

## **Russian Foreign Policy on the Threshold of World War I**

Over the centuries, the foreign policy of Russia had been formed under the influence of many factors and during the processes of establishing and expanding the Russian State. The main reasons and motives that drove the territorial expansion were not based on aggression but on the necessity to defuse the difficult situations the country was facing.

Although Russia had not been completely isolated from world trade routes, its populated areas had always had unfavourable environmental conditions and hostile neighbours. For centuries, it was any (every) country's regular development path. In order not to remain on the sidelines of world history, the Russian state fully recognised the need to find its own way to advancement that would allow the country to tap new sources of economic growth. As an essential method it was to expand territory in Asia and South Eastern Europe, gain access to the semi-enclosed Baltic and Black seas and to try to gain access to the oceans. Over the centuries, Russia gradually expanded to become a large state sitting between Europe and Asia, with a coherent homeland covering its huge plain, linked by navigable waterways. From the earliest times, this geography influenced the country's development and foreign relations, from trade to military strategy - Russia had to find out (to arrange) a lot of communications, a lot of international links. It made Russia also to participate in many different international processes - military and peaceful as well.

The main objectives and goals of Russian foreign policy were generated in this crucible of international life. And because in the Russian political consciousness the backbone of the Russian state ideology - the doctrine of the divine origin of the supreme power - from ancient times (before the adoption of Christianity) was interpreted not as the right to be the ruler, but as a duty to serve the Russian land; and because the adoption of Christianity only complemented this concept of 'God-chosenness' with the idea of the supreme ruler as the guardian and defender of the faith, the objectives of Russian foreign policy became the protection of the land, the territory, and the protection of a world order that is based on Christian values. The goals of Russian state ideology required to maintain the European balance and the presence of friendly bordering states that could serve as a certain buffer in time of international crisis. The goals and objectives defined the principles of the foreign policy of the Russian state - to preserve the status quo and support the self-sufficient subjects of international relations . In each situation the decision was made on the basis of what was more important to maintain internal balance and stability.

Having gained the access to the Baltic Sea at the beginning of the XVIII century, Russia's geopolitical strength had significantly increased. Peter I's international breakthroughs turned it into a great power. During the XVIII century, Russia had strengthened its great-power status by getting access to the Black Sea, which resulted in opening the Balkans for Europe, as well as the so-called Eastern Question. Historically, the notion of a great power had always been considered by the Russian side not as an interference with the life of many peoples, but as a responsibility for further development to the point of the preservation of identity, as the area expansion was accompanied by the economic development of new

territories, ensuring the defence of newly established borders from the encroachments of the neighbours and the strengthening of faith and cultural enrichment. Tolerance and the lack of ethnic arrogance were the qualities of the Russian people that played a crucial part in this process.

The XIX century gave many striking examples of Russian foreign policy conducted in accordance with its principles. These include the organisation of the European continent after the Napoleonic wars, the settlement of the Belgian problem, the unification of Italy, and the independence of the Balkan states among many others.

This approach to the international activities marked the beginning of the XX century.

The start of the XX century saw Russia facing serious problems. The disaster of the Russo-Japanese war had cost almost the whole navy and national pride. The first revolution, in 1905, solved little while stirring up many domestic problems.

In such circumstances in the area of foreign policy it did not have enough resources to deal with their geopolitical objectives. This required the country to follow a certain pattern in the international area. The priority had to be to safeguard the existing status and save the energy and resources until favorable circumstances arise and allow an improvement in the existing state of affairs.

A major war was about to erupt, and main events were concentrated in the Balkans. The main principles of Russia's policy in the region can be summarised as follows: first, as long as is allowed by the circumstances, to maintain the existing status quo on the Balkan Peninsula; secondly, to resist any other great power, if they should try to intervene in the flow of

events on the Balkan peninsula; and third, most importantly, to contribute, as much as possible, to the maintenance, strengthening and peaceful development of small states in the Balkans. It is the comprehensive development of the small Balkan states that St. Petersburg viewed as a basis for the distribution of Russian influence in the region. Russia was even able to include these provisions into international documents, in particular the agreement with Austria-Hungary.

The difficulties of realising these principles became evident in the period of the Bosnian crisis in 1908.

What was the Bosnian crisis? By the autumn of 1908, Austria-Hungary expressed its intention to replace the occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the stationing of troops in the Novobazarski Sanjak with full annexation of these territories. As Austria-Hungary, due to a number of circumstances, signed a number of international agreements for conservation of the status quo in the Balkans achieved in the early XX century, and in general feared that their intentions would meet opposition, it insisted that the annexation instead of the occupation and quartering of troops in a particular region were the same things.

Naturally, all Russian forces tried to oppose the position of Austria-Hungary, seeing it as a direct violation of existing international obligations. One of the arguments of the Russian side was the fact that the Novobazarski Sanjak borders were yet not fully established. Russia far-sightedly opposed the formal division of the territory between the small Balkan states. Russia stressed that at that moment the final territorial division of the Balkans was premature, would be difficult to resolve and could only increase the tension.

