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Original scientific article**MONTENEGRIN-OTTOMAN BORDER RELATIONS
AFTER THE BERLIN CONGRES OF 1878**Ivan TEPAVCEVIC¹

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will discuss the review of Montenegrin-Ottoman border relations in the period between 1878 and 1912. Following the period of centuries old conflicts, the two countries and cultures became neighbors and bordering countries after the recognition of Montenegrin independence. The paper is analyzing those relation that had their highs and lows, sometimes they were surprisingly good, and at other times on the verge of war. In the observed period, the authorities of both countries tried to avoid border incidents, and if these occurred, they calmed the situations down. As time passed, it became evident that interests of both countries would make it impossible for the existing borderline to hold. After almost 30-year period of truce, the final solution and the border issue during Balkan Wars came to an end.

KEY WORDS:

Montenegro; Ottoman; Diplomacy; Border relations

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SAŽETAK

U radu se daje pregled crnogorsko-osmanskih pograničnih odnosa u periodu od 1878. do 1912. godine. Nakon viševjekovnih sukoba, dvije države, civilizacije i kulture, nakon priznavanja crnogorske nezavisnosti postale su granični susjedi. U radu se analiziraju ti odnosi koji su imali svoje uspone i padove, ponekad su bili iznenađujuće dobri, a ponekad na ivici rata. Vlasti obije zemlje u analiziranom periodu nastojale su da izbjegnu granične incidente, a ukoliko je do njih došlo, smirivale su nastale situacije. Kako je vrijeme prolazilo, postalo je očigledno da će interesi obije zemlje onemogućiti održavanje postojeće granice. Nakon skoro 30-godišnjeg primirja, konačno rješenje i pitanje granice okončano je tokom Balkanskih ratova.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

Crna Gora; Osmansko carstvo; Diplomacija; Pogranični odnosi.

After the Berlin Congress, social relations in Montenegro develop intensively. By the end of the century, an economic boost became noticeable, as well as great expectations in terms of economic, political and state development. At the congress, Montenegrin independence was recognized, the country's territory more than doubled, important towns became a part of its territory, the country was ceded an access to the sea. Population had grown to approximately 200,000. Montenegro was no longer just an Orthodox country since it has a number of followers of Islam and Catholicism living in it. The early 20th century brought progress in political life also by embracing traditions of modern civil states, manifested through the adoption of the Constitution and the implementation of the parliamentary form of government.

On the other hand, social, economic and political crisis arose especially in the early 20th century (Raspopović 2005: 357). The problems of Montenegro at the beginning of the century were bigger than after the Berlin Congress. The poverty was still on a large scale, periodical hunger when the state failed to acquire grain abroad at favorable prices, large migrations which seemed to become epidemic in the late 19th century, lack of arable land to provide enough food for the Montenegrin population (Andrijašević 2010: 339). The majority of population was engaged in cattle breeding and farming, these being main economic sectors. Industrial development progressed slowly, there was no mass consumption, road construction was yet in the initial stage after the Congress, in order to facilitate the transfer of people, goods and capital. The heritage of decades could not have been discarded overnight. Prerequisites for faster development in all social spheres did not exist, and it was necessary to educate personnel. This led to a number of people going abroad, in order to adopt modern trends in various branches significant for Montenegro. According to official data from 1889, there were only thirty officials in Montenegrin Ministries, High Court and State Council, around a hundred people in all local government structures (governors of the counties, tribal captains, court members), whereas in the educational profession there were 12 teachers/professors in secondary schools and 74 teachers in elementary schools (Andrijašević 2010: 93). Money and human resources were needed in order to carry out major reforms, which was not feasible in Montenegro at the time. As of 1902, implementation of overall reforms is being planned, especially in the judiciary and administration sectors (Andrijašević 2010: 93).

