Transnational Solidarity Networks and the Transformations of a Crisis: The Balkan Crisis of 1875-1878

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1. Introduction

If we look at the Greek budget crisis today, we can see how an economic crisis changed into a political one for the whole EU. This is just a brief example how crises and especially their public perception transform themselves in various ways. The Balkan Crisis of 1875-1878 is an exceptional example for the variability of crises. It shows how the change of people's perception of a crisis can modify expressions of solidarity, which in turn transforms the phenomenon of crisis itself.

This brings us to the first question: what is a crisis? There are two possibilities: On the one hand we can understand a crisis as people's perceptions of the crisis and how they communicate about it. On the other hand, we can interpret them as a major breakdown of some system or institution in wider sense. Both definitions are problematic: relying on first definition, we will find the perception of crisis everywhere in the world. Given the second definition we can only find crisis through the perceptions of historical subjects and we have no clear categories concerning the essence of crisis. Because of these problems I will approach the topic pragmatically. In this paper I will understand "crisis" as the perceptions of many people and I will look at the phenomenon behind these perceptions whether it is a "real" crisis or not. There is even an interdependence between perception and phenomenon. The perceptions create feelings of solidarity with the "victims" of the crisis. These feelings often lead to the formation of groups with the purpose to help and change. The transformation of the situation obviously changes the perceptions. But in most cases we cannot separate the phenomenon from its perceptions. Even if we would be able, it is hard to know where the starting point was.

The Oriental or Balkan Crisis of 1875-1878 is an extremely complex case. Many networks of solidarity coexisted on multiple levels, some were just local and others transnational. These networks had a major impact on the evolution of the crisis, but they were also transformed by it. In this talk I want to ask how these connections and changes worked. This talk attempts to show how these different networks of solidarity are themselves the result of the transnational process of crises. But they are at the same time a major factor of their transformation and escalation. It is on these interconnections between solidarity and crisis that I will try to focus. I further want to show the interchanges and frictions between the transnational and local networks. I finally want to ask the question of whether solidarity was a factor contributing

towards a solution of the crisis or, to the contrary, even aggravated it.

In order to answer these questions, I will start with a brief description of the crisis and how it escalated and evolved. In a second step, I take a closer look at the different solidarity networks and how they interact with each other. In the final step, I will show how these networks tried to de-escalate the situation and how the project partly failed. In this whole description I want to avoid recurring to the geostrategic considerations of politicians and the military, in order to focus on the concrete impact of solidarity on a crisis. I will only refer to these concepts if it is absolutely necessary for understanding the development.

2. The crisis and its escalation

Over centuries Bosnia and Herzegovina had been provinces of the Ottoman Empire and had cultivated a certain tradition of rebellion against the central government.[1] In this context the peasant resistance of 1875, which had formed itself in a reaction to several tax raises in combination with a bad harvest, at first looked like an established practice of negotiation about the new demands of the empire. But the violent practice of the revenue leasing (*malikâne*) tithe-collectors hardened the resistance:[2] Their cruelty was the main reason for the tax paying serfs (known as *kmets*) to unite and fight against their tax collectors and landlords (*Begs* and *Aghas*).[3] Because the serfs were mainly of Serbian-orthodox or catholic faith,[4] the rebellion was seen as an uprising of Christians against their Muslim suppressors. This impression, combined with some geostrategic goals, led the autonomous neighbor provinces Serbia and Montenegro to support the uprising with goods and volunteers. They also provided ideological assistance by reinterpreting the event as an act of national resistance.[5] From the Austrian-Hungarian border this was seen as the beginning of a new oriental crisis. Emperor Franz Joseph wanted to express his solidarity with the Christians during a visiting tour in the border province Dalmatia.[6] Some of the rebels crossed the border and were reassured by the speeches of the emperor,[7] and Serbia and Montenegro demanded a collective intervention against their own sovereign, the Ottoman Sultan.[8] Even Austrian newspapers supported this demand for an intervention. They argued with the necessity to show solidarity with the Christians, but also the imperative to intervene before Russia.[9]

In the empire of the Tsar an even more vivid discussion about help for their Slavic brothers on the Balkans took place. Emperor Alexander II. displayed himself as the protector of the orthodox faith.[10] Additionally, there was an active Pan-Slavic movement in Russia, supported by leading figures in the Foreign Service.[11] However, for political reasons neither Russia nor Austria-Hungry reacted on their own, but in union with Germany. The League of the three Emperors consulted and agreed to sign a reform note by the Austro-Hungarian Foreign

Minister Andrássy. This note was communicated to all major European powers, which agreed and signed. After that it was send to the Ottoman Sultan.[12] But his government had no real chance to establish the reforms in an area of civil war. The Ottoman finances were heavily burdened by these efforts and national insolvency had to be declared.[13] Thus a local conflict was the origin of a financial crisis with international dimensions, because many European investors were involved in the Ottoman government bonds.

