FOREIGN POLICY OF AUSTRIA-HUNGARY TOWARDS THE BALKAN COUNTRIES IN THE SECOND HALF OF 19th CENTURY

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CONCLUSION

The 19th century in the Balkans was dominated by the rise of nations and clashes of great interests and rivalries over the area. In this context of interdependence between the two factors, each had its own specificity, yet the main weight remained with the domestic Balkan factors. The European factor in the Balkans, including Austria-Hungary, has had undisputed interests especially against Ottoman holdings in the European part. In many cases, the major European powers stood behind conflicts in this area, and in order to achieve their goals they not only encouraged disputes between the Balkan people and their Ottoman rulers, but also among Balkan states or nations themselves.

The situation of uncertainty that prevailed initially in Southeast Europe created the opportunity for intellectual elites of the Balkan peoples to process projects for a greater Greece, greater Serbia, greater Bulgaria, etc. The Great Powers, by exploiting the ethno-nationalistic ideas of local elites in accordance with their geopolitical, religious and other motives and interests, supported their own satellites. Namely, Russia supported the creation of a greater Bulgaria and a greater Serbia, while England that of a greater Greece and France that of a greater Serbia.

In the second half of the 19th century alongside other Great European Powers stood the double-crowned monarchy of Austria-Hungary. The recognition of politics followed by Austria-Hungary at the time (almost similar to the policy followed by other Great Powers with a direct interest in the fate of Ottoman holdings) enables us to conclude that the attitudes and actions of “great” chanceries of Europe were a prevailing factor in determining the fate of the Balkan peoples. Not all the Great Powers expressed the same interest in the Balkans during the second half of the 19th century. Directly interested to devour as much from the Ottoman dominions and to ensure the most favorable position against rival powers were Russia, Austria-Hungary and later Italy.

The rivalry between the great powers was noticed in the field but was mostly present in international diplomatic forums, conferences and conventions. So great was the role of these international forums that often their main documents would decide on the independence of new Balkan states, which in many cases were more likely to lie within boundaries presenting the interests of one or another of Great Powers, including their political, economic and military aspirations, than the interests of the people who shared those demarcation lines.
The Austro-Hungarian policy in the Balkans was antagonistic from its onset to the Russian one, and later would face the rivalry of Italian politics in the Adriatic. The great influence of historical processes taking place inside multiethnic empires such as the Ottoman and the Austro-Hungarian Empire itself also determined the foreign policy of the latter. The emergency of ethnic groups that developed their national awareness showed that supranational empires were being mined from within.

Austria-Hungary had an ambivalent attitude in its foreign policy towards the Balkans during the second half of the 19th century, which often depended on the attitudes of the other Great Powers. Even the first serious project of the Great Powers for the division of Southeast Europe, the 1807 Tilzit project that affirmed Austria’s ownership over Bosnia and Serbia, alerted Vienna that it would have to accomplish its objectives in the area not only through rivalry but also in alliance with other Great Powers of the time. While Vienna’s objectives for the Balkans, such as the occupation of Bosnia-Herzegovina, the support for the new states to be created and the open passage to Thessaloniki to enable an access to the Mediterranean Sea were clearly defined, their implementation was hardly clear. Austria-Hungary attempted for a while to maintain the status quo in the Balkans and act when it could to intervene actively in solving the Eastern Question. This was also due the fact that Austria-Hungary in the second half of the 19th century was unable to prevent the flow of events in the Balkans, and therefore saw it fit to cooperate with other Great Powers to achieve its own goals. It even entered negotiations for cooperation with the Balkan countries and peoples.

In the early 1850's, Austria was found in a position that is nicely summed up by its Secretary of Interior, Count Buol, “We are trying to reconcile all parties, and above all, to avoid a European complication which would be particularly harmful for us.” The Austro-Hungarian stance after the Crimean war was a conservative one, as it almost required acknowledging a pre-war state. The aftermath of Crimea showed that Vienna had given up on the position of neutrality when considering its stance towards the Russian policy in the Balkans. Furthermore, the aftermath of Crimea showed that Austria-Hungary, which had entered the race between the Great Powers, was not likely to emerge victorious.

The defeat from Prussia in 1866 obliged Austria-Hungary to revise its foreign policy, and give up on its Western interests, especially in Germany. Ballplatz remained under constant pressure from military circles to channel the foreign policy towards expanding in the Balkan Peninsula. This orientation of Vienna's foreign policy aroused reactions not only among its direct rivals in the Balkans, such as Russia and Italy, but also among nationalist circles of the Balkan countries intending to expand at the expense of their neighbors'
territories. Such was the case of Serbia, which among others aimed to expand over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Despite these Serbian goals, the Viennese diplomacy did not rule out cooperating with Serbia, but the circumstances brought about by the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 impacted the demise of the Austro-Serbian political combinations.

