

Eleonora Naxidou

Assistant Professor of Modern History of Southeastern Europe,

School of Classical Studies and Humanities,

Department of History and Ethnology,

Democritus University of Thrace, Greece

e-mail: enaxidou@he.duth.gr

- **Paper presented at the 2021 ASN World Convention, 5-8 May 2021**
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Serbian Liberals and their Plans for Balkan Federation (1860-1880)

Introduction

This presentation focuses on the plans for the creation of a Balkan federation which were put forward in the 1860's and '70's by Serbian liberals both in the Serbian Principality and Vojvodina in the Habsburg Empire in order to highlight an alternative and understudied version for settling the Eastern Question in the 19th century. Being essentially about determining the political state of affairs in Southeast Europe after the anticipated collapse of the Ottoman Empire this issue triggered intense European competition, which brought to the fore a number of initiatives and proposals -both formal and informal- for the future status of the contested territories. Those aiming to divide and rule the European territories of the Ottoman Empire were difficult to implement, because not only were they opposed to the established principle of not upsetting the balance of power¹, but also because they went counter to the efforts of the Balkan peoples to gain independent political status². Another option, which also proved unfeasible, concerned plans for a future Balkan Federation, modelled on similar political formations in Europe and the New World -such as the Swiss Confederation, and the United States of America, respectively- which together with nation-states gradually substituted the imperial model of governance. Such proposals which were submitted by politicians, diplomats, intellectuals, or

¹ This principle resulted from the agreement to maintain the status quo, which was signed in Vienna in 1815 by the 'Holy Alliance'.

² In 1830 the Serbs gained autonomy and the Greeks independence.

revolutionaries, both European and Balkan³, at different times and under different circumstances, had little impact and limited practical value being mostly of general and vague nature. Finally, the political principle of nationalism, which dictated that the nation and state coincided,⁴ prevailed in the Balkans. The Ottoman Empire was replaced by nation-states after revolutionary actions alongside military and diplomatic support from the European Powers.

In the Balkans the federal model was endorsed by few political figures and intellectuals mostly in the second half of the 19th century as a political response to the presumed fall of both the Ottoman and the Austrian Empires. In this context, diverging from the plans for a South Slav union, some Serbian liberals opted for the formation of a Christian Balkan federation that would include the Serbs, the Bulgarians, the Romanians and the Greeks and replace the collapsing Ottoman Empire. These were Mihailo Polit Decančić (1833-1920) and Svetozar Miletić (1826-1901), leading members of the Serbian Liberals in Austria, as well as Vladimir Jovanović (1833-1922) among the leaders of the Liberal Party in the Serbian Principality. Their proposal was certainly related to the foreign policy of the Serbian ruler Michael Obrenovich (1860-1868) who concluded alliances with Montenegro, Greece and Romania aiming at a united confrontation against the Ottomans. He also came to an agreement with protagonists of the Bulgarian national movement.⁵

Polit, Miletić and the “organic solution”

³ Plans for the creation of a Slavic or East European federation with the participation of Russia as a dominant member or having equal status were designed by Russian Pan-Slavists - such as Nikolai Danilevski and Rostislav Fadeev- and Russian radicals and socialists -such as Michael Bakunin and Alexander Herzen- respectively. In the Balkans the most significant proponents of federalism were the Bulgarian Liuben Karavelov, who envisaged a Balkan federation based on liberal and national principles, and the Serbian Svetozar Markovic, who combined federalism with socialism. See: E. Naxidou, *Η Φιλική Εταιρεία και οι Ευρωπαϊκές Εκδοχές της Βαλκανικής Ομοσπονδίας*, In: Άννα Μανδουλάρα, Γιώργος Νικολάου (eds.), *Η Φιλική Εταιρεία. Επαναστατική Δράση και Μυστικές Εταιρείες στη Νεότερη Ευρώπη*, Athen: Asini 2017, pp. 123-147.

⁴ The political dimension of nationalism has been highlighted and discussed by leading scholars of different schools. See: E. Gellner, *Έθνη και Εθνικισμός*, (Transl. into Greek by. D. Lafazani), Athens, Alexandria, 1992, p. 13; B. Anderson, *Φαντασιακές Κοινότητες. Στοιχασμοί για τις Απαρχές και τη Διάδοση του Εθνικισμού*, (Transl. into Greek by P. Chantzaroula), Athens: Nefeli, 1997, p. 26.

