

THE PEOPLE AGAINST THE DUAL MONARCHY DURING THE ANNEXATION CRISIS OF 1908–1909/1911

Roumiana PRESHELENOVA*

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Abstract: The Annexation Crisis of 1908-1909/1911 involved three empires directly: Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia, as well as people in all national states in Southeast Europe at this time. Nationalistic movements and economic protests were initiated by professional associations there and by the Young Turks. The contribution analyses the interplay of diplomacy and mass mobilisation to explore how the Annexation Crisis redefined statecraft, public sentiments, and political agency.

Keywords: Annexation Crisis; Southeast Europe; Boycott Movement

The Annexation Crisis of 1908-1909/1911, a precursor to the First World War, highlights the involvement of a number of different states. Direct actors in it were three empires: Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia, as well as people in all national states in Southeast Europe at this time: Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, and Greece. Nationalistic movements and economic protests were initiated by professional associations there and by a political power, the Young Turks. By demonstrating the interplay of diplomacy, ideology, and mass mobilization, this contribution explores how the Annexation Crisis redefined statecraft, public sentiment, and political agency.

Two of the involved states, the Habsburg and the Russian empires, were considered as "mostly interested" Great Powers in the Balkans as part of the so-called European concert. They had fought against the Ottomans in a series of wars to drive them back from Europe since the 16th century. In addition, the Dual Monarchy had territorial possessions in the Balkans. Nevertheless, the Annexation Crisis seriously threatened peace in Europe in general. The negotiations that had to solve it happened primarily in the field of diplomacy with the aim of avoiding the outbreak of a war at this moment, while numerous actions occurred in the streets. They were provoked by religious and nationalistic sentiments but also by specific manipulations that targeted the masses for the purpose of using pressure.

* Institute of Balkan Studies & Center of Thracology at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences
roumiana.preshlenova@balkanstudies.bg

While the diplomatic aspect of the crisis is studied in a number of publications, the more visible events at that time remain underestimated¹. One of the most important questions in this contribution is whether only the political elites of the involved powers played a role that had to deal with the Annexation Crisis. "Just as the rulers danced, so did the citizens," stated Palmira Brummett on the occasion of the Annexation Crisis of 1908-1909 in her analyses of caricatures that represent imperialism in the Ottoman press². This concise sentence aptly reflects the acts of resistance to the annexation when one looks at ideologies, rhetoric and actions and tries to evaluate them in a broader context.

As is well known, on 6 October 1908, Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph announced the annexation of the Ottoman province of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which had previously been occupied and administered by the Dual Monarchy in accordance with the Berlin Treaty of 1878. The Bulgarian Prince Ferdinand had proclaimed the independence of Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire on the previous day (5 October 1908). Both acts represented a formal violation of the Berlin Treaty. Although between July and September 1908 they had been fundamentally agreed between the external ministers of Austria-Hungary, Alois Lexa von Aehrenthal, and of Russia, Alexander Izvolsky, both deeds triggered the sharpest international crisis before the First World War. The "surprising act" of the Dual Monarchy put an end to the conservative cooperation between Vienna and Petersburg in the Balkans, which

¹ Bernadotte E. Schmitt, *The Annexation of Bosnia, 1908-1909* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937); Кирилл Б. Виноградов, *Боснийский кризис 1908-1909 гг. - пролог Первой мировой войны* (Ленинград: Издательство Ленинградского университета, 1964); Roderic Davison, "The Ottoman Boycott of Austrian Goods in 1908 as a Diplomatic Question," in *Third Congress of the Social and Economic History of Turkey, Princeton University, 24.-26. August 1983*, ed. Heath Lowry and Ralph Hattox (Istanbul, Washington, Paris: Isis Press, 1990), 1–28; Анатолий В. Игнатъев, „Австро-Венгерская монархия во внешней политике России на рубеже XIX-XX вв.“, in *Судьба двух империй: Российская и Австро-Венгерская монархии в историческом развитии от расцвета до крушения*, ed. Андрей Н. Сахаров (Москва: Институт российской истории Российской академии наук, 2006); Alberto Basciani (ed.), *Balcani 1908: alle origini di un secolo di conflitti* (Trieste: Belt, 2010); Francis R. Bridge, *From Sadowa to Sarajevo: The Foreign Policy of Austria-Hungary, 1866-1914* (London: Routledge, 1972); Йордан Петров, *България в балканската политика на Великобритания в началото на XX век, 1902 - 1909 г.* (Велико Търново: УИ „Св. Св. Кирил и Методий“, 2018); Петър Парушев, *Босненската криза 1908-1909, Великите сили и България* (Бургас: Университет "Проф. д-р Асен Златаров", 2023); John A. Vasquez, Andrew P. Owsiak, "The 1908–1909 Bosnian Crisis," in John A. Vasquez, Andrew P. Owsiak, *Crises, War, and Diplomacy: Lessons for World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025), 142-153.

