

The Possibility for a Greek-Turkish Co-operation Before the Balkan Wars

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I would like to demonstrate the possibility of a Greek-Turkish co-operation, namely, when, what concrete ideas appeared between the two nations until the outbreak of the first Balkan War. For this, I deem it necessary to review the meaning of two substantial concepts – “Intermediate Area” and “Graeco-Turkism” – until the Young Turk Revolution.

Concepts: the meaning of the “Intermediate Area” and “Graeco-Turkism”, their occurrences in Greek history until the first Balkan War.

In Greek historiography, the Eurasian continent is divided into three cultural or civilisational regions through its history of several thousand years:

-West: Western Europe, nowadays also North America, South America, Australia and New Zealand.

-East: Middle East (India, Southeast Asia with Indonesia, China with Japan and Korea).

-Intermediate Area: Its western border runs from the Northern Baltic Area to the Adriatic Sea. It is the boundary between the eastern (orthodox) and the western countries. The eastern border extends from the Sea of Okhotsk (Kamchatka Peninsula) to the Gulf of Aden. The area includes Russia, the Balkan countries without Croatia, the Arabian countries (from Morocco to the Arabian Peninsula), Ethiopia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistani territory west to the Indus and Tajikistan.

In the 20. century, mainly after the First World War (April 1920, San Remo; August 1920, S vres), the differences between Christianity and Islam, the “impossibility” of co-operation became emphasised. However, the distance between the two religions was not always big (one would rather talk about the feud between Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christianity), moreover, from the 11. century, ideas were born even about a religious co-operation. For thousands of years, every significant people has tried to unify the Intermediate Area¹, the centre of which has always been the Eastern Mediterranean

¹ Persians in the 5. century BC; Macedonian/Greek Empire of Alexander the Great; Byzantine (Greek) Empire; Arabs; Mongols; Turks; Russians. (According to the Peace Treaty of K çük Kaynarca in 1774, besides commercial privileges, Russia was given protectorship over the orthodox

Region, and localising its conflicts of “internal affairs” is also easy: app. 1660 years ago, they broke out around a city and for a city, for the occupancy of Constantinople.² In the last thousand years, Greeks, Turks and Russians fought for the city, which has had many names. I would like to highlight two among them: Greeks have called it “i Póli”, The City, while Russians “Cargrad”, Czar City³, both showing its significance well. The severe crisis of the area also started from inside from the 18. century (historiography usually defines it as Eastern Question in short), yet we are not talking about a religious conflict between Christianity and Islam, but a social, economic and political crisis. In spite of the external and internal problems, the reformation of the Ottoman Empire was the central idea for the Greeks, the Arabs and mainly the Turks until the beginning of the 20. century, without the will to disintegrate the empire. Greeks, Turks, Arabs are all brothers and sisters, sounded Rigas Fereos in 1797 – so did the Young Turks in 1908.

Graeco-Turkism is a term used since the 1960's, a political phenomenon, which means the mutual interlocking of interests of the Greek and the Turkish nation occurring since the 11. century. On the other hand, it is a solid ideology within this political phenomenon, aiming the establishment of a common Greek-Turkish state. An ideology that ascribes main role to the Greek-Turkish political phenomenon actually (therefore, to the statement that nations living within one political region – in this case, within the Eastern Mediterranean Region – are very similar to each other regarding their social formation, religious and cultural intellectuality, thus, they constitute one political “unity”), and the establishment of Greek-Turkish political unity is needed for this. The believers of Graeco-Turkism agreed in that nothing better than a confederation between the two states could be established, however, there were serious discrepancies in the manner of the implementation. (Evidently, the question occurred differently in the 15. Century, and differently at the beginning of the 20. century.)

In order to see the origins of the ideology, we shall go back in time to the 14-15. century (regarding both the Greek and the Turkish side), when the Eastern Party in Byzantium resisted the Western Party's endeavour to establish the religious unity with Rome and co-operate with the West against the Turks. Georgios Trapezuntios /George of Trebizond/ (1395-1484) is considered to be the “father” of the ideology and one of its earliest representers. In 1439, together with three other philosophers, he was elected to be the advisor of the Byzantine Empire at the Synod of Florence, where the central question was the union with the Catholic Church. Trapezuntios signed the union (as well as the other delegates), but when the Greeks attacked this act furiously – considering it as a capitulation against the West –, he obeyed the Greek people's will. Following the synod,

living in Ottoman territory. From this time, controlling the straits became the aim. After that, the Greek Plan of Catherine II. was born: by ousting the Turks from the Balkan, she wanted to create a new Greek Empire with Constantinople as the capital, headed by a Russian prince.)