After the Berlin Congress, Ottoman Empire had become considerably territorially weakened and financially exhausted. According to the annual book of the Ministry of Trade and Communal Services from 1879, the Empire had over 19 million people (14,212.000 Muslims, 2,750.000 Orthodox, 1,044.000 Armenians, 830,000 Bulgarians, 216,000 Jews) (Andrijašević 2010: 93). Sultan ruled the country, being at the same time the caliph and the Head of all Muslims in the world. Constantinople, the largest city on the Balkan Peninsula, had almost one million inhabitants. The decline of the Empire coincides with the rise and strengthening of the industrial revolution. Somehow, the Empire remained outside of the main financial European currents, although it had a firm hold in Europe with its six vilayets (Scutari, Janina, Kosovo, Monastir, Salonika and Adrianople). The financial power of the Empire was significantly impaired after losing positions in the Great Eastern Crisis. The impossibility of successful financing from its own revenues had prompted taking large loans in this period. Between 1890 and 1915 only, the Empire took 23 loans amounting to almost 165 million pounds sterling (Nikprelević 2001: 21). The Empire tried to make major reforms in the second half of the 19th century. One of the main concerns was maintaining the status quo. The country had been perturbed by rebellions and uprisings. Numerous charges, agrarian issue prolongation, tax increase and dissatisfaction with it, financial dependence on the West, religious fanaticism, were the reasons for the Empire's decline in the indicated period. At the beginning of the 20th century, a movement arises among the officers who sought to reform the Turkish society. In order to modernize it and get it out of feudalism, they tried to copy the West. However, big problems in the budget, debts towards European creditors, German capital influx gradually transforming the country into a colony, promoted strengthening of nationalism, manifested in the Turkish Youth movement.

By the decisions of the Berlin Congress, whose Treaty was ratified on 3 July 1878, borders of Montenegro toward the Ottoman Empire were determined. According to the Treaty, Montenegro was to gain full control over the upper valleys of the Lim and the Tara.² For Montenegro, Lim was merely a transport river, whereas a large part of the northern border lay along the Tara River. The border toward High Prokletije³ extended approximately twenty kilometers to the North and South of the main mass of the mountains. Articles 28 and 29 of the Berlin Treaty deter-

2 Rivers in Montenegro.

3 Mountain range along Montenegrin-Albanian border.

mined the border direction in general contours, whereas detailed description was to be covered by the Agreement between two countries, according to a legal custom. The demarcation itself had been carried out by an international committee of officials from the contractual parties. There were frequent disputes on several issues: precise establishment of the border line, issue of double ownership properties, delimitation of estates, forests, pastures, waters (Borožan 2000: 89). It all created preconditions, due to many unresolved issues, for later incidents and restlessness at the borders.

In the years to come, territorial exchanges occurred (trading the Plav Basin for Ulcinj), when the Convention on the cession of Ulcinj to Montenegro was signed in Kunj on November 25, 1880. Since the border from the Bojana River to the Cijevna River was not natural, the Turks argued that Montenegro did not provide safety guarantees primarily for the Tuzi Captaincy, which according to Turkish belief would have been exposed to attacks from neighboring territories. The internationally recognized border toward the North was the Tara River. Frequent security problems, especially in the upper Polimlje and around Kolašin, urged the memorandum of Montenegrin Government with Turkey from 1 (14) September 1883, and the Act of the Committee for Demarcation between Turkey and Montenegro, signed on 3/15 January 1884, in Andrijevića, definitely established the Montenegrin-Turkish border (Perazić, Raspopović 1992: 187–188, 192–196). Even after the demarcation and establishment of borders, there were incidents on both sides of the border. These relationships can be represented by the number of killed and wounded Turkish and Montenegrin citizens during the ten-year period (1882–1892), in the area between Mojkovac⁴ and mountain Mokra. The Protocol on the truce between populations from border areas of both countries, signed in Vinicka in December 1892, by 32 Montenegrin and 34 Turkish chieftains, contains information that casualties in the indicated period amounted to 115 Turkish (90 killed) and 107 Montenegrin subjects (63 dead) (Pejović 1973: 13). Also, in the neighboring territories, there were truces between the populations following brawl, wounding, murder, theft. We have an example of such an Agreement between Plav-Gusinje district, Polimlje and Velika, signed in Pepići on 12 October 1901 (Perazić, Raspopović 1992: 227–230).

The Ottoman Empire did not waste time after the Berlin Congress. On the contrary, it commenced building a system of border fortifications, renewing the

4 Town in Montenegro.

existing and building new ones. In 14 months, by the end of 1891, 27 border-posts were built between Tuzi and Mojkovac, and 12 between Plav and Berane. In the first decade of the 20th century, a strong system of border-posts, stationing Turkish units, had been set up on the right bank of the Tara River (Pejović 1973: 92).

