

## The Failure of the Checks and Balances System in the Balkans: Another Cause of the First World War?

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"The immigration of Turkey from Rumelia to Asia"-caption: "but not so loud"

"Türkiye'nin Rumeli'den Asya'ya hicreti"  
"Çok Gürültü Çıkarmayın"  
3952/1 Verlag von Gustav Liersch & Co. Berlin S.W. 48.

Sometimes pictures may tell so many details about the time that they belong. It should be the eyes that have to discover the story with the help of the mind. The political cartoons that were published during and after the Balkan Wars offer such opportunities for scholars who would be willing to analyze the effects and the outcomes of a disaster which had set the prelude for a major European War. Indeed a cartoon may tell so much; looking at it, one may observe a still moment or a story that lies beneath.

### Prologue

In his article, *1914-The Third Balkan War-Origins Reconsidered*, Joachim Remak wrote:

“We have stood stooped over for too long now, searching for the underlying causes of the war. We have become so involved in subtleties that the obvious has sometimes escaped us; we have not seen the forest for the roots. The obvious fact is that the issue that led to Verdun and Versailles not only was Austro-Serb in origin, but that in the immediate crisis that followed, some of the most basic decisions affecting peace or war were made by Berchtold rather than Bethmann, and by Pasic rather than Sazanov.”<sup>1</sup>

Remak’s emphasis is on the verdict that the First World War started out of a Balkan conflict rather than a major crisis among the European Powers who had been confronting with each other since the late 1890’s. This verdict leads to the question, what was wrong with the Balkans that the reshaping of its political map between 1908 and 1914 brought the European system tumbling down?

In his memoirs, Edward Grey wrote: “The annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina was the first disturbance of the *status quo* of Turkey; Italy’s conquest of Tripoli was a shock to it; the Balkan Allies destroyed it.”<sup>2</sup> Though the dissolution of Ottoman Empire dates back to 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was after the Congress of Vienna that this issue became a major problem, under the name of Eastern Question. What was so special about Turkey’s *status quo* which the perishing of such a status brought the major war? Usually dubbed as “the sick man of Europe”, perhaps Turkey had some other value than being a devisor of vast land stretching from Balkans to Indian Ocean. Indeed, Grey’s emphasis on the disturbance of Turkey’s *status quo* is related to a change in the *balance of power* in the Balkans and this change is closely related with the probable disturbance of the *balance of power* of the European system as a whole. As a great champion of *balance of power*, Grey knew that the Balkan Wars destroyed the delicate structure deliberately constructed by the previous generation of statesman of Europe whom enjoyed the privileges of the late European Concert.

### **The Treaty of San Stefano and The Congress of Berlin:**

Though signed as a preliminary draft in March 1898 for the finalization of the Russo-Turkish War, the treaty of San Stefano was aimed to serve basis for further negotiation with the other Great Powers of Europe. In this sense Russia carved out a new political map for Balkans in favor for her future political plans. In dictating such a treaty to the succumbed Ottoman Empire, Russia’s political aims were to construct a sphere of influence within the Balkans united by Pan-Slavism. Upon signature the Ottoman Empire recognized the independence of her former vassals Serbia, Romania, Montenegro and therefore lost her political hegemony in the region. But the treaty supposed the emergence of a new Balkan state, Kingdom of Bulgaria, which was to gather vast amount of area including Macedonia and Rumelia.

Though San Stefano treaty was accepted as a legitimate implementation of a victor’s will over the adversary, in fact, its contents were rather problematic both for Russia’s Balkan ambitions, and for the European political system’s stability.<sup>3</sup> After the collapse of the first concert system in the

process of Unification Wars, the European system was in a process of consolidation upon its reshaping with the unifications of Italy and Germany. There was a tendency upon constructing a new concert and the Three Emperors League was a step for that purpose. A reinterpretation of the Holy Alliance of 1815, the League was only a loose coalition. After a bitter decade of unification wars, European powers were willing to cooperate but lacked an institutionalization like Congress of Vienna in 1815. Lacking such an institutionalization, the collective understanding of peace was too fragile to absorb a Balkan crisis which may antagonize the European powers.

After the signature of the treaty, there was a mood of dissatisfaction in Serbia about the new map and the vast territory which the new Bulgarian kingdom was supposed to be built, as Serbia claimed most of these territories as their ancestral lands.<sup>4</sup> The estrangement of Serbia and the position of Russia which forced her to choose sides between Serbia and Bulgaria would always be the problem for Russian Balkan policy, but in 1878 this problem was novel to Russian foreign policy. Nevertheless, this problem caused a power vacuum in the Balkans which emerged from the rapid exclusion of Ottoman power from the Balkans and the failure of Russian policy to reinstitute a stable regional balance. Moreover, Russia's position as a champion of Pan-Slavism became vague as Bulgaria became the focus of her Balkan policy. The Russian disregard which is closely shown in the content of San Stefano treaty unleashed a great suspicion and fear among the new Balkan states on Russia's future plans. As Russia became aware of her policy's failure, she hoped that the future conference which was sure to be held, would provide a position which she could save face.

