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## **Russia and Great Britain in the 19th century – the Balkan Pattern**

The basic aim of this paper will be to pay attention on relations between Russia and Great Britain in the 19th century on the Balkan Peninsula with special focus on Serbia as the typical Balkan pattern. In that period both of them were interested what happened there. In London with huge attention were watching whether Russian influence grown or fall down on the Balkans. In the Foreign Office also were interested whether Russian officials support forming of the Panslavic committees in the Balkan states, especially in Serbia. Policy of Russophobia prevailed in the British foreign policy on the Balkan in the 19th century. British politicians are thinking that all Slavic peoples, especially the South Slavs because of their historical, spiritual, religious ties with the Russians are a priori exponents of the Russian policy on the Balkans.

Otherwise, the phenomena of British Russophobia was shown by the British historian John Gleason in his study *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain*. According to him Russophobia is a paradox in the history of Great Britain, that was followed by antipathy for Russia, at the beginning of the nineteenth century and which soon became the most prominent and most constant element of the British reality.<sup>1</sup> Gleason saw the causes of the chronic British Russophobia in the rivalry of imperial ambitions on the same territory (Middle East), or in different approaches to solving the Eastern Question, then in economic rivalries, and important were the Whig and the Tories party rivalries that transferred their own internal conflicts to the field of foreign policy. The emergence of Russophobia in the British society was influenced by the local political figures, and hostile press which published numerous articles full of prejudices about Russia and the Russians.<sup>2</sup> Regarding the time course of this phenomenon, Gleason believes that Russophobia in the UK developed in the thirties of the nineteenth century, it acquired its final shape during the fourth decade of the same century, and culminated during the Crimean War.<sup>3</sup>

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Serbia and the United Kingdom in 1837, there had always been a continuous interest of British politics in Serbia as to whether the impact of Imperial Russia was increasing or decreasing, whether the Serbian people were of Russophile orientation, whether there were, on the territory of the Principality, and

later of the Kingdom of Serbia, activities of secret Russian emissaries encouraging Pan-Slavic companies and organizations, as well as whether changes might occur in the Pro-Austrian foreign policy of Milan Obrenovic and its replacement with a Russophile stream. For all the British consuls and later representatives in Belgrade, a particular concern was that influence of Russia did not cross a dangerous limit that could imperil the British interests on the Balkans and further in the Middle East.

It means that during the nineteenth century and especially after the Berlin Congress, the British policy on the Balkans and Serbia was carried out in accordance with three basic principles of its foreign policy. Primarily this is a commitment to maintain the status quo on the Balkans, it is the system of relations established at the Berlin Congress that practically meant prevention of the Russian influence in the region and disabling St. Petersburg from having any future role in solving the Eastern Question.

Disabling Russian expansion and Pan-Slavism on the Balkans because of the constant fear of the great Russian influence and reputation of Russia's policy among the Balkan peoples and newly-recognized states, was the second postulate of the British Balkan politics. Preventing the formation of a federation or alliance of the Balkan states and peoples, whose creation would revise the decision of the Berlin Treaty and change the political map of the Balkans, but also the newly-established balance of power among the great powers was the third principle of the British policy towards the Balkans and Serbia.

For the British foreign policy it was important whether and to what extent Serbia respected the decisions of the Congress of Berlin, and whether it advocated maintaining the original state or it was a potential destroyer of peace, i.e. maintaining the status quo. This concern for the respect of the Berlin Treaty was particularly emphasized in the first few years after the end of the Congress, and the most notable example of its concern in regard to this are the reports of its vice consul Augustus Becker about the difficult position of minorities, especially the Jews and Muslims in Nis. On the basis of the reports one could conclude that Serbia did not comply with commitments made to Congress regarding the protection of minority rights.<sup>4</sup> Otherwise, in the political life of Great Britain there was consent of both the conservatives and liberals that the state on the Balkans reached at the Congress had to be maintained in accordance with the then adopted decisions.