But the crisis also continued on the local level with the radicalized resistance groups even refusing the joint proposal and demanding their autonomy from the Ottoman Empire[14] or the union with Serbia.[15]

At the end of the year, the discussion about possible assistance to the Balkan Christians started in the London public and press,[16] *The Times* even demanded military intervention.[17] Yet no political agreement could be reached and so the fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina continued. The European Governments could not agree on how establish an armistice. The Berlin Memorandum as a new political approach to stop the civil war failed because of British resistance against the contained violation of the Sultans sovereignty.[18]

After more than one year of atrocities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, other Balkan provinces began to act on their own and started further rebellions. The Bulgarian resistance, however, was quickly and cruelly crushed. The Bulgarian Muslims had been trying to avoid a situation similar to the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina and overreacted. Hired mercenaries and the ottoman army caused bloodshed under the insurgents and their families. The victims of the ensuing persecution asked the major Europeans powers for help in many letters.[19] This only added fuel to the fire of the British discussion. Many newspapers and travelers wrote about it, and the leader of the opposition William Ewart Gladstone composed the masterpiece "Bulgarian Horrors"[20]. The pamphlet was sold in large quantities and was read all over Europe. While the British public thus demanded a fast intervention against the "cruel Turks", Prime Minister Disraeli stopped such efforts because of geostrategic reasons.[21]

Supported by the European public opinion the Balkan principalities began to act and declared war against their own liege lord.[22] But soon the defeat of Serbia and Montenegro was obvious and the European empires tried to negotiate an armistice with the Ottoman Empire. These efforts failed during the Constantinople Conference and in the London Protocol.[23] A new conflict arose as Russia declared war on the Ottomans. The new conflict changed the expressions of solidarity fundamentally. The Ottomans were now seen in another light and their resistance against the Russian superiority was portrayed as a heroic act.[24] Hungarians started to demonstrated for an intervention on the side of the Ottoman Empire and suddenly in

British Pubs the Jingo Song resounded, demanding war with Russia.[25] But the society was deeply divided in its expressions of solidarity with the Balkan Christians or the Turks. No official response was formulated until the end of the war and the treaty of San Stefano.[26] For many governments this treaty was so unacceptable that it brought Europe to the edge of a major war. But the powers could agree to renegotiate at Berlin.[27]

Among the topics debated during the Congress was the issue of what should happen to the war refugees. In the press a new discussion on humanitarian solidarity with these displaced persons was initiated. In particular, Austria-Hungary established big camps for these people and demanded help to repatriate them.[28] This demand became the formal reason for a European mandate of an Austria-Hungary intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina; an intervention that was not welcomed by local solidarity networks. The treaty of San Stefano promised them autonomy, which was refused in Berlin. They tried to fight the new solution by armed force.[29] So even as all problems seemed to be solved and the crisis was declared to be over, the fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina continued against their new Austria-Hungarian administration.

3. Networks of solidarity

After this overview of the conflict, let us have a closer look at the involved networks of solidarity. I will start at the local level.

The violence against the rebels first produced peasant solidarity against suppression in Herzegovina. These groups were founded on a local level. After the first violent uprising a few peasants formed paramilitary gangs. They were very distant from each other and had few options to communicate across a wider range. They were supported by a much bigger number of peasants and few merchants who gave them food and other supplies.[30] Usually these solidarity networks only existed between people of the same faith.

They fought against another network consolidated by solidarity. Their landlords and tax collectors formed a well-connected elite in both provinces. They hired mercenaries called Başı-Bozuk to keep their prerogatives and to collect money. They acted together to protect their ancient rights and economic situation. The mercenaries were not only connected to them by their payment but also their Muslim Sunni faith and so they also believed to be fighting for the order of the Sharia.[31]

Both parties fought for or against cultural tradition to maintain or improve their rights and economic situation. Contrary to many misinterpretations this conflict was merely social-economical[32] and not exclusively ethnical or religious.