It must be remembered that an understanding of collective action led the European powers to deal with Ottoman misrule in Balkans with a series of conferences in 1876, however failure in these negotiations forced Russia to act singlehanded by using military means. Yet, the massive Russian victory in 1878 did not deter the European states –primarily Britain- to claim that the point that is reached concerns the interests of all the major European powers and the previous treaties, such as London in 1841 and Paris in 1856, gave bases for such an involvement. In that sense, both Russia and the other powers knew well that the outcome of the war might not be decided by Russia alone but should be interpreted with the consent of the other powers too. With the consent of all major powers, the Congress of Berlin gathered in June 1878. The Congress was to act as an institution for building a collective peace for Europe and a supplement for pacifying the converging interests of Great Powers.

The final act of the Congress of Berlin which was announced at mid-July introduced revisions about the articles related about the proposed Bulgarian Kingdom. The revisions were mainly about rupturing the vast area which the Bulgarian Kingdom was supposed to reign. The Congress

unanimously accepted Serbia's, Montenegro's and Romania's independence but Bulgarian Kingdom was left as a vassal of Ottoman Sultan. Bulgaria was also deprived of the territory which San Stefano treaty had suggested. Instead the territory which lay between Albania to Thrace and from Dubrovnik to Thessaly was split to three. Macedonia and Eastern Rumelia was left to Ottoman Empire. Though nominally accepted as an Ottoman province, Bosnia Herzegovina were left to Austria-Hungarian administration. The territory left behind of this partition was to belong to Bulgarian Kingdom. Also minor border modifications were made in favor of the small Balkan states in which even Greece who did not involve in the recent conflict had gained some territory in Thessaly.<sup>5</sup>

Though the first impressions of political historians who base their analysis on realist theory may observe that the final outcome of the Congress of Vienna successfully eliminated the possibility of Russian hegemony over the Balkans which was about to be built through the clauses of San Stefano treaty. In that sense, it could be said that in the course of the congress, Britain successfully suspended Russian intrusion to Mediterranean through the greater Bulgaria and also Austria-Hungary who was distracted by the independence of Serbia and Montenegro upon her borders, aimed at providing herself a powerful position in the Balkans by obtaining the administration of Bosnia Herzegovina and Sandjak. However given the circumstances which European powers gathered in Berlin in the sense of building a collective peace, the whole analysis may be interpreted in another sense.

### **Introduction of the Checks and Balances System in the Balkans:**

In his presentation of the debate over the war-prone structure of bipolarity and multipolarity, John Mearsheimer states that the claim on bipolar systems war-prone structure rests on three main arguments. These are first, "there is one great power versus great power dyad" and when the number of great powers increases than there is more chances that they go into conflict; second, the limited resources tend to be distributed more equally in bipolar systems, therefore increasing the chance of power balancing; thirdly, there is less chance of conflict over misunderstanding the adversaries, that is bipolarity has a structure more prone to communication than conflict as there is only one adversary.<sup>6</sup> Naturally all three combined maximize the chance of balancing as other great powers to form coalitions and alliances is nonexistent and therefore only lesser powers are present to cooperate in a strong hierarchy. Therefore great powers in bipolarity tend to stabilize their own sphere of influences than interfering in the sphere of the other.

Mearsheimer's presentation of the argument on war-prone structure of multipolar systems is based on two arguments. First, as the number of great powers increases within the system, there will be more chances for deterrence, an aggressor would have to concern about taking on multiple

great powers, probably in a coalition against itself. Though balancing is more difficult in multipolarity chances of forming deterrent coalitions is much more than bipolarity. Second, it is assumed that the more the number of great powers, the less the attention that they will pay to each other. As the number of opponents increase, the percentage of the attention decreases per opponent. Also multipolarity mitigates more equality to the actors and tends to constitute a loose hierarchy than bipolarity.<sup>7</sup>

Mearsheimer's last emphasis is on unipolarity. He states that unipolarity is war-prone as there is only one power on the top of the hierarchy and minor powers tend to get out of the way to avoid conflict with the sole pole.<sup>8</sup> Such unipolarity creates a hegemon to constitute the status quo based on a strong hierarchy that is kept in order by the hegemon itself.

Peace is status quo that is accepted unanimously by the members who are involved in the decision of making it. Therefore peace is a collective action and those who do not accept the status quo are threats to be neutralized. Although the word "neutralization" may refer to action or use of force, it could also be argued that creating hierarchies may both force responsibilities on great powers for maintenance of peace through stabilizing a balance and deter smaller units in taking action against status quo to fulfill their individual interests. The case of the arrangements of the Congress of Berlin is related with such a scheme. The failure of Russia's Balkan policy which had created a major power vacuum was fixed with a checks and balances system which is delicately planned and introduced by the European Great Power Elite.

In the case of Balkans, the positive and negative historical roots of Ottoman hegemony which dominates the small Balkan states and the very same means which creates a sense of inferiority on them was to be sustained.