All changes in Serbian politics – from the change of the rulers to the change of governments and politicians, were evaluated in the Foreign Office from the standpoint of whether these changes could cause effects on the decisions of the Berlin Congress and thus threaten its strategic interests. Therefore, the United Kingdom put pressure on the Serbian government



at every hint of changes so that the changes could be avoided, postponed or if they could not be stopped, to limit them to a minimum as to cause as little inconvenience and difficulties as possible in the implementation of the Berlin Treaty. A key point in the British policy towards Serbia and the Balkans in 19<sup>th</sup> century was a constant obsession with the Russian expansion and the need to prevent its influence in the region, as well as fear of Pan-Slavic movement. From 1837. on, it closely monitors whether the Russian influence in Serbia is getting weaker or stronger, and whether Pan-Slavic agents operate on its territory. To London, Serbia and the Serbian people were and continued to be a pendant in Russian hands, an outpost of the Russian breach on the Balkans, an exponent of the Russian politics. The obsession of the British public with Russia, was vividly presented by Lord Salisbury, who claimed that the earlier Pope-phobia in the British society and politics was replaced by Russophobia. According to him, it was a result of the need of the British society for a "spiritual specter, a ghost that mobilizes it to defend the interests of Turkey in the same way it defended its interests against the Vatican."<sup>5</sup>

The constantly present Russophobia in the British politics and awareness of the closeness of Russia and Serbia led to its great suspicion and fear of each step undertaken in Belgrade. In London, the attitude of the Serbian government to Pan-Slavic movement in the country and the Balkans was carefully listened to. Great Britain supported the opposition of King Milan to Pan-Slavism and his policy of poor relations with Russia. British emissaries in Belgrade put a special focus on keeping an eye on the information about a renewal of Pan-Slavic committees in Serbia. Thus, Gerald Francis Gould, a minister resident, on March 1881, reported to George Granville, the head of the Foreign Office, that the committees were controlled by General Chernaev who had been in Serbia for a few months, officially in order to ensure the railway concession, but according to his information, the Russian general had a task to create political intrigues against Duke Milan, in the name of Moscow Pan-Slavic committee.<sup>6</sup> The British emissary informed his government that in mid-April of the same year the Russian general was staying in Serbia again<sup>7</sup>

When the 1882 uprising broke out in Herzegovina, the British government feared of possible actions of Pan-Slavists in Serbia wanting to help their brothers in the area. Thus, Sidney Locock, the Minister resident, on May 1882, informed the Foreign Office that the Serbian authorities stopped a convoy of guns in Cacak, which were smuggled from Bulgaria to Bosnia. The convoy was accompanied by sixty 'armed to the teeth' Montenegrins, under the command of Stefan Lukic Jovanovic, the former Russian officer who had been expelled from the army and Jovan

Popovic Lipovac, who had had a similar fate.<sup>8</sup> Locock received reliable information that the Bulgarian government had sold seven thousand rifles to the Pan-Slavic Russian committee for the needs of the rebels in Herzegovina.

The British politics was interested in the attitude of king Milan to Pan-Slavic movement, although it had the information that he was not fond of it. King Milan clearly stated his opinion about the Pan-Slavic movement in an interview with Sidney Locock, on February 1882. On that occasion he expressed his most determined opposition to Pan-Slavism propagated by Russia on the Balkans. He accused the Pan-Slavic Russian emissaries for sowing seeds of discord everywhere.<sup>9</sup> For him, Pan-Slavism was dangerous also because he believed that Russia tended to remove him from the throne through the Pan-Slavic circles. In the years that followed, the British diplomats kept on tracking the Pan-Slavic activities. On February 1888, the emissary George Hughes Wyndham wrote that printing of the Pan-Slavic newspaper "Velika Srbija" (Great Serbia) was started in Belgrade, the publishing of which was supported by the Russian embassy in Belgrade and Pan-Slavic committees.<sup>10</sup> Beside the government that was concerned about the renewal of Pan-Slavism, the British press often wrote about the strong Pan-Slavic movement in Serbia. After the victory of the Radicals in the Assembly elections on September 1883, the Times published an article which expressed the fear that the Victory of Serbian radicalism would threaten the state of Serbia and its noble idea that had always strived for greatness and independence of Serbia. From the pages of this newspaper there came a warning about the fact that Serbian Radicals were representatives of Pan-Slavic agitation, whereas Pan-Slavism and the Serbian idea are not only different, but mutually exclusive. That is why, in the opinion of the editorial board, the fear that the triumph of the radicals marked the victory of the Radical Pan-Slavic agitation over the Great Serbian idea was reasonable.<sup>11</sup>

