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FEDERALISM IN THE ERA OF NATIONALISM: WEST EUROPEAN PROPOSALS FOR BALKAN POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

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Abstract:

This paper examines the idea of political unification in the form of a Balkan federation which originated in Western Europe in the era of nationalism. It was introduced as one of the options for settling the Eastern Question at the onset of the 19th century, after the anticipated Ottoman withdrawal from its European territories, but in effect had very little impact and no practical significance. Expressed by a few individuals -diplomats, intellectuals, publicists and revolutionaries- at different times and under different circumstances, federal proposals were of a general and somewhat vague nature rather than consisting of detailed and realistic designs that could be implemented. Besides, there was never any real political influence, nor was this prospect taken into any serious account as having the capacity to form a realistic policy in shaping the political future of Eastern and Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: Federalism, federal plans, Balkans, Western Europe, Eastern Question

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the notion of federalism, which has emerged as a key issue in our era of globalization. Despite criticisms, federalization still figures as the optimal political solution to confront national antagonisms, ethnic conflicts, minority problems etc. both in Europe and worldwide. A characteristic case is the ‘experiment’ of the European Union to accomplish political unification on a federal basis in spite of difficulties and strong challenges. In this context my contribution discusses federal plans for Balkan political reorganization after the anticipated Ottoman withdrawal from its European provinces. Bearing in mind that the topic is too broad to be dealt with by a single author within the limited space

of an article, I focus on some indicative proposals which initiated in Western Europe in the course of the 19th century¹.

The Idea of Federation and the Eastern Question

The Europeans never could tolerate the idea that an empire of infidels had the sovereignty of lands that belonged to a predominantly Christian continent. For a very long time, however, there was no European leader powerful enough to contest against the victorious Ottoman army on the battlefield; while the organization of a joint campaign, as had occurred in earlier times with the crusades, proved a totally impossible feat. Thus, the European royal courts were forced to acknowledge the Sultan as a political and economic associate and entered into treaties and alliances with the sultanate to endorse their interests in the East². At the same time, however, the expulsion of the Ottomans from Europe remained a continuing quest. The attempts to achieve this through military operations date back to at least the late 16th century with the Naval Battle of Lepanto in 1571. European aggression, which was certainly encouraged by the gradual weakening of the Ottoman power, continued in the following centuries with the Austro-Turkish and Russo-Turkish wars, as well as the French military operations in the Balkans and the East at the beginning of the 19th century. This is basically how the thorny and complicated Eastern Question arose, which essentially was about determining the political state of affairs in Southeast Europe after the anticipated decline or collapse of the Ottomans³. The issue triggered intense European competition, which was accompanied by a number of initiatives and various scenarios -both formal and informal- for the future status of the contested territories.

Within this context, various arrangements and designs were put forward throughout the 19th century. Those that aimed to divide and rule the European territories of the Ottoman empire were difficult to implement, because not only were they contrary to the generally

¹ Federalism in 19th century Eastern Europe is an understudied topic. The most detailed study on the issue is the classic book by L. S. Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation. A History of the Movement toward Balkan Unity in Modern Times*, Hamden, Connecticut, Archon Books, 1964. See also: D. Djordjević, Projects for the Federation of South-East Europe in the 1860's and 1870's, *Balkanica* 1970, N 1, pp. 119-145; V. Todorov, *Greek Federalism during the nineteenth century (ideas and projects)*, East European Monographs, New York, Boulder, 1995; L. Chasiotis, *Η Ανατολική Ομοσπονδία: Δύο Ελληνικές Φεντεραλιστικές Κινήσεις του 19^{ου} αιώνα*, Thessaloniki, Vantias, 2001; *The Balkan Socialist Tradition and the Balkan Federation, 1871-1915*, Revolutionary History, Volume 8, no 3, London, Porcupine Press, 2003.

² G. Hering, *Οικουμενικό Πατριαρχείο και Ευρωπαϊκή Πολιτική 1620-1638*, (Transl. into Greek D. Kourtovik), Athens, MIET, 2003, pp. 17-18.