As mentioned before, the failure of Russia's Balkan policy emerged from the context of San Stefano treaty in which Russia was unable to balance the territorial ambitions of the new liberated Balkan states. Focusing on Bulgaria as a potential Russian satellite, Russia could not predict the reactions of both Serbia and Romania whom have tremendous contributions to the Pan-Slav case and the Russo-Turkish war of 1878. These small states also felt that their freedom from the Turkish rule was won by their own efforts and not by Russian intervention alone. So the act of San Stefano treaty which had created a *fait accompli* in case of Bulgarian Kingdom was seen as a singlehanded affair in which Russia betrayed the Slav case. Especially clear in Serbia's case, the new political environment called for individual cases and Serbia detached herself from the grand policy of Pan Slavism, at least from the Russian vision of that policy. The success of the Congress of Berlin was the

introduction of the new Balkan hierarchy which Russia was unable to erect and naturally introduction of the new hierarchy aimed at keeping the small Balkan states at bay.

The peace building effort in Berlin produced a checks and balances system which echeloned in a row that a great power duality on the top which would form both a great power deterrence against any attempt to injure the system, a mid power which would form a check over the lesser powers and finally the local powers whose ambitious territorial interest form the main threat to the stability. There were important necessities to be fulfilled which concern the first two levels. The great powers should be in concert to form a balance in the sense of bipolarity. However this balance would not rest on rivalry but it would form a polarity in which the lesser powers bandwagon behind the great powers to form the balance. However there is always a chance that in such a system the local crises that flame out of the individual interest of the lesser powers tend to pull in the great powers who don't want to lose their domination over their followers. Such a reverse of control makes it impossible to localize any regional conflict and therefore war becomes inevitable. That was the reason for creating a checking agent over the small powers; an agent which was created deliberately to subdue the lesser powers, a "scarecrow" literally which should strike hate but who seemed too powerful to take action against. As the image should be created, it was grave important that the great power duality would cooperate for protecting the necessary means and myths which provided the mid power its position.

The top level of the checks and balances system was formed by two East European Empires which defined major interests in the region. Bosnia Herzegovina was given to Austro-Hungarian control whereas Bulgaria was made open for Russian influence. This exercise was done in a sense of creating a duality which appears to constitute a balance in which minor states may choose their sides for bandwagoning.<sup>9</sup> But the previous practice that brought Russia's failure in her Balkan policy revealed that small states were prone to cause conflicts in seeking out their individual benefits and were irresponsible in maintaining the stability. If the leading great power fail to realize or materialize their interests there happen a power vacuum which small states seek to fulfill their ambitions singlehanded, therefore creating a chaos. Worse they may seek to align with the other power and tend to force the alliance to its own individual benefit. Such coalitions tend to replace balance with rivalry within the given sphere. There was a tendency in the Balkans towards such negative scenarios in the interval between San Stefano treaty and Congress of Berlin and therefore the creation of Austro-Hungarian and Russian duality was not enough to secure the balance. There was also a need to create the "scarecrow", the mid power which would consume the energies of the small powers and therefore deflecting their ambitions in forcing the great powers to a rivalry. It was in that sense, the utterly defeated Ottoman Empire was restored to power in Balkans with a substantial amount of

territory to give her the presence of a mid power. It was expected that the Ottoman “scarecrow” planted in Macedonia would form a target which would keep the small Balkan states interests busy but also an obstacle which they can’t tackle alone. The reinstatement of Ottoman power was augmented with the proclamation that though Bosnia Herzegovina was given Austro-Hungarian control and Bulgaria was claimed as a Kingdom, they were nominally both Ottoman provinces. It was in that sense which the Great Power duality was supposed to support the myth of the mid power status of the Ottoman Empire and in return the Ottoman “scarecrow” would create the necessary submission which would force the lesser powers to stick more to their Great Power ties. It was balance through bandwagoning.

The checks and balances system introduced by the Congress of Berlin integrated three characteristics of multipolarity, bipolarity and unipolarity in different levels. On the higher level the system is bipolar which is presented by the Austro-Hungarian and Russian duality. On the mid level, Ottoman Empire who regained Macedonia stood as a middle power supported by the great power duality which could still exercise her hegemony over the small Balkan states. Her position characterizes unipolarity. The lower level which is constituted by the small Balkan states has multipolar characteristics which the individual interests of each state superseded the common interests, if there was any. It seemed that the only common motive was the hate against Ottoman hegemony but the small states did not have any basis neither for collective action, nor they had the power to take individual action. It was this weakness that the major European powers hoped would force these small states towards bandwagoning because it would have become their only choice.

#### **The Checks and Balances System in Action:**

Though the implementation of the decisions that were taken in the Congress of Berlin took some time; once settled, the checks and balances system surprisingly started to ease the tensions in the region. Both Serbia and Romania inclined their policies to bandwagoning with Austria-Hungary. In 1880, a secret treaty of cooperation was signed between Austria-Hungary and Serbia.<sup>10</sup> In 1883, Romania signed an alliance treaty with Austria-Hungary.<sup>11</sup> By the signature of such treaties which promised Austro-Hungarian support, both Serbia and Romania intended to form a balance with Bulgaria which was backed by Russia. Though neither Austria-Hungary, nor Russia had any challenges between them, they both were eager to fulfill their share of hegemony within the region. The positive mood that stemmed out of the handling of the Balkan problems in harmony led to the establishment of the Second Three Emperors League in 1882. The collaboration of Austria-Hungary and Russia for acting in consensus provided the circumstances which the Ottoman Empire may act as a checking agent. It should also be noted that in this era, the main focus of Russian foreign policy

shifted from Balkans to the Far East and cooperation with Austria-Hungary in Balkan issues was welcomed. Both Great Powers enjoyed the luxury of defining common interests in their Balkan policies and naturally this good mood is reflected within the European system as a whole.