⁵ L. S. Stavrianos, *Balkan Federation. A History of the Movement toward Balkan Unity in Modern Times*, Hamden Connecticut: Archon Books 1964, pp. 92-95; Vladimir Peev, *Dobrodetelnata Druzhina i Pregovorite sās Sārbiia prez 1867-1868 g.*, in Plamen Mitev (ed.), *Vremeto na Levski*, Sofia: Kulturno-prosvetno Druzhestvo ‘Rodno Ludogorie’ 2010, p. 115 ff.

In 1862 the lawyer, politician and journalist Mihailo Polit Decančić, leading member of the Liberal Serbs in Vojvodina and the Omladina⁶ published in Vienna his study entitled *Die Orientalische Frage und ihre Organische Lösung*⁷ where he presented his views on the Eastern Question. In his opinion Europe did not liberate the Balkan peoples from the yoke of an Asian tribe, which was its moral duty, because of the opposing interests of its states. In this way Southeastern Europe was subdued to Asian brutality which did not allow for the development of culture, he added. For this reason he believed that fighting against the barbarians from Asia was a sacred commitment for the Balkan peoples.⁸ Further on Polit explained in a more explicit way why the Ottoman state in Europe should not be preserved. In this context he criticized the decision of the Europeans in the Paris Conference in 1856 to guarantee the integrity of Turkey for two main reasons. Not only was it impossible for Turkey to become a modern state because it was based on the Islamic religion, but its rule was also not compatible with the political principle of nationalism.⁹ As for the Christians living in Turkey Polit stated that there existed only two Slavic nations namely Serbs and Bulgarians because Montenegrins, Bosnians, Herzegovinians etc. were in fact different geographic definitions of the Serbs as was the case with Bavarians and Germans.¹⁰ He admitted however, that in Bosnia and Herzegovina Serbian nationality had to be developed.¹¹ In his view both Greeks and Serbs should play a significant role in the settlement of the Eastern Question the former in the south and the latter in the north of the Balkans siding with and not antagonizing each other.¹² In sum, Polit was convinced that Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians and Greeks shared interests due to their common religious faith.¹³ Finally, being opposed to the re-establishment of the Byzantine Empire, the dismemberment of Turkey by the European states and the annexation of the Balkans by Russia,¹⁴ he presented his “organic solution” which, he believed was in keeping with the philosophy of universal history and at the same time

⁶ The Omladina was a cultural Youth Organization founded in 1866 in Novi Sad which aimed to cultivate the Serbian national character.

⁷ Dr. M. Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage und ihre Organische Lösung*, Wien: Franz Leo's Verlag 1862.

⁸ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 1.

⁹ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 5-9.

¹⁰ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 12.

¹¹ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 13.

¹² Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 15-16.

¹³ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 17.

¹⁴ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 18-29.

a factor of neutrality.¹⁵ His “organic solution” was the formation of a confederation of the nations of Turkey, the Slavs –Serbs and Bulgarians-, the Romanians and the Greeks, a union in which each state would enjoy independence in accordance with the principle of nationality, because each of the abovementioned nations had their own history, culture and national life and were not race related.¹⁶ Polit went on to define the boundaries of the member states which in his view should be drawn according to geographic and not linguistic criteria. In this way Romania would not expand its dominion, Greece would annex Thessaly, part of Epirus and Macedonia having previously reached an agreement with the Slavs and Serbia would include Bosnia, Herzegovina and Old Serbia. Moreover, the borderline between Serbia and Bulgaria would start from the bay of Thessaloniki, continue south of Ohrid and end at the mouth of river Aoos in the Adriatic Sea. Thessaloniki should become a free city. Furthermore Polit envisaged a closer state coalition between Serbia and Bulgaria on condition that the administration, system of justice, education as well as culture would allow each one to preserve its national independence. Romania and Greece would then join this union in the form of a confederation. Disfavoring the existence of a common Parliament Polit introduced the idea of an assembly of ambassadors or a permanent council which would treat issues such as defense, disputes, financial contribution of each member state for the construction of roads, railway etc. In his plan Constantinople would become a free city. Finally Polit explained that he called this solution organic because to him it was compatible with the “organism” that the Christian nations in Turkey had developed through their history and national life.¹⁷

Svetozar Miletić,¹⁸ another leading member of the liberal Serbs in Austrian Vojvodina shared Polit’s views on the future political status in Southeastern Europe. Miletić played a protagonist role in the political and cultural life of the Serbs in Austro-Hungary. He was founder and leader of the Serbian Liberal Party and among the founding members of the Omladina. He became mayor in Novi Sad and member of the Hungarian Parliament. He was also co-editor of the newspaper *Srbski Dnevnik* (Serbian Chronicle) and editor of the newspaper *Zastava* (Flag) both published in Novi Sad. Miletić’ views on the Eastern Question initially appeared in 1863 in

¹⁵ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 30.