³ On the Eastern Question see Edouard Driault's classic study, *Το Ανατολικό Ζήτημα. Από τις αρχές του έως τη συνθήκη των Σεβρών*, Volumes one and two (Transl. into Greek by Lina Stamatiadis), Athens, Istoritis/Katoptro, 1997 and 2000, respectively.

accepted principle of not upsetting the balance of power⁴, but also because they went counter to the efforts of the Balkan peoples to gain independent political status⁵. Another option, which also proved unfeasible, concerned plans for a future Balkan Federation, modelled on the political formations in Europe and the New World -such as the Swiss Confederation, and the United States of America, respectively- which together with nation-states gradually substituted the imperial model. Such proposals that were submitted mainly by individuals - diplomats, intellectuals, or revolutionaries- both European and Balkan⁶, at different times and under different conditions, had partial impact and limited practical value. What is more, rather than consisting of detailed and realistic designs that could be implemented, these proposals were of a general and somewhat vague nature. In fact, they were never included in the discussions during the numerous meetings and conferences convened by the Great Powers. In the end, the political transformation of the Balkans was based on the principle of nationalism, where the nation and state coincided⁷, the outcome of which was that the Ottoman Empire was replaced by nation-states after revolutionary actions alongside military and diplomatic support from the Europeans.

Western European Proposals for the Balkan Federation

Cyprien Robert (1807-1860), the Slavophile who introduced Slavic studies to France, believed it was essential that the Ottoman Empire be maintained, although in a different form to what it was, as a way to counteract the expansionist tendencies of Russia, Austria and England in the East. In his two-volume work *‘Les Slaves de Turquie’ (The Slavs of Turkey): Serbs, Montenegrins, Bosnians, Albanians and Bulgarians*, published in 1844 in Paris, he argued that this would be possible only through the decentralization and transformation of the Ottoman Empire into two confederations along territorial and religious lines⁸ which would be

⁴ This principle resulted from the agreement to maintain the status quo, which was signed in Vienna in 1815 by the 'Holy Alliance'.

⁵ In 1830 the Serbs gained autonomy and the Greeks independence.

⁶ Plans for the creation of a Slavic or East European federation with the participation of Russia as a dominant member or having equal status were designed by Russian Pan-Slavists -such as Nikolai Danilevski and Rostislav Fadeev- and Russian radicals and socialists -such as Michael Bakunin and Alexander Herzen- respectively. In the Balkans the most significant proponents of federalism were the Bulgarian Liuben Karavelov, who envisaged a Balkan federation based on liberal and national principles, and the Serbian Svetozar Markovic, who combined federalism with socialism. See: E. Naxidou, *Η Φιλική Εταιρεία και οι Ευρωπαϊκές Εκδοχές της Βαλκανικής Ομοσπονδίας*, In: *Πρακτικά του Διεθνούς Επιστημονικού Συνεδρίου ‘Επαναστατική Δράση και Μυστικές Εταιρείες στη Νεότερη Ευρώπη-Φιλική Εταιρεία* (under publication)

⁷ The political dimension of nationalism has been highlighted and discussed by leading scholars of different schools. See: E. Gellner, *Έθνη και Εθνικισμός*, (Transl. into Greek by D. Lafazani), Athens, Alexandria, 1992, p. 13; B. Anderson, *Φαντασιακές Κοινότητες. Στοχασμοί για τις Απαρχές και τη Διάδοση του Εθνικισμού*, (Transl. into Greek by P. Chantzaroula), Athens: Nefeli, 1997, p. 26.

⁸ The authors of the texts examined here apply the terms ‘federation’ and ‘confederation’ interchangeably.

under the scepter of the Sultan: the Christian Federation in Europe and the Muslim Federation in Asia. The first would consist of Greeks and Slavs, as in his opinion, these peoples had reached the realization that a union was in the interest of both. More specifically, the structure of this federation would resemble a pyramid: at its base, delineated by the Danube, would be Wallachia, Moldova and Serbia, and on each side would be Bulgaria and Bosnia joined to Montenegro and Herzegovina, respectively; the next level would comprise Albania and Epirus, Macedonia and Thessaly, the state of Constantinople, Thrace and the Kingdom of Greece; while at the top of the pyramid would be the island of Crete⁹. According to Robert, the first step in the establishment of the '*Greco-Slave amphictyony*' should be a Bulgaro-Serbian union that would prevent a Russian invasion of the Balkans¹⁰.

