Makedonija, Slovenija, Horvatija* (Moscow: Monolit-Evrolinc-Tradicija, 2002), 205.

[8] Dejan Mirović, *Zapad ili Rusija* (Belgrade: IGAM, 2004)*; Srbi o Rusiji i Rusima. Od Elizavete Petrovne do Vladimira Putina (1750–2010). Antologija*, ed. Miroslav Jovanović (Belgrade: Pravoslavni bogoslovski fakultet, Institut za teološka istraživanja & Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2011).

two World Wars and a series of civil wars during the 1990s often referred to as the Wars of the Yugoslav succession.

The Balkan Wars, the first one in particular, had a special place in the re-arrangement of South-East Europe. It was something of an East-European Reconquista which pushed the Ottoman Empire and Muslim and Ottoman population back to Asia. The small Balkan states made a common stand on their own volition for the first time in history rather than acting in support of Great Powers agenda. The Balkan allies were even termed "the seventh Great Power". Their alliance, however, did not last for long. The division of spoils ended in new conflicts. Just like the struggle against the Moors did not spare the Christian kingdoms from fighting each other, the expulsion of the Ottomans was accompanied by conflicts between the new Balkan states over the former Ottoman possessions.[9]

The Balkan Wars "constituted chronologically the second, but equally important, phase of establishing the Balkan national states" — the Berlin Congress of 1878 being the first phase.[10] The Eastern Question which had been on the European agenda from the end of the seventeenth century — the complex knot of international conflicts over the territories of the declining Ottoman Empire - was also brought to a close. Imperial Russia remained deprived of the ardently desired "keys of its own house", the control over the Black Sea bays and Constantinople.

The demise of the multinational Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empire after the First World War led to formation of new national states instead of them, a consequence of then modern slogan of national self-determination. However, the Versailles peace settlement based on that principle did not extinguish a multitude of national disputes. The newly-established borders did eliminate a lot of the old disagreements, but they also gave birth to new ones. Moreover, all the Balkan states had their own dissatisfied minorities.

Nearly all the Balkan countries faced national disasters in the early twentieth century. The Ottomans lost their European lands and then their Empire collapsed. Bulgaria was bitterly disappointed twice — after the Second Balkan and the First World War. Serbia lost her outlet to the sea in 1913 and survived her own Calvary during the First World War. Macedonia remained divided. In the wake of the First World War, Greece suffered "Asia

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[9] *V "porohovom pogrebe Evropy". 1878–1914*, ed. Vladilen N. Vinogradov (Moscow: Indrik, 2003).

[10] Artem A. Ulunjan, "Opyt nevrazhdebnogo istoriopisanija: Balkanskie vojny v kontekste "novoj istoriografii regiona"", in: *Modernizacija vs vojna. Chelovek na Balkanah nakanune i vo vremja Balkanskih vojn (1912–1913)*, eds. Ritta P. Grishina & Andrej L. Shemjakin (Moscow: Institut slavjanovedenija RAN, 2012), 48.

Minor disaster", the defeat of the Greek army in the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1921). The sole exception was the Carpatho-Balkanic Romania.

Following the Second World War, there was a rising interest in different forms of a union between the Balkan countries. In particular, one of the most famous projects for the re-arrangement of South-East Europe was the plan to form the so-called Balkan (Danube) federation.[11] Its realisation never got off the ground. In the Balkans, and across the entire Eastern Europe, the states became even more monolith in terms of their ethnic composition.

As a result of the expulsion at the end of the Second World War, the ten million strong German community in Eastern Europe ceased to exist. The instrumentalisation of German national minorities abroad for the purpose of disrupting the countries in which they lived on the part of Nazi Germany undermined the general position of national minorities in the long run. The world directed its attention to protection of individual human rights. The protection of universal human rights was considered sufficient for the protection of all, national minorities and small ethnic groups included.