Though the Russian withdrawal from the Balkans gave a free hand to Austria-Hungary, there was a tendency in the small states to get into conflict for territorial disputes. Usually the claims either rested on irredentist claims or territorial demands based on the context of San Stefano treaty. Such was the reason of the war of 1885 which the Bulgarian annexation of Eastern Rumelia was the cause of Serbian declaration of war. If not properly managed, these kinds of conflicts usually carried the risk of widening but the presence of Ottoman check which was effectively backed by the support of the great power duality precluded the expansion of such conflicts. This interpretation can be best seen in the peace making process of the Servo-Bulgarian War of 1885. The checks and balances system effectively localized the conflict that had emerged from the fears and ambitions of two small rival states. While the fear of upsetting the great power balance suspended Russian intervention to the conflict, Austria-Hungary's coercive diplomatic pressure on the belligerents ensured the finalization of the fighting. As the great power duality fulfilled their responsibility, the peace between Serbia and Bulgaria was signed under the guidance of Ottoman officials as Bulgaria was still formally a vassal of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup>

As the checks and balances system settled on its course in 1890's, it was possible to observe some attributes that emerged. First, with the pacification of the region, Austria-Hungary and Russia invested in much cooperation in Balkans politics, therefore creating a stronger stability and equilibrium at the level of great power balance. This was mainly due to Russia's growing activity in the Far East in which she wanted to feel secure her backyard in East Europe giving a free hand to Austria-Hungary in the Balkans. In that sense Austria-Hungary found the opportunity to exercise her power politics in the Balkans without a rival. The power monopoly sustained by Austria-Hungary gave the bipolar system unipolar characteristics at the great power level.

Second, as Austria-Hungary dominated the Balkan power politics, Ottoman Empire increasingly became a source of hatred for the Balkan states. This was both due to the unopposed power of Austria-Hungary which by far superseded any Balkan state and also due to the policies of the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamit who exercised his hegemony by investing on the weaknesses of the Balkan states that lacked strong military power but also the cohesion to act together. The antagonisms between the small Balkan states were skillfully processed by Abdulhamit's administrative challenges such as the case in the separation of the administration of the Balkan churches.<sup>13</sup> Even though there was also a feeling of unhappiness against Austro-Hungarian

domination, there was always a sense of negotiation, there was none with Abdulhamit. As the approach of inferiority dominated the Ottoman-Balkan states relations, the outcome of Abdulhamit's divide and rule policies created a sense of *revanche* against Ottoman Empire and Turks.<sup>14</sup>

However there was also another reason for the negative feeling against the ottoman rule too and this was because of Macedonia. Macedonia's significance was that almost every Balkan nation claimed a historical bond to this land and with a mixture of populations from nearly all Balkan nations; all the Balkan states defined Macedonia as a land of their ancestors which needed to be redeemed from the Ottoman oppression.<sup>15</sup> By late 1890's, Ottoman Empire was still a formidable power for the small Balkan states to counter and also Macedonia was a too vast land to any Balkan state to claim for oneself.

For the purpose of maintaining the stability of the region, in May 1897, Austria-Hungary and Russia unilaterally declared that they agreed on maintaining the current Balkan status quo and oppose any power to upset it. They also proclaimed that the problems related with Constantinople and the Straits were in interests of all European powers and therefore could not be subject of an agreement between them alone.<sup>16</sup> With this declaration, both states proclaimed their cooperation and indicated that they were aware that their unanimity was closely related with the European concert. Such proclamations tend to consolidate Ottoman Empire's mid-power position and discouraged the small Balkan states about their conflicting intensions. Such was the case for Crete in 1898. The Great Powers who stood in concert maintained the Balkan status quo by preventing Ottoman Empire crushing Greece in the Turco-Greek War of 1897 and placed the disputed island of Crete under the guidance of Great Power concert. This solution effectively discouraged Greece's intensions to annex Crete but at the same time restrained Ottoman Empire's any military reaction which may upset the stability in the region.

Even though both the European Great Power concert and the Austro-Hungarian and Russian duality favored and cooperated for stability of Balkans, there was a brewing tension within the region. Beginning from the early 1890's, almost every Balkan state began to put forward irredentist claims for Macedonia and complained about the corrupt Ottoman rule. This evolving chaos was further inflamed by Abdulhamit's single-handed rule which both resisted any kind of reform that was called from both by the Great Powers and by the Ottoman intelligentsia. Instead he kept on playing the Balkan nations' hatred to each other which stem from nationalist approaches, in a sense that such an action would kept their focus away from Ottoman Empire. By the turn of the century, Macedonia became a shooting ground of the bandit gangs which were sponsored by the rival Balkan states and the irredeemable Ottoman order start to decline sharply.