Apart from Tara, an internationally recognized border, the Bojana River was also a border river. It is noteworthy that the great island at its mouth had been somewhat a neutral territory, being considered completely worthless economically (Dvorský 2000). According to Article 29, paragraph 4 of the Berlin Treaty, the Bojana River was to be used by both countries. However, Turkey often disputed or prevented the sailing of Montenegrin ships. Of course, it wasn't done directly, but via a system of controls and customs. This led to frequent protests of the Montenegrin consul in Skadar, in the effort to improve the situation (Radosavović 1960: 93). In the years just after the Congress, a number of Ottoman citizens from Ulcinj⁵ owned property in Montenegro, but did not acquiesce to the sovereignty of Montenegro at all. They did not perform military duties, nor send their children to schools. They addressed Turkish consul in Ulcinj for anything and asked for Turkish passports when they traveled (Franetović-Bure 1960: 301).

After the Berlin Congress, Montenegro was striving to protect Orthodox population left on the other side of the border. To do this, a broad action of national effort had been applied, through local authorities in the border regions having an impact on the Orthodox population on the other side of the border. An important political instrument towards Sanjak of Novi Pazar was the possibility for the authorities in Cetinje to infiltrate their ideas via school boards and local teachers, and to exercise dominance of their own influence. Schools were opened on the initiative of a competent bishop or local church-school municipality (Prekić 2010: 74). There were several places from which propaganda activity was directed towards the Orthodox population in the Ottoman territory. For the Kazas of Berane, Bijelo Polje and Gusinje, Andrijevića was the main post, while Nikšić authorities were responsible for the political activity of the Kaza Pljevlja, later Sanjak. As for the area towards Albania, main posts were Podgorica and Ulcinj. After the Berlin Congress, the increase in industrial products import strengthened the emigration of craftsmen to Albania and other Turkish regions (Strugar 1960: 755). In these areas, a network of commissioners would arise, providing useful information to the authorities in

5 Southernmost town in Montenegro.

Cetinje. As of 1880, Sokol Baco, the chief Montenegrin commissioner among the Catholic Arbanasi, had been receiving regular monetary compensation from the Crown Prince's Ministry of Finance.

A number of Catholics around Skadar Lake were loyal to Montenegro. The Skadar area was the smallest vilayet, in which the Albanians accounted for 95% of the population, but only 57% were Muslim (Pavlović 2001: 251). Relations with Malësia were burdened with border incidents and conflicts, primarily because of the double-ownership properties, extending on both sides of the border. The village of Mužečka had been ceded to the Ottoman Empire at the Berlin Congress. However, as early as 1883, the border was corrected by an Agreement between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire, and Mužečka was ceded to the Zatrijebač Tribe i.e. to Montenegro (Nikprelević 2001: 125, 129). In the border villages of Zeta (Mataguži, Vranj), a demarcation line had been drawn, so Montenegrin and Turkish citizens worked the land up to it (Stenographic transcript of the Montenegrin National Assembly 1910: 1004). A part of the fertile land called the Blacklands was declared a neutral zone. There were incidents there. In 1891, a dispute arose between the populations of Zeta and Gruda about who was entitled to graze cattle. Courts ruled that a part of the population was to be evicted. But, Montenegrin Minister of the Military had given property to the individuals at this location and settled them there to defend the border. The border population was thus obliged to guard the border, this was a quite burden. In 1895, the land was in effect expropriated by the state of Montenegro. This dispute did not get its epilogue until the Balkan War (Pejović 1973: 124).

As for economic life, we can distinguish three areas: Skadar Lake with Zeta and Primorje, areas along the Cijevna River, and territories on Lim and Tara. According to the Agreement between the two states, entire Montenegrin transport through Obod6 and Skadar was to be customs-free. But every once in a while, Turkish offices used to prohibit the import of grains in Montenegro. When the ban occurred, smuggling would commence along the border, particularly around the Plav Basin (Dvorský 2000: 114). Especially notable was tobacco smuggling. There was a monopoly in both countries, it had only been organized differently. The smuggling took place in accordance with discrepancies in quality and price. Special gendarmerie units persecuting smugglers and guarding the border were kept at standby.