In the 1990s, when the Yugoslav crisis erupted, it became obvious that this was not the case: the collective rights of ethnic groups separated from the main body of their nation were also in need of protection. Incidentally, the break-up of communist Yugoslavia turned into another Serbian national disaster.

From the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century the solution of Balkan territorial and national disputes was often envisaged in the formation of larger multinational states which would digest not just different nations, but also their territorial conflicts. Yugoslavia was the best example of that whereas numerous schemes for Balkan (Danube) federation were never realised. The end of the twentieth century witnessed the diametrical opposition to such tendency. In order to resolve national conflicts in multinational states, these states were disintegrated.

The problems of Balkan modernisation did not disappear following the two World Wars. After the Great War, modernisation was still modelled on the western patterns and it continued to lag behind with the result that the gap separating the Balkan from developed countries did not decrease. After the Second World War all the states (with the exception of Greece) underwent the cantering, and now alternative, modernisation which trod on the path of socialism. Yugoslavia endeavoured to find another model of

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[11] *Cf* more in: *The Balkans in the Cold War: Balkan Federations, Cominform, Yugoslav-Soviet Conflict*, ed. Vojislav G. Pavlović (Belgrade: Institute for Balkan Studies, Serbian academy of Sciences and Arts, 2012).

an alternative modernisation through the so-called self-management. And once again, the initial success turned into failure at the end of the road. Besides, that failure was followed by the rise of nationalism in all Balkan countries and, in fact, nationalism became an alternative to communism. Today the Balkan countries again undergo an imitating and cantering modernisation.

It is important to remind oneself of the cyclicality of Serbian (Yugoslav) history. It was particularly visible in the attempts to solve the most complex national question in the Balkans. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia, it could be safely said, tried to apply all the variations of internal policy, from unitary state to federalism in 1939 when the Croatian lands (two previous *banovinas*) formed the *Banovina* of Croatia. Seeking its own solution of the national question, "the second", Tito's communist Yugoslavia traversed much the same path as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia — from formally federal, but essentially unitary, state composition on the pattern of that in the Soviet Union to *de facto* confederal one as defined in the 1974 Constitution. And the outcome was much the same.

The main characteristic of Yugoslavia's self-management reforms was the fact that it coupled economy and ethnic relations. One affected the other and sometimes accelerated and other times slowed down the overall pace of reforms. Relative democratisation of social life cleared the ground for economic development. However, it produced entirely different results in the field of ethnic relations since it was primarily understood as a decentralisation of the state and loosening of federal ties. Rather than harmonising ethnic relations decentralisation brought about growing nationalism in all the Yugoslav federal units (republics) and all spheres of public life, and increasing tensions between the Yugoslav nations. When those tensions reached their zenith, Yugoslavia broke up.[12]

Today nearly all Balkan countries belong to or endeavour to join the European Union (to "come back to Europe" again). This is again facilitated by the globalising world. Nevertheless, the European project has not put an end to numerous Balkan disputes. To say the least, the Serbian, Macedonian and Albanian national questions remain unsolved. Some old differences like the Greco-Turkish one have not been removed either. The unifying Euro-Atlantic idea in the Balkans is challenged by some other ideas as, for example, the pan-Slav, which is currently not in the forefront, or, contrary to it and growing in strength, the pan-Turkish one (as part of the more global pan-Islamic idea).

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[12] *IUgoslaviia v XX veke. Ocherki politicheskoĭ istorii*, ed. Konstantin V. Nikiforov (Moscow: Indrik, 2011).

The Balkans remains to be a volatile and rather under-developed region of Europe. The Balkans population suffer the most on that account. The accomplishment of their dream of a peaceful and comfortable life seems not to lay in a new, if voluntary, submission to "European Empire" this time, but rather in the realisation of a still actual slogan "Balkan for the Balkan peoples". At the moment, this appears somewhat utopian, but who knows what tomorrow will hold in store? The Balkan history continues no matter what.

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