The political leaders of Russia agreed that amid the lack of force and resources it was necessary to follow a cautious and moderate line of action. But the consensus ended with the search for a definition of cautiousness and moderation.

Russia was aware that it lacked effective military, economic and political mechanisms to prevent the actions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the Balkans. As a result of adapting various approaches in difficult circumstances of the Bosnian crisis, the prevailing tactic of Russian foreign policy had become the linking of the question of the relation of Russia to the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Novobazarski Sanjak with the question of the status of Constantinople and the Straits, naturally in a way that was helpful to Russia. The purpose of this tactic was to try and get compensation for the disruption of the status-quo by Austria-Hungary.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs A.P.Izvolsky and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in general believed that the tactics adopted under the circumstances were optimal. It was an attempt to improve relations with the other great powers and fulfil the country's geopolitical objectives by way of making concessions. As if to say - 'we agree to them violating the international agreements, but we want a compensation for that'. This approach is known as a pragmatic policy of bargaining.

However, thanks to Stolypin, Russia took a strong stance during the Bosnian crisis, stating that 'although Russia cannot resist the annexation (referring to that of the Balkan territories by Austria-Hungary - E.R.), but should act as the defender ... of its own, Turkish and the Balkan states' interests'.

In fact, that showed how serious Russia was in its intention to participate on an equal basis in the complex and controversial international

game unfolding in this European region. It could be said that such policy influenced the outcomes of the Bosnian crisis.

Indeed, the outcomes of the Bosnian crisis were largely a result of the unfavourable (for Russia) balance of powers. However, it is important to foresee immediate results and distant aftermath of certain results.

Russia failed to solve the problems facing the country's diplomacy and foreign policy: the regime of the Straits remained the same, Serbia's position was not upheld, Montenegro did not get territorial compensations, etc.

However, it is also important to take into account the fact that the military defeat of Serbia was prevented. In addition to that, the conflict between Turkey and Bulgaria, which had by that time declared independence, had been settled peacefully. Montenegro had received economic compensation for its territorial losses. And most importantly, Russia and the great European powers had come to share more similar views on a number of issues including the possibility to change the status of the Straits (on terms favourable to Russia). Other positive moments the emerging trend or rallying among Balkan countries, to which Russia had contributed.

Such was the immediate result of Russia's robust position.

During the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, Russia, unfortunately, failed to effectively pursue such a policy. The biggest loss was the fact that the alliance of the Balkan states was not maintained. Responsibility for that, to a large extent, laid with the great European powers, who feared the strengthening of the sovereignty of the Balkan countries, as the strengthening and development of their sovereignty would have led to a

strong position of Russia in this European region. However, it was the outcome of the two Balkan wars that made Serbia a major ally of Russia in the Balkans - this explains the logic behind the actions of the Russian government in the tragic events of July and August 1914.

Could Russia not stand up for Serbia? This would have been a direct betrayal of its foreign policy principles, which would have been unacceptable because it would not have helped to achieve the basic foreign policy goals. Had Russia not stood up for Serbia, the latter would have been captured by Austria-Hungary and Germany. Refusal to assist Serbia would have led to potential aggression at the borders of the Russian state itself. It would have also limited the presence of Russia in the Black Sea, whereas Russia would have been locked into only the land theatre.

A similar logic was behind Russia's foreign policy after the start of the war.

Already by September 14, 1914 Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister had drafted a project of common military goals for Russia, France and Britain, that consisted of the following twelve points: 1. Three powers will strike the German power and their claims to political and military domination. 2. Territorial changes should be made basing on the principles of the rights of nationalities. 3. Russia shall annex the lower reaches of the Neman River and the eastern part of Galicia. It will annex the east of Poznan, Silesia and the western part of Galicia to the Kingdom of Poland. 4. France regains Alsace and Lorraine, annexing, if it wishes, a part of Rhineland Prussia and the Palatinate. 5. Belgium will increase its territory. 6. Schleswig-Holstein will be returned to Denmark. 7. The State of Hanover will be restored. 8. Austria will become a monarchy constituting three parts - the rump Austrian Empire, the Kingdom of Bohemia and the Kingdom of

Hungary. 9. Serbia annexes Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, Dalmatia and northern Albania. 10. Bulgaria will receive compensation from Serbia in Macedonia. 11. Greece and Italy shall share southern Albania. 12. Britain, France and Japan will share German colonies.

Virtually, this was a post-war world order plan in which true values and morals would play a highly important role, and which could avert chaos in international relations. It was an attempt to organize the world order in a way that would not allow the strong to prevail over the weak.

Of course, this caused certain disagreement on several issues. For example, regarding the post-war situation in Poland - whether it would be an autonomous entity within the Russian Empire or an independent state that concluded a treaty with Russia. But perhaps it was a subconscious understanding that only such an approach may be politically beneficial to Russia that caused such public excitement at the beginning of the war. This excitement was based on the understanding that by defending the results of its long history and protecting its sovereignty, Russia defends the sovereignty of others.