6 A settlement at Skadar Lake.

Tobacco smuggling centers were the vicinity of Skadar, Berane and the Plav Basin.

One of the unresolved border issues was regulation of the Bojana River flow, and regulation of Skadar Lake. The first time that Crown Prince Nikola I visited Constantinople in 1883, he initiated resolution of the problem. As early as the following year, French engineers began to work on a study concerning the issue. With Turkish statesmen and politicians in charge, issues have often been raised regarding regulation of the Bojana River flow, as well as the Lake drainage in order to obtain a large area of high-quality arable land. But the matter exceeded the interstate framework, primarily because of strategic interests of the involved European powers. Floods of 1895 had prioritized the resolution of this issue, but its realization was not carried out. Along with the aforementioned, the issue of draining the Ulcinj mud was also being initiated. A Contract between Montenegrin government, the Bravi-Mazini-Plata Society and the company from Genoa was signed in mid-May 1911, but due to the outbreak of the Balkan War, weaknesses in the organization of work, as well as other reasons, no results were achieved (Pejović 1962: 243). Before the Porte, ideas of building railway line from Bar to Skadar had also been raised. The resulting economic benefits for Montenegro would be compensated to the Turkish side by the improvement of good neighborly border relations (Raspopović 2005: 366).

Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire had some common interests also, such as draining the Skadar Lake, preventing the advance of Austria-Hungary onto Salonika, progress of trade and mutual exchange. In the first decade of the 20th century, trade with the Ottoman Empire was in second place, just behind Austria-Hungary. The Trade Contract with Turkey was concluded and signed on 19 February 1909, and ratified in 1910. Even before signing the Trade Contract, an agreement was reached with Turkey that minimum tariff was to be applied for Turkish products (Jovanović 1963: 121). Many issues were to be resolved with Turkey, both those relating to the mutual demarcation and implementation of the Berlin Congress decisions, and those that stemmed from the relation of succession, status and protection of Montenegrin subjects at work in Constantinople and other Turkish cities (Raspopović 1995: 94). Though border incidents and disputes had provoked occasional tension, mutually tolerant relationships prevailed. This was also contributed to by diplomatic network, since Montenegro had representatives in Constantinople and Skadar (Raspopović 1995: 94). On the other hand, the Turks had their representatives in Cetinje. Montenegrin office in Skadar was founded in

1893, after the Berlin Congress, and it was its second phase of work until the beginning of the Balkan Wars in 1912.

Circumstances in border areas at the beginning of the 20th century required reaching agreements, and one such instance was in 1905, when the Montenegrin-Turkish border convention was signed. A committee of Montenegrin and Turkish envoys met in Berane and Andrijevića to resolve border issues and ensure order at the eastern border (Voice of the Montenegrin 1905). Members of the Committee were Janko Vukotić, Minister of the Military, Sultan's adjutant Enver Pasha, Brigadier Jovo Martinović and General Hasan Pasha. A year later, due to inaccuracies and the need for a final solution of controversial border issues, the special Sultan's envoy, Ambassador of Rome Resheed Bey, arrived to Cetinje, and successfully completed his task.

In this period (1905–1906), near the Northern and North-Eastern borders of Montenegro, and on the Ottoman Empire territory, movements and revolts of peasants dissatisfied with their socioeconomic status arose. Ottoman army had punished the rebels cruelly, after which the areas towards Lower Kolašin and Pljevlja had the appearance of a burnt land. The year 1906 is also called Şemsi Pasha's Year. At that time, nearly 3000 inhabitants fled to Montenegro with their livestock. People could not endure having their houses and hay set to fire, vineyards and cornfields cut down, purchase of various foodstuffs prohibited, livestock taken away (Glušćević 2005: 87).