² Owing to this conflict series lasting for a long time, many legends have appeared in connection with the city. (E.g.: According to the tradition, the last Byzantine Emperor, Konstantinos Palaiologos XII. did not die actually during the siege of Constantinople in 1453, just hardened into stone, and will revive, on the day of which the city will also become free from the Turks.)

³ Further researches would be necessary to examine, to what extent this name was inside the Russian political and social consciousness/thinking. For as far as the Greek name is concerned, very deep.

he expressed his affection for his country, the universal Byzantine Empire and even the Sultan in one of his letters:

“Nobody doubts that You are the legitimate ruler of the Romeoses⁴. Actually, the ruler, who occupies the throne of the empire legally. This throne is Constantinople in the Roman Empire; the ruler is who possesses the city legally. And You occupy the aforementioned throne from God, not from people...therefore, You are the legitimate Roman Emperor...But the Emperor of the Romans is simultaneously the emperor of the entire globe.”

He repeated all the attempts of the past in order to get Islam and the Orthodox religion come closer to each other, and to back this, he compiled a discourse called *On the Truth of the Christian Religion*. He sent it to Sultan Mehmed II in July 1453, only two months after the conquest of Constantinople (29th May 1453.), in order to prove that there was no essential difference between the two religions. Actually, he did not realise that the sultan could not handle the Greek and the Turkish residents of the empire on an equal footing, since the jurisdiction of the Intermediate Area has always been based on the recognition of the religious differences: subjects, whose faith was different from the dominating religion, have always had to pay an extra tax⁵ as well.

From the 18. century, the influence of the West became more and more sensible in the Ottoman Empire, which concerned the Greeks first, the Turks (due to the lack of a Muslim civil class) only later. However, the stronger this influence and more intensive the change was, the more popular the ideology of Graeco-Turkism seemed to be, making both peoples realise their otherness against the West. In this atmosphere, in 1797, the constitution plan⁶ of Rigas Fereos (1757-1798) was born. Following the overthrow of the Ottoman Empire, he wanted to establish a new state with the empire's old borders, but with a new name: he would have called the reformed empire Greek Republic. For the implementation, he would have liked to break out a revolution in the Balkan, but he was arrested by the Ottoman authorities, then executed in July 1798 – with the assist of the Patriarch of Constantinople. The patriarch had threatened the Greeks earlier, namely, that he would anathematise those who read the revolutionary work of Rigas. The attempt of Rigas is interesting, because the characteristics of his revolution occurred again during the Young Turk Revolution. His aim was to organise a civil revolution (not only national, but political and social as well), however, this was foredoomed to failure in such a multinational state as the Ottoman Empire, where so many different nations lived. (Such a revolution was unable to be successful even 110 years later.) He compiled his programme in 1797 according to the French Jacobinic constitution of 1793, in some features even more radical than that. (E.g. He deemed compulsory education necessary for everyone, in addition, women would have also been obligated to compulsory military service. This

⁴ Following the downfall of the Western Roman Empire, Byzantine people with Greek mother tongue still called their country the Roman Empire, and themselves Romans. Today: Romeos = New Greek.

⁵ The tax of non-Muslim subjects was the djizya (poll tax).

⁶ Title of his work: “New Political Constitution of the Inhabitants of Rumeli, Asia Minor, the Islands of the Aegean, and the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia”.

way, Rigas leaned towards the standpoint of considering men and women as equal, by which he exceeded the French constitution of 1793.) Some parts of his constitution plan:

Article 7: "The people of the empire [leader], every resident living all over the state, with no religious and dialectical exception, is of Greek [thus, Orthodox Christian: Greek, Slavic, Arabian], Albanian, Vlach [thus, Romanian], Armenian, Turkish [thus, Muslim: Arabian, Kurdish and Turkish] and other extraction."

Article 21: "The entirety of the people together constitutes the nation, not only the rich and the highborn."

Article 53: "Every act and order... will be in Greek, so that every judgement and state decree may be read better by everyone all over the empire."

Article 112: "The legislative power certainly [ensures] equal rights, security, freedom and landed property possessory right for every Turk, Greek, Armenian..."

He did not see that his constitution plan was irreconcilable with the wishes, concerning religion and nationality, of the peoples in the Ottoman Empire. This contradiction is absolutely obviously shown within his liberty hymn of 1796, called *Battle Song*, in which he suggested that the Christian and Muslim residents of the Ottoman Empire accept the Cross as the symbol of the insurrection.

