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**STATE, RELIGION, NATIONALITY.
SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE
(19th AND EARLY 20th CENTURY)**

**ДЪРЖАВА, РЕЛИГИЯ, НАЦИОНАЛНОСТ.
РАЗМИСЛИ ОТНОСНО ЮГОИЗТОЧНА ЕВРОПА
(XIX В. – НАЧАЛОТО НА XX В.)**

Османската власт на Балканите създава специален модел на организация за немюсюлманите: Високата порта признавала само онези групи, които се самоопределяли според религията си и не зачитала етническата принадлежност. Общностите и индивидите били идентифицирани според религиозната им принадлежност, а не според националната си култура. Неизбежно, с течение на времето трайни национални особености, включващи поведение, навици, обичаи, темперамент и склонности, и, разбира се, езика, били подплатени с религиозни чувства и преживявания, които поставили акцента върху религиозния национализъм. Често той изигравал решаваща роля при формирането на националните държави в региона. В процеса на създаване на национални държави религията, която дълго време била мост между изповядващите ортодоксалното християнство на Балканите, се превърнала в проблем на другостта.

Ключови думи: Югоизточна Европа, религия, национална специфика, национални държави.

For several centuries the Ottoman Empire incorporated in its borders most of the Southeast European area. In the second half of the 19th century the ethnographic map of European Turkey contained a variety of elements: Turks, Bulgarians, Greeks, Macedonians, Serbians, Albanians, and Jews, who lived in areas, more or less large. They did not live ethnically isolated, but they came into contact, they collided or they lived in harmony, and they even disappeared from one place to appear in another, which made it difficult spatial. It is almost impossible to advance to secure the predominance of an item under a specific report, although at first glance, it would seem that such a numerical preponderance is of indisputable argument. A careful analysis reveals, however, various criteria: the idiom, religion, school population, ethnic consciousness freely expressed. Of course, each is important, but they are relevant only together. Throughout the period of occupation, Ottoman influence manifested itself more or less prominent in everyday life of all these elements. Abuses, injustices, inequities on ethnic groups have developed an attitude of undermining state authority.

Thus, historically Southeast Europe was an unstable area, marked by clashes and conquests. Periods of calm were often very short. But one thing is certain: with all the infighting, with all the fragmentation, despite the continuity of foreign occupation and despite the intervention of the great powers, the nationalities have not disappeared, have not assimilated each other, but they managed to coexist, to keep alive the spiritual, and their own individuality, although some had experienced extremely difficult periods.

Since its foundation, Christians and Muslims lived in the Ottoman Empire. Theoretically, the Porte had a tolerant attitude towards the Christian religion. Practically, the Christians were considered inferior by Muslims, and were forced to range of obligations and to practice professions considered unworthy of a subject of Allah. Christians were deprived of civil and political rights and forced to convert to Islam. We cannot omit the fact that there were Christians who gave up their religion in favour of the occupant, with a desire to succeed in society. But most Serbs in Bosnia, Greeks of Crete and the Bogomils from Bulgaria adopted Islam, often in need of survival. Throughout the 19th century, religion functioned as a line of separation between the subjects of Sultan rather than ethnicity. Thus Muslims – Turks, or Bulgarians, Bosnians, Albanians, Greeks in Crete converted to Islam, formed the ruling class, while Christians, except Catholics, were considered Greeks because they recognized the spiritual authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and have made up the rest of the population.

By the middle of the 19th century, the Greek Church and the Patriarchate of Constantinople was considered the spiritual authority of most of the non-Muslim population of the Empire. Precepts of the Islamic state forbade in fact the interference in another sphere of religion. The only interference was allowed by the Sultan to issue *berats*. Based on these *berats*, holders of high ranks of the Orthodox Church exercised their authority over an area or ethnical group. They had full autonomy in relationships with parishioners. The Patriarchate of Constantinople stretched over 108 eparchies (dioceses) and 80 of them had the rank of metropolitan (55 in the Balkan Peninsula). For a long time these ecclesiastical ranks were occupied by Greeks. This and the celebration of the religious services in Greek, which often was not understood by the audience, explains why in the struggle for national liberation in South-Eastern Europe the religious aspect had an important role, along with education and culture. Nationality in the Ottoman Empire was recognized first by the recognition of a national church. Thus, the struggle for national independence took the form of a struggle for a national church, which caused, sometimes, conflicts with the Patriarchate of Constantinople. One of the most important was in 1870 and was generated by the creation of the Bulgarian Exarchate, which broke away from the Patriarchate of Constantinople in 1872¹.

The Treaty of Berlin affected very vaguely (art. 23) the situation of Albania and Macedonia. Moreover, Chancellor Bismarck considered non-existent the Albanian nation. According to the participants at the Congress, the Albanians did not exist

because after the religion practiced, they were either Muslim or Orthodox, i.e. either Turks or Greeks. Despite the efforts of the Albanian nationalists, the union, the state autonomy, and recognition of the Albanian as an official language used in the administration, justice and education did not take place until the beginning of the 20th century.

Macedonia was an area of great ethnic diversity. Turks, Bulgarians, Greeks, Serbs, Albanians, Macedono-Romanians, Jews and Gypsies lived in their towns and villages, without any of these groups having prevalence in all evaluation criteria. According to the some allegations of a contemporary, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Slavs would have represented 3/5 of the total population of two million (Haumant 1932: 1). According to other authors, Macedo-Romanians (Aromanians) formed in 1894 one fourth of the entire population (Rubin 1913: 98). All were Ottoman subjects, Muslims or Christians. Because of the religious service in Greek, many Europeans were convinced of the Greek nationality of the inhabitants of this territory, especially since the Greek Church controlled the education and had particular influence on the cultural sphere. Over the time, the disruption between the two churches proved to be complex and with profound consequences and after 1878, transformed Macedonia in a disputed territory claimed by Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia. Anthropologists, linguists, psychologists from the three neighbouring countries, became rivals, claiming this territory for the benefit of their nationalities.