But the conflict was not limited to these fighting parties. Outside of their own group the

landlords could rely on solidarity of the central government of the Ottoman state, which was expressed by the support of the army and police. But their orders were mainly to calm down the conflict. Their enemy, the local networks of the insurgents, seemed isolated. But even with their small range of communications and movement, they did not stop at the political borders. They even used them as shelters from prosecution and they were supported by their neighbors in Montenegro, Serbia and even in Austria-Hungary.[33] Some state functionaries went as far as to organize support for the paramilitaries unofficially.[34] But also refugees left Bosnia and Herzegovina to find peace behind the border, where they served as relays of communication to the world.

Through these connections information about the atrocities spread. A political discussion started in neighboring countries and principalities. It was received by Pan-Slavic circles like the Slavic-Welfare Committee in Russia[35] or the Czech national parties[36] in Austria-Hungary. They used the information to mobilize support for refugees and military groups, but also lifted the conflict to an interstate level. They also campaigned for the recognition of the uprising as a legitimate fight for independence. Through this message they tried to recruit volunteer fighters. These efforts worked at least partly and brought many foreign freedom fighters, such as Italian Garibaldians, to Bosnia.[37] Even exiled Russian socialists came to support the uprising and to fight for their own political ideas.[38] The demand for national independence was so popular that we can speak of revolutionary tourism to the Balkans. These cliques of supporters of independence are extreme examples of how solidarity could exacerbate a crisis by adding additional violence.

This spreading of violence in combination with the presence of other observers brought the discourse to the attention of the Western European public. There informations about the violence were propagated by actors from humanitarian groups, like the Anti-enslavement movement. Through their representation this conflict was perceived as a major breakdown of the "rules of humanity" by the European press and there were many demands for intervention. This mass movement inspired the opposition politician Gladstone to support these demands with all his efforts, as a weapon against the current government.[39] In his political campaign, Gladstone solidarized with the Balkan Christians, tried to raise money to support funds like Lady Strangford´s, and to push the working government into an intervention against the "Turks": "Let the Turks now carry away their abuses in the only possible manner, namely by carrying off themselves. Their Zaptiehs […] and their Pashas, […] one and all, bag and baggage"[40]. He demanded in the British public the banishment of the Muslims from the Balkan. Many agreed that this was the only option to end the crisis. Even the humanitarian

discussion, through the accord and withdrawal of help, was used to segregate one group from the other.

However, this whole movement was mainly confined to Britain, with a few supporters in other European countries. Contact with the situation on the Balkans only existed through a few consuls and observers of the embassy, like John Blunt and the Calverts. They created a very detailed paper[41] about the massacres committed by both parties on the Balkans. But it took quite a long time until the news of the prosecution of Muslims reached the public discussion.[42] The movement which these news helped fuel, however was not based on solidarity but on a hate of Russia.[43] In their arguments, the persecutions were only used as political statement for intervention against the Russian army. There were no strategies for helping the displaced persons. Quite the same happened in Hungary, largely independent of the developments in Great Britain. The Hungarian Deák party, for example, organized protests in favor of an intervention in the major cities.[44] But their main reason was the fear of the Pan-Slavic movement and not the humanitarian situation.

To sum up, looking at all these groups and how they expressed their solidarity, we see one crisis, but many forms of parallel solidarity. Most of the solidarity networks had very weak connections amongst each other and had only a local impact. Away from the local context, solidarity was just an imagined projection. Even the transnational discussion in the British Empire, was focused on London and only included a few other participants of near European countries. But their exchange with the center of the crisis on the Balkans was nearly nonexistent.

If we look closer at solidarity, every expression of solidarity meant also exclusion, often the enmity, of a conflict party. In some cases the hostility against one opponent seems to have taken precedence over solidarity. The main interests of some groups were not the improvement of the local situation in the crisis, but the defeat of their enemy. Escalation rather than de-escalation of the crisis was in their interest.