¹⁶ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 32-34.

¹⁷ Polith, *Die Orientalische Frage*, σελ. 35-41.

¹⁸ For Miletić see: Dushko Kovachević, *Svetozar Miletić. Zhivot i politika (1826-1901)*, Beograd: Zavod za Udzhenike 2009.

sequels in the newspaper *Srbski Dvenvik* and in 1877 in a book in German under the title *Die Orientfrage*.¹⁹

Following a similar line of argumentation with Polit, Miletic argued that the Eastern Question was the Gordian Knot for Europe closely related to all major European issues of that time such as those of Italy, Germany and Poland.²⁰ In his mind three main factors would be taken into account in order for the Eastern Question to be settled, the third being the most important; the interests of the neighboring countries of Turkey namely Russia and Austria, the interests of all European states which sought balance of power and the aspirations of the Christian peoples who lived in Turkey that is their claims for liberation from the Turkish yoke.²¹ Further down Miletic explained why the Treaty of Paris in 1856 was detrimental to both the Christian peoples in Turkey and Europe protecting only the Sublime Porte.²² In this way Miletic concluded that the only viable solution for the Eastern Question was the liberation of the Christian peoples of Turkey who had every right to fight for it.²³ At the same time, however, Russia and Europe should secure their commercial interests in the East, the former in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, and the latter namely England, France and Italy in Asia Minor and the Egyptian coast.²⁴ In this context adopting the organic solution Miletic agreed with Polit that the Christian states and peoples should unite politically, the Serbs and the Bulgarians in a federation that would provide each one with national self governance and laws and a confederation with the Rumanians and the Greeks with independent legislation and administration which would deal with defense, international relations and settling internal disputes.²⁵ As for the boundaries of each member-state Miletic drew them in almost the same way as Polit the main difference being that he included Thessaloniki in the Serbian part claiming that the city was very important for Serbian commerce.²⁶

Jovanovic and the pivotal role of the Serbian nation

¹⁹ Dr. Svetozar Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, Neusatz: Serbisch-Nationale Vereins-Buchdruckerei 1877.

²⁰ Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, σελ. 1.

²¹ Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, σελ. 15-18.

²² Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, σελ. 19-21.

²³ Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, σελ. 35.

²⁴ Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, σελ. 45-46.

²⁵ Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, σελ. 47.

²⁶ Miletitsch, *Die Orientfrage*, σελ. 47.

Another Serbian supporter of the federal idea was Vladimir Jovanovic, the most significant liberal ideologue in the 1860's and among the leaders of the Liberal Party in the Serbian Principality. Being a fierce opponent of the monarchical regime of Prince Michael Obrenovich, he spent several years in exile, first in Geneva, where he published the newspapers *Svoboda* (Liberty) and *Srbska Svoboda* (Serbian Liberty) (1864-1866), and later in Novi Sad where he became one of the founding members of the Omladina. In 1868 he was arrested by the Hungarian police and held prisoner in Budapest being suspect for the murder of Prince Mihail. However, after seven months of detention he was released due to lack of evidence incriminating him. It was only after Milan Obrenovich came to power and a new more liberal constitution was proclaimed in Serbia that Jovanovich returned to Belgrade in 1872. In 1876 he was appointed Minister of Finance in a government formed by the Liberal Party.²⁷

Jovanovich presented his views on the future status quo in Southeastern Europe in two studies; one in French under the title *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie dans l' Europe d' Orient*,²⁸ published in Paris in 1870, the other in English entitled *The Emancipation and Unity of the Serbian Nation or the Regeneration of the Eastern Europe*,²⁹ which appeared in Geneva in 1871. Jovanovich believed that liberated Serbia should become the champion of liberal and progressive ideas in Southeastern Europe.³⁰ He also maintained that Serbs and Croats belonged to same nation despite their different religion.³¹ Further on he described the political situation of the fragmented Serbian nation which, in his opinion, consisted of the Serbs in Montenegro, liberated Serbia, Austria and Turkey that is Bosnia-Herzegovina and Old Serbia.³² Starting with the Serbs in Austria Jovanovich claimed that their rights to

²⁷ For Jovanovich see: Gale Stokes, *Legitimacy through Liberalism: Vladimir Jovanović and the Transformation of Serbian Politics*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press 1975; Boris Milosavljević, *Liberal and Conservative Political Thought in Nineteenth-century Serbia*. Vladimir Jovanović and Slobodan Jovanović, *Balkanica* XLI (2010), σελ. 131-153; Diana Mishkova, *Balkan Liberalisms: Historical Routes of a Modern Ideology*, στο Roumen Daskalov and Diana Mishkova (επιμ.), *Entangled Histories of the Balkans*. Volume II: *Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions*, Leiden-Boston: Brill 2014, σελ. 99-198.