The proposals for federation by certain Italian revolutionaries had the exact same objective, namely the prevention of Russian expansionism in Eastern Europe. In the decade of the 1860s, the Venetian Marco Antonio Canini (1822-1891) considered it the sacred mission of France and Italy to liberate and civilize the East. He believed that this would sooner or later be fulfilled with the formation of the *United States of the East*, comprising of a Danubian and a Byzantine confederation, which would effectively put a stop to Russian expansionist ambitions¹¹. As he explained, by 'east', he was referring to the area stretching from the Carpathian Mountains, to the Black Sea and to Cape Tenaro¹².

Around the same time, Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872), the Italian patriot and activist for the unification of Italy, also envisioned an organizational system of federation in Eastern Europe that would, on the one hand, replace the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires, and on the other, neutralize Russia's Pan-Slav aspirations. In the first of his *Slavic Letters* in 1857, he wrote that the restructuring of this part of Europe would result from the rise of the Slav national movement, whose significance for the future political developments in Europe as a whole was indisputable¹³. According to Mazzini, the Slavic race was divided into four groups, which would result in the creation of four future nations. The first included the Poles, the second were the Russians, the third comprised the Bohemians together with the Moravians and possibly the Slovaks of Hungary, and the fourth consisted of the Serbs together with the Montenegrins, the Bulgarians, the Dalmatians, the Slovenians and the Croats. Mazzini

⁹ Cyprien Robert, *Les Slaves de Turquie. Serbes, Monténégrins, Bosniaques, Albanais et Bulgares*, volume I, Paris, Passard-Labitte, 1844, pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ Cyprien Robert, *Les Slaves de Turquie. Serbes, Monténégrins, Bosniaques, Albanais et Bulgares*, volume II, Paris, Passard-Labitte, 1844, pp. 412-414.

¹¹ Marco Antonio, *Vingt Ans d' Exil*, Paris, Dramard et Cie, 1868, p. 190.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

¹³ Giuseppe Mazzini, *Politica Internazionale. Lettere Slave*, Firenze, Casa Editrice Nerbini, 1909, I, p. 36.

believed that the peoples of this last group were destined to unite politically under federal administration and together with the Greeks would expel the Turks from Europe, thus resolving the Eastern Question. He also predicted that the third group might split in two, and as an emerging Slavic power, Hungary would also include the Latin provinces of Wallachia and Moldova¹⁴. In his second *Letter* Mazzini was clear about the relationship between the Slavs and the Greeks. He stated that the Greek race, which was waiting for the call to independence, would willingly join the fourth group of Slavs, forming the European section of the Eastern Empire, and effectively dissolving Turkish dominion¹⁵. Finally, in his fourth *Letter* he put forward his estimation that Europe would be transformed into a sum of confederations formed on the basis of geographical location, language and historical traditions, among which “*there will be a Greece that will extend to the Balkans and will preside over Byzantium, a free centre of a confederation of peoples that today make up the Turkish Empire in Europe*”¹⁶.

Mazzini’s views on the future of Eastern Europe, which also involved Italy, crystallized about ten years later in his articles in the newspaper *Duty (Dovere)* (1866). His deep-rooted belief was that Italy’s destiny was to play a leading role in the establishment of a new order in Europe and in the settlement of the Eastern Question based on the policy of nationality. For this reason Mazzini argued that Italy should abandon the old alliances and turn to the peoples who were in the process of ethnogenesis. In Eastern Europe, where there was a strong link both in terms of geographic proximity and historical ties, it was of the greatest importance to stabilize relations with three fundamental groups: the southern Slavs, the Greeks, and the Romans (by which he meant the Wallachians and the Moldovans). The process of nation-building of these peoples would bring about the dissolution of the Austrian and Turkish empires in Europe, being artificial unions that lacked ethnic homogeneity¹⁷. According to Mazzini, it was precisely this prospect that Italy had to give its support to, even if that meant taking military action: ‘*A Federation of the Danube that will replace the Empire of Austria: a Slavic-Greek Confederation which will replace the Turkish Empire in Europe: Constantinople, free city, an amphictyony centre of the second Confederation: an alliance between the two Confederations and Italy: this is the future. The national policy of Italy should focus on promoting this. Today, by going to war with Austria, not only can Italy*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁵ Giuseppe Mazzini, *Politica Internazionale. Lettere Slave*, Firenze, Casa Editrice Nerbini 1909, II, pp. 37-39.