In the 1870’s Germany joined the ranks of the Great Powers and as a powerful Empire dictated its will over the international events. The most immediate intentions of Germany were to distort the global hegemony held by England and France. Surely, the Viennese diplomacy did not delay in signing a treaty with Germany, thinking it would help the separation of spheres of interest over the Eastern Question. Furthermore, in 1873 the two Great Powers of Central Europe signed the Alliance of the Three Emperors with Russia. On the other hand, Vienna continued bilateral talks with Petersburg for the signing of joint agreements or treaties, both overt and covert, aiming to divide the Balkans into two zones of influence. Both powers, now with the consent of Germany, agreed not to intervene militarily for or against the Ottoman Empire.

Even in its edition of the last quarter of 19th century the Eastern Crisis focused on the liberation of the Balkan peoples from the Ottoman rule. Austria-Hungary continued to be one of the Great Powers that was most concerned in the regional developments. The outbreak of the uprising in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the summer of 1876, the declaration of war against the Ottoman Empire by Serbia and Montenegro a year later, the outbreak of the Bulgarian uprising which was fiercely oppressed, set Russia in motion, while Austria-Hungary continued to show doubts over its position of maintaining the status quo, and it was not difficult to envisage what it would willingly accept any changes, as long as it got “its own share”. This is confirmed by the 1876 Reichstadt Agreement with Russia, the secret 1877 Austria-Russia Budapest Agreement after the failure of December 1876 Istanbul Conference, etc.

The event that would shake the European diplomacy of the Great Powers, especially that of England and Austria-Hungary, was the Saint Stefan peace, a result of the Russia’s pressure on the Ottoman Empire after defeating it at war. Decisions of the Saint Stefan Treaty were considered unacceptable, and so the Great Powers, and among them Austria-Hungary, asked for their review, which is why on June 13, 1878 the Berlin Congress assembled, bringing together the six European Great Powers and the Ottoman Empire. Austria-Hungary, together with England and Russia, emerged from this congress with territorial gains after having won the right to temporarily occupy Bosnia-Herzegovina.
After the Berlin Congress, the foreign policy of Austria-Hungary was played in the framework of “the Alliance of Three Emperors” (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia), a treaty that in addition to recognizing the right of Austria-Hungary to annex Bosnia-Herzegovina at any time it saw it fit, also asked from Vienna in return not to oppose the potential unification of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia. It should be noted that through this Treaty the German diplomacy that was an important factor in the decisions of the Great Powers, aimed to preserve as normal relations between Austria-Hungary and Russia as possible.

The gains of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans forced Serbia to rethink its aims towards the North and focus more towards the south. A treaty was even signed between Austria-Hungary and Serbia in June 1881, according to which Austria-Hungary would not just recognize any possible gains of Serbia beyond its southern borders, but also help the latter with the Great Powers for a stance in its favor. As proven by subsequent events, Austria-Hungary and Serbian alliance could not be successful because Nachertania, which led the Serbian politics, was essentially a union of all lands inhabited by southern Slavs into a single state under the hegemony of Serbia, which meant detachment of possessions from the Dual Monarchy.

Even in the last two decades of the 19th century, apart from Russia, Austria-Hungary was the other power that had immediate interests in the Balkans. At the time, Italy emerged along with these two European protagonists. Although Austria-Hungary did not hesitate to involve Italy in May 1882, in the Tripartite Alliance (the third party being Germany), Vienna representatives were quick to notify the Italian party that while they would not hinder a expansion of Italian influence in the Mediterranean, Italy on the other hand should not affect the status quo in the Adriatic. The year 1887 saw an extension of the Tripartite Alliance for another 5 years, during which period Austria-Hungary accepted Italy as an equal partner in the Balkans, even considering the possibility of changing the borders in the Ottoman area of the peninsula by considering a permanent or temporary agreed invasion of the two powers. The Albanian issue had an ever-stronger effect in the relations between Austria-Hungary and Italy. The end of the 19th century saw Vienna consider having a clearly defined platform in its policy towards the Albanian issue.

Surely, Austria-Hungary could not accept the emergence of Serbia on the eastern shores of the Adriatic, or the control of Italy over the same sea by jeopardizing Dalmatia. Ballplatz, in its interest of composing the Balkans map, had concluded that Austria-Hungary possessed territorial benefits over Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandzak (without Novi Pazar), without
detracting the attention from the Albanian issue. Regarding the latter, it held that Albania
would be organized as an independent state with Shkodra and Ohri Lake within its borders,
but regretted that Durres and Valona would go to Austria-Hungary.

Evident even in the 1890’s is that the Viennese diplomacy achieved its objectives in the
Balkans in agreement with Russia, without forgetting the differences between them when it
came to Bosnia-Herzegovina or the Albanian issue. Vienna’s rapprochement with Russia
caused resentment in Rome, and therefore, to settle their disputes, Vienna and Rome signed
the Monza Agreement in 1897, pledging to maintain the status quo in the Balkans. Despite
the agreements or the rivalries of the Great Powers in the second half of the 19th century over
the Balkans, the beginning of the next century further expanded the disputes and conflicts
between them. The Austro-Hungarian policy towards the Balkans had its significant impact
on the future of the Ottoman possessions in the peninsula, and played an irreplaceable role in
bringing about an accelerated end of the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empires.