²⁸ Vladimir Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie dans l' Europe d' Orient*, Paris: A. Lacroix, Verboeckhoven et C^{ie} Éditeurs 1870.

²⁹ Vladimir Yovanovitch, *The Emancipation and Unity of the Serbian Nation or the Regeneration of the Eastern Europe*, Geneva: H. Georg 10, Corraterie 1871.

³⁰ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 5-6.

³¹ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 8-10.

³² Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 252.

national self-administration and religious freedom were constantly violated³³ Moreover, after the establishment of dualism in 1865 the Hungarian politicians used every possible means to force the Slavs and Romanians in their territory to abandon their language, renounce their national rights and sentiments.³⁴

In a separate chapter Jovanovich referred to the political developments in Serbia from the creation of the Principality to his days. He sharply criticized Prince Michael Obrenovich and his government for absolutism, not respecting the principle of personal freedom³⁵ and not taking advantage of the favorable circumstances in 1862 and 1868 in order to declare war on Turkey uniting the Slavs and Christians of Southeastern Europe under his leadership.³⁶ As for the Serbs in Turkey, he asserted that despite the proclamation of reforms they were slaves under a system of barbaric oppression which hindered their moral and intellectual progress.³⁷ Being convinced that both Austria and Turkey were hostile to Serbian nationality he believed that Serbia was the unique political state capable of uniting the Serbian nation and becoming a democratic nucleus for South Slavs and pivot to a liberal and progressive movement in Eastern Europe.³⁸ Finally in order to counteract Russian and Austrian aspirations in Southeastern Europe Jovanovich was in favor of the development of a liberal national Serbian movement aimed at creating a confederation of liberated peoples capable of resisting against any foreign conquest and rule.³⁹ Without giving any further details Jovanovich wrote that the Serbian patriots urged their Slav, Greek and Rumanian colleagues to unite displaying brotherly solidarity in order to revive Eastern Europe and rebuild their nationalities without sacrificing their freedom.⁴⁰

Concluding remarks

The Serbian intellectuals whose ideas are examined in this paper sought to combine three modern ideological trends in their proposals for the political future of the Balkans; nationalism, liberalism and federalism. In this context they advocated for the creation of a federation of nation-states based on individual and national liberty,

³³ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 45-52.

³⁴ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 65-73.

³⁵ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 195 κ.ε.

³⁶ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 200-204.

³⁷ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 243-244.

³⁸ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 262.

³⁹ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 301.

⁴⁰ Yovanovics, *Les Serbes et la Mission de la Serbie*, σελ. 322-323.

although they were not very explicit as to the mode of governance for this political union. Avoiding discussing the issue of the holder of the supreme power, they seem to have favored constitutional monarchy. However, all three were overly critical of Prince Michael's rule which they considered autocratic and detrimental to Serbian national interests.

Against this common background several divergences are also to be discerned. Polit and Miletić produced more elaborated plans with regard to the formation of the Balkan federation, central authorities, status of member states as well as boundaries. Moreover, within the federal framework, they proposed the creation of an inner core consisting of Serbia and Bulgaria although they were not very specific about the character of this tighter link. As for Jovanovic, he made rather vague reference to the establishment of a Christian federation, his main concern being to stress on the pivotal role that the Serbian Principality should assume for the cultural and political unification of the Serbian nation. Moreover, unlike Polit and Miletić who only included Montenegrins, Bosnians and Herzegovinians in the Serbian nation, he added Croats too. Furthermore, not only did he share the view about the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, but he also implied the dissolution of Austrohungary, which Polit and Miletic could not do because they belonged to the political elite of the Monarchy.

All in all, through their proposal for the unification of the Balkan nations into a liberal Christian federation, Polit, Miletić and Jovanović are the main representatives of a federal line of thought which did not gain popularity let alone being adopted by the Balkan political leaderships at that time. In this context, however, they did converge with the supporters of the South-Slavic idea on that they perceived most of the South Slavs as part of the Serbian nation.

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