The Young Turks and the Constantinopolitan Organisation

In the second half of the 19. century, ideas urging the empire's reformation and different organisations established for this aim occurred sharper and sharper. Among the Young Turks, the group with the biggest role was the Committee of Union and Progress, founded by four medical students in Constantinople in 1889 (an Albanian, a Caucasian Circassian and two Kurds). They published their entire programme in their official paper, the *Mesveret* on 3rd December 1895: "We clamour for the implementation of the reforms... not only in favour of one nation, but the independence of every Ottoman, [were they] Jews, Christians, or Muslims... We have decided to preserve our particular Eastern characteristics and culture, and for this, we adopt only the West's general scientific developments."

The first congress of liberal Ottomans got together in Paris in February 1902, with the participation of 47 representatives; Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Kurds, Albanians, Armenians, Jews, Circassians. The followings were accepted there as aims: the preservation of the Ottoman Empire's territorial integrity; the maintenance of the monarchy as the indispensable link of the empire's different peoples; equality before the law for every citizen of the empire, without any religious and ethnic discrimination; the restoration of the constitution of 1876. (This constitution was not in force for a long time, because the sultan suspended it a year later, but it meant rather extensive representation for every resident of the empire – so it left good memories in the mind of the nationality of Turkey.)

The Young Turk Revolution became victorious on 23rd July 1908. The officers of the committee proclaimed the restoration of the constitution of 1876 and kept their promises towards the empire's non-Turkish communities, which is perfectly demonstrated by the

composition of the Parliament⁷, the distribution of the 288 places: 147 Turkish, 60 Arabian, 27 Albanian, 26 Greek, 14 Armenian, 10 Slav and 4 Jewish representatives managed to get in. The Young Turks were Ottomans, and not Turkish or Greek nationalists. They had not realised the significance of the nationality problem, therefore, their rise to power generated enormous enthusiasm both among the Arabs and the Greeks. There was a beam of hope for the fulfilment of the Greek-Turkish co-operation within one state, the most dominant representers of which were Jon Dragumis and Athanasios Suliotis-Nikolaidis. The intellectual leader was Suliotis, who created a secret society in Constantinople among the Greeks living in the territory of the Ottoman Empire, called the 'Constantinopolitan Organisation', existing between 1908-1912. This organisation closely co-operated with Dragumis, and was supported by the Greek representatives of the Ottoman Parliament, the Patriarch of Constantinople and the Athenian government as well. The ideology of Suliotis was neither the Byzantine-Ottoman universal state conception of Rigas, nor the nationalism of the Megali Idea. It was an ideology that unified both, and was based on the political identity of the Eastern Mediterranean Region and the identity of the nations living in this territory. Its final aim was to establish an Eastern Federation, which would have unified every nation living here in one state. He did not believe in one Byzantine or one Ottoman nation, but in many separate nations, like the Greek or the Turkish, and they should negotiate on the establishment of a confederation, which would preserve the substantial political identity of the Aegean peoples. Following the implementation of the confederation, the transition into the second stage would have become possible, the stage "over nations", the development of an "Eastern race". Suliotis wrote the following in his work *Constantinopolitan Organisation*:

"...We, the nations of the Balkan Peninsula and Asia Minor, are in much closer relationship with each other than our fanatic education and studies let us imagine that. For long generations, our ancestors have mixed with each other, so that no matter how we are differentiated now, by nations or by states, every one of us has different anthropological types inside, and still it is easy to tell us apart from the other European and Asian peoples. For generations, our ancestors have lived in the same state, for more than a thousand years as the citizens of the Byzantine, and today, of the Ottoman Empire... There were more and more moments in the City⁸, when I could not stand being touched while thinking of the relationship and common misfortune of the nations in the Balkan and Asia Minor, and I realised that none but unity might mean the only hope for throwing off the external pressure."

Nevertheless, the euphoric mood following the success of the Young Turk Revolution did not last for a long time among the Christian nationalities of the Ottoman Empire, it was shaded already by the events of October 1908⁹. Later, following the defeat of the counterrevolution of 1909, the more liberal representatives of the Young Turks were

⁷ The first meeting was on 17th December 1908.

⁸ The City means Constantinople for Suliotis as well.

⁹ On 5th October 1908 Bulgaria proclaimed its independence, on 6th October Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina, and a day later the residence of Crete proclaimed its union with Greece – although the latter did not come true, only after the first Balkan War.



completely obscured, and instead of the principles promising the equality of every subject in the empire, Turkish nationalism became the policy increasingly. Simultaneously, acts disadvantageously concerning Christians were born, and the possibility of co-operation changed more and more into opposition, which lead to the first Balkan War, as well as to the almost total division of the Ottoman Empire's European territories. The outbreak of the war put an end to the Greek-Turkish co-operation, just before it actually could have been established.

My aim was to outline the ideological similarity of the Ottoman Empire's reformatinal conceptions until the spread of Turkish nationalism. And these concepts all originate in the thought of the unity of the Eastern Mediterranean Region (as a common political region).