The facts indicate that the Serbian sovereign was in a bad relationship the Russian authorities. It was a crucial point for the British politics in its determination to support him and develop good relations with Serbia. Russia was unable to overcome the remarkable inclination of the Serbian king towards Austria, and was often involved in numerous campaigns of Milan's enemies and organizing conspiracies against him. The report sent to the Foreign Office by Locock on October 1883 was interesting and described a meeting with King Milan in detail. On that occasion he complained about the hostile attitude of Russia towards him and the secret work of the Russian policy on demolition of the Berlin Treaty provisions and his government: "Russia is still secretly working to achieve its ultimate goal, and whatever the difficulties that are in store for it, it does everything



to remove them, and the Berlin Treaty is the current obstacle. Since the moment when its authorized representatives left the Congress of Berlin, its goal has been to attempt to replace the treaty by the Treaty of San Stefano ... At present, Russia is operating on the Balkan Peninsula, especially in Bulgaria and here, it has personal reasons to have the country as an instrument and also wants to get rid of me, because I do not want to be its servant ... Russia will never forgive me. Rarely can I buy Russian newspapers without finding to read that I need to be removed and replaced by Karadjordjevic.<sup>12</sup> On that occasion, the king reiterated his stand that he would not work under instructions from Russia and would rather trust Austria that in his opinion "is not driven by the desire to eat us like Russia."<sup>13</sup> He also strongly believed that Russia was using the Radicals in order to eliminate him from the throne.

Constant fear of the British politics regarding a possible rapprochement between Serbia and Russia proved to be justified, which was supported by a report made by Locock on July 1883, which stated that King Milan authorized Jovan Marinovic to use his presence at the coronation of the new Russian Tsar in Moscow, to convey to the Russian government his desire to improve the relations between the two countries. The mission of Marinovic ended without success, because the Russian side had asked for much more than empty and solemn promises. It is interesting that the historian Slobodan Jovanovic believed that this mission represented an attempt of the Serbian king to deceive Russia with beautiful words.<sup>14</sup> In the same report Locock presented his assessment that the policy of Russia would not change and that it would continue to be directed against the Serbian king and the government.<sup>15</sup>

The British suspicion of good intentions of Russia in relation to Serbia was also shown during the stay of a large group of Russian surgeons in Belgrade during the Serbian-Bulgarian war. In his reports from January and April 1886 Wyndham informed London that the purpose of their presence was of political nature, i.e. that they used their stay for insertion of Russian agents into the country as well as for the return of Russian influence and affinity of the Serbs.<sup>16</sup> Wyndham indicated the bad relations between Serbia and Russia in the years that followed. On the July 1886 he met King Milan who kept warning him of the renewed strengthening of the Russian influence on the Balkans and Serbia, as well as of Russian encouragement given to the conspiracy against him.

Wyndham's report about his conversation with King Milan on June 1887 speaks distinctly about the ongoing interest of the British politics in the possible increase of Russian influence in Serbia. This meeting represented a sort of confession of the Serbian king, and justification of

certain actions. King Milan explained that the decision to appoint Jovan Ristic as a new Prime Minister had been made because the country at that time was permeated with Russophilia and because he could no longer rely on the support of the revolutionary minded army. This, however, did not change his commitment to Austria with his "heart and soul."<sup>17</sup> Great Britain kept receiving information from various sources that Russia continues to promote and organize a conspiracy against King Milan. This is supported by Wyndham in July 1887, when he warned London that Russia with the "help of Montenegrins encourages conspiracy against King Milan, and wants to bring Prince Petar Karadjordjevic to the Serbian throne".<sup>18</sup>

British representatives in Belgrade warned that a change of rulers in Serbia and increased influence of Russia on the Balkans could cause unforeseeable consequences for peace in the area.<sup>19</sup> A change on the Serbian throne would also cause a change in the direction of the foreign policy of Serbia, which was not in the interest of Great Britain, and that is why it very closely followed all the news about conspiracies against King Milan and his eventual abdication, using every moment to encourage and force him to give up the intention to voluntarily leave the throne.