The nationalist turmoil in Macedonia and the sharp decline of Ottoman order which fail to sustain any security for the population naturally gave way to uprisings. There was a steady stream of uprisings in 1902 and 1903 which have resulted by oppressive Ottoman reaction.<sup>17</sup> The steady decline of Ottoman authority in Macedonia was an important breach to the integrity of the system because of the status which Ottoman Empire held as the mid power. Finally in 1903, there was a war scare between Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria who claimed to protect the ethnic Bulgarians of Macedonia from the Ottoman oppression. After a short diplomatic crisis, Bulgaria only yielded when other Balkan states agreed on maintaining the status quo. This incident clearly demonstrated that the Ottoman Empire's status which proved effective over the smaller Balkan states was eroding and that the power status of the Ottoman Empire is evidently becoming nonexistent. The folly of the "scarecrow" was revealed.

The failure of Ottoman Empire to fulfill her checking role upon the Balkan states clearly demonstrated such a failure might bring chaotic results for the Balkan system. Therefore in order to keep the Ottoman Empire in the game, Austria-Hungary and Russia proposed the so-called *Vienna Proposal* in early 1903 compromising administrative reformation for the Ottoman rule in Macedonia. In September 1903, based on the previous proposal, the *Mürzsteg Program* was submitted to the Ottoman Empire. The program suggested a two year reform program, mostly about building a new organization for the security of the population in Macedonia. The reformation was to be interpreted with the guidance of European officials.<sup>18</sup> The *Mürzsteg Program* was the last effort of the duality to give Ottoman Empire the chance to pursue her role within the system. However neither Abdul Hamid, nor his bureaucracy got the message. There was a great deal of resistance on the Turkish side and though the proposal was accepted formally, these reforms were never executed.

### **The Breakdown of the Checks and Balances System:**

David Stevenson argues that the European balance of power which had rested on eastern and western equilibriums among the great powers began to shatter from 1908 to 1914 and as the balance of power was broken the final outcome was the First World War. He states that the first damage which broke down the equilibrium was the Bosnian Crises of 1908.<sup>19</sup> Contrary to his argument, this paper suggested that there had been a much more complex structure in the Balkans than the mere equilibrium of two major powers. From 1878 to the early 1900 the two major powers did not put up a rivalry as their interests were in favor of cooperation and indeed there was no tension within the region as all the problems were effectively localized. The mid power status given to the Ottoman Empire worked perfectly and her position as a "scarecrow" constituted the check over the small states. The hierarchy that echeloned in three stages worked completely.

Between 1903 and 1908 there were a number of changes took place which would affect the structure of the checks and balances system. Unlike the crises which stemmed out of the decomposition of Ottoman hegemony, these events disturbed the cooperative mood of the duality of Great Powers that had formed the balance through bandwagoning.

In 1904, a *coup d'état* in Serbia, which was plotted and executed by the ultra nationalist officers of the army, brought down the pro-Austro-Hungarian Obrenovich dynasty and gave the throne to the pro-Russian Karageorgevich dynasty. The rapid reaction of Austria-Hungary came in form of a massive boycott on the Serbian exports. It was thought that Serbia would succumb to Austro-Hungarian reaction as the dual monarchy was her only trade partner. However Serbia was successful in breaking the Austro-Hungarian boycott by finding new partners, such as United States. The so-called *Pig War* which had lasted until 1906 had ended with the loss of Austro-Hungarian supremacy over Serbia and moreover the ending of bandwagoning policies for Serbia . Moreover, the new government under Prime Minister Nikola Pasic was eager to promote Serbia to the status of a regional power through Pan-Slavist irredentism. Unfortunately, his plans for this generally challenged Austria-Hungary's position in the Balkans.<sup>20</sup>

By the loss of her domination over Serbia, Austria-Hungary chose to lean on Serbia's rival Bulgaria as a deterrent. However, Austria-Hungary's new Balkan approach which demanded cooperation with Bulgaria was based on necessity rather than supremacy. Therefore from the outset of this rapprochement, Austria-Hungary was not in a position to bar Bulgaria's territorial ambitions and force her to bandwagon. Instead the new situation demanded a coalition against the more ambitious Serbia, a potential rival to both states. The other side of the scale was formed by Serbia who turns her attention to seek Russia's support which is necessary to end her forced isolation. The loss of Austro-Hungarian power domination over the Balkan states and the possible replacement of Austro-Hungarian and Russian cooperation with polarization was a shift in the character of the system structure which was based on unipolarity at the balance level to bipolarity.

After these changes in the structure of the Balkan system, the scale would have been tipped to equilibrium in 1906, if Russia had not suffered a major defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905; but loosing almost all of her sea power, 1/3 of her land power and standing on the brink of revolution and bankruptcy Russia was far too weak to appear on the side of Serbia as a formidable balancer.<sup>21</sup> The nonexistence of Russian force meant that Austria-Hungary could act freely –at least for some time- and it was obvious that the reshaping of the balance of the system was not in equilibrium and therefore the significance of the checking agent was once again become fatally important. In 1906, still the Balkan provinces of Austria-Hungary were nominally belonged to Ottoman Empire and the

Bulgarian Kingdom was still a vassal of Ottoman throne. Ruling over Macedonia and Albania Ottoman Empire was still the biggest Balkan state nominally. Finally, it should be noted that the conflicting issue between Serbia and Bulgaria was Macedonia and therefore the only possible enemy common to both was Ottoman Empire. As long as Ottoman presence prevailed in Balkans, the small Balkan states would be checked in their ambitions and the polarization of the great powers would not lead to a conflict but a balance; but the strength of the Ottoman Empire's status firmly rested on the support of the Great Powers and as they were about to enter into rivalry, the future gave no prospects of Great Power support for Ottoman Empire.