Some of the main issues in relations between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire, in the first decade of the 20th century, regarded the position of the Orthodox people on the other side of the border in places where Montenegro had a strong influence. With Turkish consent, Montenegro was striving to open the markets, primarily in ⁷Leverić and Prenčani, where the Montenegrin Customs Service was also located. With captaincy tickets, Montenegrin citizens were, at times, allowed to go in escorted groups and purchase grain in Pljevlja. Such practice existed on the other side, too. Turks tried to control the border villages, and in particular to limit contact and connections with Drobniak and Šaranci. In intervals, Turkish offices blocked the import of grains in Montenegro. The effects of the blockades were never reliable, because along the border on the Cijevna River, and especially above the Plav Valley, smuggling trade was easily realized. Among other things, the Montenegrin-Turkish

⁷ Area on the Tara River.

Border Convention from 28 June 1906, signed by Minister Janko Vukotić and Sultan's adjutant Enver Pasha, lists border-crossings in both countries. These were Lever-Tara and the bridge under Prenčani. Following the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Decree, a meeting had been scheduled between commander Knežević and captain Šibajlija, and Turkish authorities, for the purpose of arranging the crossing to the market in Pljevlja (DACG, MUD, 1907, f. 56, 1802).

Texts in Montenegrin newspapers *Voice of the Montenegrin* and *Cetinje Gazette* reflected the difficult situation in Sanjak in the final years of Turkish rule. The texts were colored by the spirit of the time, reflecting economic, socio-political, national and religious turmoil in Sanjak toward the end of Turkish rule (Rakočević 1978: 131). Montenegro's policy was to diplomatically make the Porte guarantee personal and property security to the Orthodox people, while in return influencing the same people from Cetinje to fulfill all the regulations envisioned by Turkish Constitution and laws, and not to raise rebellions. However, frequent border closures and trade barriers had put the border population into an unendurable position. Montenegro used diplomacy to try and influence the improvement of status and provide relief to the population. But, as the situation was not improving, influence of Montenegro was weakening, even in the regions along the Montenegrin border (Starovlah 2006: 99).

At the time of proclamation of Montenegro for the Kingdom in 1910, border controls were tightened. The authorities were alerted for all the events occurring in the neighborhood. Most stringent inspections were carried out. The year brought on an irregular situation in the area between Skadar Malësia and Kučka Krajina. This part had become a "hot and explosive point", a place where neighbors were continually accusing each other of breaking and entering foreign territory. Later that year the circumstances around the Village of Velike, in the Berane region, came to the forefront. Montenegrin peasants working the land on their own territory were shot on several times. The construction of the border-posts was a spark that constantly threatened to burst and cause major damage. In 1911, Turkey increased military forces towards Montenegro. It also strengthened border garrisons in Plav, Berane, Bijelo Polje and Pljevlja, as well as in some places closer to the Montenegrin border. This was a direct consequence of the uprising in northern Albania. King Nikola saw this as an opportunity to intervene in the uprising, to interfere, and to place a part of the territory under his authority. Montenegrin Government assisted

the military establishment of Malësor, sent them help in war material and organized the reception of refugees. The best example of Montenegrin influence was the meeting with Malësor leaders held in Podgorica in August of 1911, when Malësor representatives were forced to accept amnesty, under Montenegrin pressure. The Montenegrin-Turkish border relations around the Tara River were strained to the limit in 1911. Local Montenegrin authorities tacitly approved the incursions of individuals and smaller companies into the Turkish territory, whether these were the incursions of refugees from the other side or those of Montenegrin citizens – border guards. At the end of May, after the Albanian uprising, actions were undertaken from the Turkish side to normalize border relations in the area, but it did not last. Maintaining trade connections and visiting border markets ensured a political impact on the population and encouraged better propaganda and intelligence regarding the interests of Montenegro, for closer ties with its border and other authorities.

In the last year of Montenegrin-Ottoman border relations (1912), the major change in the attitude of Montenegro occurred. The loyalty of border population to Turkish authorities was no longer required, but weapons were being delivered and military units organized. During August, rebels from the Nahia of Berane, assisted by Montenegrin volunteers, destroyed all Turkish border-posts from the Kolašin fields to Šekular. A climate of total chaos arose along almost the entire border line. Failure to implement numerous reforms, difficult position of Christian population, massive influence of feudal relations in the early 20th century, were among the causes of this situation. The conflict in Mojkovac and the uprising of Donjovasojevići presented an introduction to the Balkan Wars.

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