4. Efforts of de-escalation and transformation

Considering the points mentioned so far, it looks like solidarity created or deepened the crisis. But on the other hand, many of these solidarity groups wanted to end the crisis for the sake of their solidarity bearer. Nearly everyone believed an international intervention to be the right tool for their task. Thus these demands for a humanitarian mediation were used by politicians in geostrategic plans for winning territory or influence. Because of this, a local crisis escalated into a major political conflict. In this crisis so many interests and solidarity groups were involved that no party could reach their goals without the help of other actors. Therefore a

compromise was searched for mainly on a state level, since the connections between the other groups were too weak and the hate towards each other too strong. But also the diplomatic efforts of states in many conferences[45] and contracts[46] could not avoid a war, yet they could limit the scope of the conflict to a Balkan war. Finally they were able to negotiate a peace treaty that was acceptable for all involved states at the Berlin Congress.[47]

In this political meeting, only the representatives of the great powers were allowed, but no legates of NGOs. Also, the delegates of smaller countries were only invited to special session about their concerns but without any power to vote. NGOs and the small countries did both have some influence on the decisions of the congress through the detour of the public opinion.[48] For example, some politicians, like Disraeli, addressed their speeches to the abstinent public rather than to the attendees.[49]

Due to that pressure the negotiation parties tried to legitimate their decisions in the public eyes. They partitioned the territory on the Balkans in a new way and gave many small states their territorial share. For the powder keg Bosnia and Herzegovina they had a very unique solution. The major powers agreed to give a European mandate for a unilateral intervention by Austria-Hungary.[50] The empire was ordered to occupy and administer the country substitutionary for the Ottoman Empire.[51]

But this decision was made without the consent of the locals. They expressed their veto against it by armed resistance. They organized another uprising in which the old conflict was put aside and the locals united against a new foreign enemy. Only after a new bloody military campaign[52] peace could be settled and this orient crisis could be declared over.

5. Conclusion

As a whole, the crisis was the result of the international reception of a local conflict. The communication was very one-sided. Some incomplete information was communicated to a wider audience, but the single recipient interpreted it only in his or her own local context. The real communication between two different networks of solidarity remained short-termed. A weak communication infrastructure in the Balkans and language problems may have been partly to blame. But that would be a too simple answer. If we look at later “humanitarian disasters”, we see the same phenomena, in areas with much better infrastructure. The suffering of the people is the main theme in the public discussion, but there is no direct communication with the people concerned.

The reasons for this maybe the following: most organizations only have a global pretension, but focus their efforts on a local national public. The actors in solidarity networks have their own interests. And even if they are selfless, they need to persuade other people to help.

Persuasion always works better with a simple message, for instance the claim that these people are persecuted and need our help. An obvious enemy-victim relation must be part of the message. Around this narrative, the solidarity networks potentially found their own *groupness*[53] in the sense of Roger Brubaker. They need this feeling of belonging to gather members and resources, to be able to help the "victims". Direct communication with the victims or the persecutors would have shown that neither group really was corresponded to their imagination. For example the American and British sources describe the Bulgarians only as victims, while their own sources telling a story of a violent uprising.[54] The context of three years of civil war normalized violence for most inhabitants of the Balkans - one behavior most European helpers were struggling to comprehend. Direct communication could be disturbing. It would have a negative influence on the inner consolidation of the solidarity network and it was therefore avoided.

Most networks only had access to local communication, even if they were thinking globally. But in this closed communication situation they were aware of the agency of other solidarity groups. For example, in the Hungarian discussion, they closely observed the Pan-Slavic movement – precisely because of their fear. But – just like for the London humanitarians – observation did not imply any form of collaboration. Only states tried bringing different actors into a direct conversation. Therefore diplomacy remained the real transnational factor in this crisis. The information about the local situation flowed through diplomatic intermediaries through which it was received by other solidarity networks. But their interaction was not without conflict, and the strategies for disturbing the agency of another states brought them to the edge of a major war. Communication is not always an instrument of de-escalation.

Neither is solidarity. The extension of the crisis was a result of the outspoken solidarity. The solidarity avowals deepened the differences between the conflicting parties, and made resistance a promising strategy because of the hope of foreign intervention. Some insurgents only jumped on the bandwagon because of this chance of success. Moreover, the material aid for the refugees only alleviated symptoms, but did nothing for solving the problems which were at the root of the violence. Solidarity is not an option for ending the spiral of escalation.

The reason for the de-escalation is instead to be found in the transformation of the nature of the crisis. The starting point as an agricultural crisis did not affect many actors directly. Not until the atrocities gave rise to a financial crisis were other interests concerned. But later, when the political crisis reached its peak and the danger of an international war became immanent, the major powers agreed to find a solution. It worked out, but it was against the

interests of the conflicting parties on the Balkans. Their veto was simply suppressed and the crisis found its end by force.

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