There was an interval which Ottoman Empire had the opportunity to relieve herself from her need of a support. Like the coup in Serbia in 1903, the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 was an unexpected incident and it brought down Abdulhamit's long standing unpopular rule. The revolution initially was welcomed by domestically and internationally, as the new regime promised a new constitution aimed at revising the Ottoman corrupted rule in Balkan provinces. Logically, this was also valid for Bosnia Herzegovina which was under Austro-Hungarian control but nominally belonged to Ottoman Empire. The Austro-Hungarian Foreign Minister A. Lexa von Aehrenthal who had recently appointed to the office had no intention to leave Bosnia Herzegovina, if the new Turkish government reclaimed her provinces. In fact, the time couldn't have been better for Austria-Hungary to annex the provinces once and for all.

Though the new Turkish regime still enjoyed a degree of support from Britain, the positive mood of the revolution was waning. The new regime was unsuccessful in changing the identity of being the "sick man of Europe" and Austria-Hungary had seen no sense in contributing in curing the sickness. Instead Austria-Hungary herself needed a power projection over the Balkans after her set back in the *Pig War*. An annexation of Bosnia Herzegovina would serve as a gesture of Austro-Hungarian power to Serbia as the majority of the population was ethnic Slavs which Serbia claimed that they were ethnic Serbs. The time was also right as the other Western Powers were tired of the stress of Moroccan Crises and the following negotiations in Algeciras Conference; on the other side Russia was still too weak to oppose the outcome. Even so, Aehrenthal informed his Russian counterpart Islovski in a secret meeting in Bachlau and in return promised him the Austro-Hungarian support in diplomatic efforts about opening up the straits. In another secret arrangement, he also plotted a plan with Bulgaria for a simultaneous declaration of her independence with Austria-Hungary's unilateral annexation declaration.

In the beginning of October in 1908, Bulgaria declared her independence and one day later Austria-Hungary announced that she had annexed Bosnia Herzegovina. The plot was obvious but also

it was a *fait accompli* as Ottoman rule had been non-existent in neither of these territories. Even Ottoman response was not so loud, only protests on the level of governments and a boycott to Austro-Hungarian trade materials which Austria-Hungary easily redeemed herself with a proper amount of cash given to the Turkish government. However the strongest reaction came from Serbia who refused to recognize the annexation. In a desperate search for partners, her efforts to gather a Balkan coalition against Austria-Hungary and Bulgaria came to naught. As war clouds start to gather on Austria-Hungary and Serbia, Russia step in the pot. This was due to Russia's frustration over Aehrenthal's recanted promises about the Straits but to a higher degree about Serbia being the last partner which Russia could hold on in the Balkans. However Russian support utterly diminished as Germany joined the conflict by supporting Austria-Hungary with a very 'heavy' declaration to Russia in which she warned Russia to step out and if not she would exercise the obligations of the Triple Alliance. This meant a threat of war which Russia was too weak to tackle. After Russian withdrawal, Serbia succumbed to Austro-Hungarian pressure.<sup>22</sup>

In Stevenson's argument, Bosnian Crisis constituted the major turning point in the breaking up of the European equilibrium and indeed many writers analyze Bosnian Crisis as one of the origins of the war. This paper too accepts Bosnian Crisis should be studied as an origin of the First World War but in the context of the breakdown of the checks and balances system. The argument rests on the power loss of Ottoman Empire which was clearly demonstrated over the course of the crisis which would hinder her position as a checking agent. While Austria-Hungary aimed at repairing her rapid deteriorating power status through a show of force, she was not aware that the outcome would be nothing but a pyrrhic victory. Most historians argue that the crises created a Bermudan triangle between Austria-Hungary, Serbia and Russia which six years later sucked these states in to war; however the cause of the outbreak of the war was not only a mere crisis of an unsettled balance between Austria-Hungary and Russia but the absence of a checking agent –the scarecrow- to absorb and consume Serbia's energy. What Austria-Hungary's recklessness in 1908 crises was the disclosure of Ottoman weakness which was effectively masqueraded and defended earlier. After 1908, almost all Balkan states were encouraged to demand their share from Ottoman provinces and "free their people who were suffering" under the Turkish yoke. After the Bosnian Crises, the checks and balances system was completely broken down, the scale which could not find equilibrium between Austria-Hungary and Russia was unable to sustain any balance and Ottoman Empire's weakness revealed that the mid power who was supposed to act as a checking agent was not fit to this status anymore. As the high levels of the system hierarchy became unstable, the initiative passed to the small powers that were focused on their territorial ambitions rather than the stability of the Balkans.

Lacking the formal characteristics of both unipolarity and bipolarity, the Balkan system had developed a chaotic multipolar character.