The ambiguity in the Treaty of Berlin on the status of the population in Macedonia, the failure of the Ottoman government to enforce reforms and to make radical and essential changes, the interference of the European powers in the configuration of Southern-Eastern Europe, all these transformed the province, after 1878, „in an apple of discord between the Balkan states”. Religion, culture and education were preferential land of confrontation. Thus, by virtue of history and on the assumption that everyone who is under the authority of the Ecumenical Patriarchate was Greek, Greece considered them all Greeks, although the best representative of this element was Southern Macedonia. In turn, the Bulgarians thought everyone Bulgarian, dependent on the Exarchate, and they began a sustained religious propaganda in northern, central and even in southern Macedonia. In the border area where the population was bilingual, the Bulgarian emissaries came into conflict, often violent, with those who spoke Bulgarian, but considered themselves Greeks. Greece and Serbia acted in the same way. Most often the Ottoman Empire closed its eyes and even encouraged the actions of one or another of the rivals in the Balkans. By practicing religious appeasement to one or another nationality, the Sublime Porte hoped to keep the territories in Europe. Thus, in 1890, despite the opposition of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, which threatened to break ties with the Orthodox churches in the Ottoman territory, the Sultan granted two berats to the Bulgarian bishops in Ohrid and Usküb (Skopje). Two more were added in 1897, in exchange of Bulgaria's neutrality in the Greek-Turkish conflict (Nicolova 1981: 34).

The undeniable Latin, called Vlachs by the Turks, kutzovalahi by the Greeks and Macedono-Romanians by themselves, Aromanians lived in the European possessions of the Ottoman Empire in compact groups, especially in Macedonia, Epirus, (districts Monastir, Iannina, Thessaloniki) and Albania (districts Durazzo, Avlona, Berat). According to contemporaries in the European part of the Ottoman Empire 1-1.2 million Macedono-Romanians lived, who in 1894 accounted one seventh of the population. As with other nationalities, the Macedono-Romanians were almost non-existent for the representatives of the Powers at the Congress in Berlin. Because the religious services were celebrated in Greek, the Aromanians were considered Greeks by the foreigners. After 1878, they started to behave as a distinct nationality. The first step towards the affirmation was made even in 1878 when, by the order of the great vizier, the Aromanians received the right to benefit of Ottoman protection and to establish schools.

The recognition of a religious hierarchy by a document signed by the Sultan was equivalent to the recognition of nationality. In addition to religious duties, the head of the church was invested with secular powers: opening of schools, representation by delegates in the administrative board that worked in each village. In the absence of a priest, the Aromanians were forced to resort to the Greek bishops and priests, much less tolerant than the Ottoman authorities. Since the last decade of the 19th century the Sublime Porte had adopted a benevolent attitude towards the Macedono-Romanians. Their problem could not be indifferent to the Sultan. According to his own confession, the problem had to be resolved with tact because “it will be not appropriate or prudent in the current state of things for a Muslim power to violate the privileges of the Greek Church in the East”.

Only in the early 20th century the Aromanians were successful. By an act (Iradea) of May 9/ 22, 1905, the Sultan asked the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople not to prevent the Aromanians from celebrating the religious services in the Romanian language by their priests and using their language in education.

In the early 20th century the problem of status and rights of minority ethnic communities in Southeast Europe was far from to be resolved; there were still nationalities without civil and political rights, who wanted to keep their customs, language and to follow a religious cult. By some governments in the region, as well as by those of the Ottoman Empire or of some of the great powers (Russia and Austria-Hungary), the desires of the ethnic communities were interpreted as harmful concessions designed to weaken the authority. There continued to persist the opinion that the very recognition of ethnic communities was an element of weakness.

The Ottoman rule over the Balkans established a special organization for the non-Muslims: the Sublime Porte recognized only the groups determined by religion and ignored ethnicities. Communities and individuals were defined by religious identity and not by their national culture. Strong national specificity, consisting in manners, habits, customs, temperaments and inclinations and, not least, in language, were impregnated with religious feeling and experiences that brought the focus of religious nationalism. It proved often to have a decisive role in creating national states in the area.

NOTES

¹ By the late 19th century, Russia had supported the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, under which authority were all the Christians in the Ottoman Empire. It was believed that together, the Christians were more powerful in fighting with the common enemy, the Ottoman Empire and, at the same time, this served better its plans to control Constantinople. The defeat of the revolt in Crete in 1869 brought a change. Greeks believed that Russia was responsible for the failure. In these circumstances, Russia changed its attitude to the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Russia was pressing the Sublime Porte for an independent Bulgarian church, supporting the common origin of the Slavs and their belonging to the same church. On 28th of February, the Sultan signed the firman which established the Bulgarian Exarchate. Theoretically, the Exarchate remained subordinate to the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Practically, the differences between the Greek and the Bulgarian church made subordination impossible. The rift between them became final in 1872 when the Bulgarian church was declared schismatic by the Patriarchate of Constantinople. – See: Barker 1979: 62; Haumant 1932: 1–25; Jelavich 1977: 209.

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