¹⁶ Giuseppe Mazzini, *Politica Internazionale. Lettere Slave*, Firenze, Casa Editrice Nerbini 1909, IV p. 49. Citations from Italian have been translated into English by the present author.

¹⁷ Giuseppe Mazzini, *Missione Italiana- Vita Internazionale, Il Dovere, Giornale Politico Settimanale pre la Democrazia*, Saturday 23 June 1856, vol. 25.

*promote it, but with one action, implement it.'*¹⁸. Thus broadening the scope of political unrest to include Central Europe, Mazzini also wanted the transformation of the Austrian Empire into a Federation of the Danube.

Lastly, the idea for federation was considered by Hungarians and Romanians in exile, as well as the Serbian government. Following the unsuccessful uprisings of the Hungarians and Romanians in 1848, and up until the diarchy system (*Ausgleich*) was implemented in Austro-Hungary in 1866, there were unofficial talks where the proposal was put for a federation of the Hungarian branch of the Habsburg Empire with Serbia and the Danubian Principalities. However, negotiations were not successful, because of substantive disagreements between the parties, and due to unfavourable external circumstances. More specifically, the Hungarians refused to surrender to the future federation their Slavic provinces: to be exact, they refused to give Croatia and Slavonia to Serbia, and Transylvania to Romania. In addition, contrary to expectations, Austro-Hungary did not become embroiled in large-scale military confrontations which could very well have triggered such plans into action¹⁹.

Concluding Remarks

First and foremost as already mentioned, all the federal plans which are discussed in this paper, despite their significant differences, were of a very general nature. None of them provided any detailed or practical information concerning the realization of such schemes. In this way, issues related to structure, statehood, or membership were not always dealt with or specified. Moreover, all these proposals endorsed not only the ideological preferences of the authors, but also the national interests and aspirations of their countries of origin. Thus, Cyprien Robert, the Frenchman, defending his country's position in the East, supported the dual confederation of a decentralised Ottoman Empire as the only way to guarantee the integrity of Ottoman dominion and at the same time stop Russian, Austrian and British imperialism. In contrast, the Italians, Canini, and in particular, Mazzini believed that federalization in Eastern Europe would create favourable conditions for Italy to emerge as a leading force in the area.

Based on the above, it could, therefore, be argued that most proposals for federation from the west were in effect a disguised form of imperialist policy. In other words, it was an indirect way to avoid upsetting the balance and causing friction between the established

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ L. S. Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation*, pp. 66-79.

European powers. It was yet another attempt of the Western Powers to extend their control of the Balkans through the creation of a federal system. On final analysis, these proposals too were another expression of the strong competition for predominance in Europe.

Last but not least, there is much discrepancy and ambiguity on the issue of the federation partners. The member States are designated sometimes on geographical grounds, at other times on a religious basis, or along ethnic grounds; and of course at times there are various combinations of all of these. This confusion, which to some extent can be attributed to ignorance resulting largely from a lack of information, is due mainly to the fact that ethnic groups in the Balkans and Eastern Europe had not yet completed the process of differentiation, meaning that they had not fully formed their distinct ethnic identity. Therefore, they were not easily distinguishable in the eyes of Western Europeans, nor were the territories where they lived clearly determinable. Thus, there was Cyprien Robert grouping Bulgaria together with Montenegro, and even the champion of national ideology, Mazzini was not sure of the nations that would emerge through the Slavic race. In this way, most of the proponents of federalism mentioned here, not having taken into account the national criterion did not propagate federal organization on a national basis. It was precisely this reason why their plans contradicted the political principle of nationalism that was predominant in the Balkans in the 19th century.