### **The Destruction of the Checks and Balances System:**

The consequences of the 1908 may vary but one way or another they had opened up a path for destruction of the checks and balances system. The polarization of the great power duality which had gone to extremes after the crisis was prone to conflict and antagonism as Russia was not willing to lose face at the side of Serbia. So after 1908, Russia once again put forward the Pan-Slavist card. Russian efforts were successful in persuading Serbia and Bulgaria in giving up their territorial interests and accept Russian Tsar as their arbiter in case of dispute; the Balkan Alliance came to life in 1911.<sup>23</sup>

It should be remembered that the position of Russia in 1911 was very similar with her situation in 1878 as once again she quickly lost control of the situation she had created. The Russian dilemma of falling between Serbia and Bulgaria was never effectively managed. Nevertheless, by creating the Balkan Alliance between Serbia and Bulgaria, Russia acted as much recklessly as Austria-Hungary. Though designed to create a united front against Austria-Hungary, Balkan Alliance got out of Russia's control almost immediately. As Montenegro and Greece joined in the existing alliance, the continuity of the checks and balances system was to be put to its final test. The time was perfect for the alliance to take action as the Ottoman Empire was going through both domestic and international crises. Though a distant fight from the main Ottoman geography, The Libyan War with Italians consumed the remaining prestige of the tired empire, but the major crises was the Albanian uprising which has started in 1911 and escalated rapidly. Unable to initialize any reforms, Ottoman rule in Macedonia was corrupted and virtually nonexistent. However still presenting a formidable force, Ottoman army exceeded the combined forces of the Balkan states –at least on paper- and this was seen in the eyes of the Great Powers as an obstacle which the smaller Balkan states never would dare to face.

The Balkan Wars which had started in October 1912 was the final stroke which completely demolished the checks and balances system. The final remains of the structure which had been built in 1878 were utterly removed in the process of the First Balkan War. Anticipating an Ottoman victory, the Great Powers announced their intention to maintain the Balkan status quo from whatever outcome of the war would be; but the rapid victories of Balkan armies over their opponents necessitated an effort to keep the developing situation under control. However the Ottoman military collapse was so complete that neither Great Powers was successful a peace building or nor Tsar Nicholas in playing his role as an arbiter for distributing the gains to the alliance.

Though Ottoman presence was utterly expelled from Macedonia, the territory became a new source of dispute which Bulgaria chose to settle the issue by attacking Serbia and Greece. Bulgaria's attempt was quickly undone by her utter defeat. The peace negotiations which had started in ended up in May 1913 with the Treaty of Bucharest, which was designed to fit the latest status quo which Serbia and Greece shared Macedonia between each other while Bulgaria was pushed aside. The new situation effectively displayed the exclusion Ottoman Empire from both Balkans.

Perhaps it could be said that the main problem with the reckless attitudes of the great powers over Balkans rest on different motives. Almost all of the great powers were engaged in their own narrow views of the European system. Though still nominally appeared as a great power club, the concert which had established the Balkan status quo so deliberately on the guarantees of checks and balances was not present anymore. It was interesting that the Great Powers that had designed the peace were represented by their major political figures in Berlin in 1878; however the gathering which had monitored the peace negotiations in London in 1912 was only ambassadors of Great powers whom were hastily gathered by Edward Grey.<sup>24</sup> There was not even an official meeting and definitely no intention upon building a collective peace. Grey and others were only interested in securing corrections on the forthcoming peace map which had already drawn by the force of the Balkan armies. There was even a mood of relief as the Ottoman naissance which had resisted for so long was undone but how much difference was there between Austria-Hungary and Russia in faring better than Ottomans in fulfilling their responsibilities in the Balkans? History reveals the answer.

After 1913, there was a new status quo in the Balkans which was resting on a balance which was not in equilibrium. Moreover the balance was not in control of the great powers; but above all there was not a mid power to fulfill the role of a checking agent. Without the "scarecrow" distorting the attentions of the small powers, it was obvious that any future conflict was prone to trigger a major crisis.

## **Epilogue**

When Joachim Remak argued that "1914-1918 was the longest but by no means the only war of the Turkish succession"<sup>25</sup> and it was the Third Balkan War; he had a point. In his reply Paul Schroeder, counter argued that the great power system which had dominated Europe was also wavering and in 1914 it just broke down; he also had a point. But there seems to be a missing link between Remak's Balkan System and Schroeder's European Great Power System that should have linked their operations; a conjunction which had combined the attention of both European great powers and Balkan states to an extent the former should care and the latter should hate...

It seemed that there was wisdom in Grey's identification of Turkey as the *status quo*. Though he was not fond of Ottoman Empire, he knew well that in her absence European powers would need to involve in Balkan issues which were effectively suspended by Ottoman Empire's artificial power. What he could not determine was that it was the mid power position that was granted to Ottoman Empire and which was faithfully supported for fulfilling of the responsibility she had; and yet she did her part in creating a barrier which could absorb the negative energies of the small Balkan states thus saving Europe from further concern. Macedonia symbolized the Ottoman "scarecrow" and both Macedonia and Ottoman presence checked the small states by keeping them busy over a disputed territory and a common enemy. What Austria had done in 1908 was the first stroke to level the Ottoman hegemony's myth in the eyes of the small Balkan states and the second stroke came from Russia who had recklessly formed the Balkan alliance, a coalition which obviously could have only acted against one possible enemy which was common to all members. Indeed Balkan was successfully removed the checking agent out of the Balkan system. The status quo of 1878 was effectively damaged by the local great powers and utterly demolished by the small ones.