The principle of preventing the creation of a wider community of the Balkan peoples adjoined the principle of respect for the existing situation on the Balkans and prevention of Russian expansion. The British government followed Serbian ideas to form a federation, confederation or a confederacy of Balkan states. Official London was always reserved and looked upon attempts to link the Balkan peoples and states with distrust, as each union could create a change in the established balance of power in favor of Russia and undermine the interests of Britain. That is why the British emissaries in Belgrade regularly inform their superiors about this sensitive issue.

To sum up

The British policy towards Serbia throughout the nineteenth century was based on the fundamental principles of its Balkan policy, and on typical Balkan pattern. This policy is characterized by distrust for the Serbian state, because of doubts regarding its sincere intention to respect the decisions of the Congress of Berlin in terms of maintaining the current situation on the Balkans. Great Britain fears of the increased Russian influence and expansion of Russophile and Slavophile feelings in the Serbian people. The Serbs were considered a perpetrator of the Russian policy on the Balkans, with Serbia as a possible "platzdarm" for the Russian breakthrough to Constantinople, even though at the time the official foreign policy of Serbia was very Austrophile oriented, and relations of the Serbian state and its rulers with Russia were on a very low level. That fact did not



diminish the constant vigilance of the British government and its almost panic fear that there could be a rapprochement between Serbia and Russia. Almost all reports of British representatives in Serbia contain information about the Russo-Serbian relations and the Pan-Slavic movement in Serbia.

The British policy also looked with disapproval upon all other efforts of King Milan and Serbian politicians to form a union of Balkan states, despite the fact that these plans were supposed to have the Turkish Sultan at the forefront of the union. All ideas about Balkan federations clashed with the British policy of maintaining the current situation on the Balkans, regulated by the provisions of the Berlin Congress. Strategically speaking, almost throughout the nineteenth century, the Serbian state and national interests were in conflict with the objectives of the British policy on the Balkans, although the ruler of Serbia after the Congress of Berlin was a great Austrophile, and who as such indirectly worked on actualization of the British policy on the Balkans.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gleason, *The Genesis of Russophobia in Great Britain: A Study of the Interaction of Policy and Opinion*, Cambridge 1950, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, 284-286.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*

<sup>4</sup> A. Rastovic, *Great Britain and Serbia 1878-1889*, Belgrade 2000, 80.

<sup>5</sup> М. Екмечић, *Стабилност Балкана и Срби, Међународни округли сто: Европа на раскршћу. Нови зидови или Уједињена Европа*, Зборник радова, бр. 17, Историјски институт САНУ, Београд 1999, 51.

<sup>6</sup> Foreign Office, 105/17, Gould to Granville, Belgrade, March 15, 1881. (further F. O.)

<sup>7</sup> F. O. 105/17, Gould to Granville, Belgrade, April 19, 1881.

<sup>8</sup> F. O. 105/32, Gould to Granville, Belgrade, May 20, 1882.

<sup>9</sup> F. O. 105/32, Locock to Granville, Belgrade, February 2, 1882.

<sup>10</sup> F. O. 105/67, Wyndham to Salisbury, Belgrade, February 3, 1888.

<sup>11</sup> Видело, Београд, 28. септембар 1883, бр. 114.

<sup>12</sup> F. O. 105/40, Locock to Granville, Belgrade, October 11, 1883.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*

<sup>14</sup> С. Јовановић, *Влада Милана Обреновића*, Београд 1990, I 166.

<sup>15</sup> F. O. 105/24, Locock to Granville, Belgrade, July 15, 1883.

<sup>16</sup> F. O. 105/55, Wyndham to Salisbury, Belgrade, January 6, 1886, F. O. 105/56, Wyndham to Rosebery, Belgrade, April 23, 1886.

<sup>17</sup> F. O. 105/63, Wyndham to Salisbury, Belgrade, June 23, 1887.

<sup>18</sup> F. O. 105/56, Wyndham to Rosebery, Belgrade, July 5, 1886.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*