The Bosnian assassination could have been one of the local crises in Balkans. However in sub systems, the challenge between a great power and a local small power usually escalates with an intrusion of another great power. This intrusion usually is a balancing act, however the small power tends to antagonize the balance between the great powers forestalling the localization chance of the conflict. In such cases only a local mid power had the ability to settle the negative effect of the small power. From the assassination crises to the outbreak of the war, there was nearly a month in which great powers could have mediated a localization of the conflict. In fact Russia's practice somehow was based on the same reason. However if Austria-Hungary had the wisdom of recognizing Bosnia and Herzegovina as nominally Ottoman provinces, instead of annexing them and if Russia had the wisdom of preventing a coalition instead of playing the role of big brother without a cause, there would not have been any Balkan Wars, neither the first or the second, nor the third which Remak pointed out...

Finally, the cartoon in the first page reveals the scheme of the checks and balances system and its downfall... Removal of a necessary component brings the whole structure down. The exclusion of the Ottoman Empire from the Balkans shattered the whole basis which the European system rested on. The failure of the checks and balances system was indeed should be considered a cause of the First World War.

A final verdict: The scarecrow is broken...



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<sup>1</sup> Joachim Remak, "1914- The Third Balkan War: Origins Reconsidered", *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 1971, pp. 353–366.

<sup>2</sup> Grey, Edward, **25 Years**, London, Houdner and Stoughton Ltd. 1935, Vol.2, p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> A full analysis on the Issues that concern San Stefano Treaty and the Congress of Berlin can be found in the in: George Douglas Campell, Duke of Argyll, **Eastern Question**, London, Strahan and Company Limited, 1879, pp 136-214.

<sup>4</sup> The Serbian Foreign Minister Chedomille Mijatovitch recals the dissappointment caused by thier "Slav Cousins" and describes the mood in Serbia in his memoirs. Chedomille Mihatovitch, **Memoirs of a Balkan Diplomatist**, London, Cassel and Co, 1917, p. 31-36. Fort he diplomatic procedures and the reactions of Sebia and Montenegro to San Stefano Treaty, see: David Mckenzie, **The Serbs and Russian Pan-Slavism, 1875-1878**, New York, Cornell University Press, 1967, pp. 248-271.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Rich, **Great Power Diplomacy 1814-1914**, New York, Mc Graw-Hill, 1991, p. 226-227.

<sup>6</sup> John Meirsheimer, "Structural Realism", Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, Steve Smith, **International Relations Theories**, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p 79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p 79-80.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 80.

<sup>9</sup> For the theory of Balancing and Bandwagoning, see:

Stephen J. Walt, **Origins of Alliances**, New York, Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>10</sup> For the details of this treaty see. Mijatovitch, op cit., pp. 36-45.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Jelavich and Barbara Jelavich, **The Establishment of Balkan National States 1804-1920**, 4th edition, Seattle, Washington University Press, 2000, p. 186-187.

<sup>12</sup> Chedomille Mijatovitch, who was presenting Serbia in the peace neagotiations recalls the shame and hatred of him and his Bulgarian collegaues in negotiating under the Ottoman guidance. Mijatovitch. op cit. , pp. 24-29.

<sup>13</sup> For the problem of the separation of the administration of the Balkan churches, see: Fikret Adanır, **Makedonya Sorunu**, translated by Ihsan Catay, İstanbul, Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 1996, pp. 38-61 and Canan Seyfeli, "Osmanlı Salnamelerinde Bulgar Eksarhlığı ve Bulgar Katolikleri (1847-1918)", **Ankara Universitesi İlahiyat Fakultesi Dergisi**, 52:2 (2011), pp 157-190.

<sup>14</sup> Aram Andonyan, **Balkan Harbi Tarihi**, translated by: Zaven Biberyan, İstanbul, Sander Yayınları, 1975, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Mathew Smith Anderson, **The Eastern Question 1774-1923: A Study in International Relations**, London, Mc Millan, 1966, p 261-262.

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<sup>17</sup> For detailed information about the *Cuma* and *Ilinden* uprisings, see: Adanır, op. cit., pp. 172-213; Andrew Rossos, **Macedonia and the Macedonians**, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2008, pp. 106-113.

<sup>18</sup> It should be noted that the first call for reform in Macedonia came from Britain. Barbara Jelavich, **History of the Balkans 20th Century**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> David Stevenson, **Armaments and the Coming of the War**, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996.

<sup>20</sup> R. W. Seton-Watson, **Sarajevo: A Study on the Origins of the Great War**, London, Hutchinson, 1926, pp 26-29.

<sup>21</sup> For the situation of Russia after the Russo-Japanese War, see: William C. Fuller J.r., **Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914**, New York, Free Press, 1992, pp.394-418.

<sup>22</sup> For Bosnian Crisis of 1908, see: Bernadotte E. Schmitt, **The Annexation of Bosnia 1908-1909**, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1937 and also R. W. Seton-Watson, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Edward C. Thaden, **Russia and the Balkan Alliance of 1912**, Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965.

<sup>24</sup> Grey, op. cit., Vol 2, pp.91- 95.

<sup>25</sup> Remak, op. cit., p 365.