² Palmira Brummett, *Image and Imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press 1908-1911* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 175.

had continued for decades and had temporarily frozen their rivalry in the region.

Immediately after the proclamation of the annexation, the Russian Tsar Nicholas II ordered to inform the ambassador of the Dual Monarchy in Petersburg, Leopold Graf Berchtold, that from that moment on Russia would communicate only in writing with Austro-Hungarian diplomacy. France, Great Britain, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire protested vigorously on the grounds that the annexation was a one-sided violation of Article 25 of the Berlin Treaty. Serbia and Montenegro, with the support of Russia, expressed their outrage, too. During the crisis, Russia acted as the protector of the small Slavic states, opposing Austria-Hungary as a multi-ethnic empire with significant Slavic populations within its territories. Diplomatic negotiations between the Great Powers began immediately with the aim to calm down the warlike mood in Belgrade and Cetinje and keep the conflict local. In the Dual Monarchy itself, the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina was controversially evaluated, and the behaviour of the Foreign Minister Aehrenthal was even characterised as juridical cretinism in the House of Representatives (Abgeordnetenhaus)³.

Two days after the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, protest demonstrations started in Constantinople in front of shops in which Austro-Hungarian goods were sold. At the same time, customers were prevented from purchasing products from the Dual Monarchy. The newspaper "Tanin", edited by the Young Turks, published an article entitled "Buy no Austrian⁴ goods!". The article called to boycott Austrian goods and ships and to withdraw orders that had already been made in the Dual Monarchy. The appeal to boycott Bulgarian goods and ships had no practical effect, since they were insignificant compared to those of the Dual Monarchy⁵. A Boycott Syndicate was founded in Constantinople. According to diplomatic sources, it united all merchants and load carriers (*Hamals*) in the Ottoman capital and represented an impressive power of around 40,000 people. The article was reprinted in other newspapers and was a signal to the boycott in Turkey. The actual momentum of the movement was the Committee of Union and Progress in Thessaloniki, which had initiated the constitutional revolution of 1908 a few months earlier. Local

³ „Protokolle des Hauses der Abgeordneten,“ XVIII. Session, 122. Sitzung, 8129ff. Cited after Stefan Verosta, Ignaz Seidl-Hohenveldern, *Die völkerrechtliche Praxis der Donaumonarchie von 1859 bis 1918. Eine Auswahl von Dokumenten*. Bd. 1, 2 (Wien: 1996).

⁴ In this and all similar cases, Austrian and Hungarian goods and ships were meant, although usually only the former were explicitly mentioned.

⁵ Централен държавен архив (София), фонд 321 к, опис 8, архивна единица 12.

committees for the boycott were organized in all major cities of the Ottoman Empire⁶.

In addition to refusing to buy Austrian goods and unload Austrian ships, the local committees organised demonstrations, publications, strike posts and inspections of the imported products to check their non-Austrian origin. The red fez, which was considered an Austrian product and was imported mainly from the Dual Monarchy into Turkey, was replaced with a white or black astrakhan hat. *Banque de Salonique*, supported by the Viennese *Länderbank*, was also boycotted⁷. In addition to numerous peaceful protests, violence was also reported. Two traders in Kumanovo and Kotchani (Kočani) were sprayed with oil and burned in the street because they did not stick to the boycott and supposedly had smuggled Austrian sugar⁸.

In the press, the boycott offered an opportunity to mock the aggressor, praise the revolutionary potential of the masses, and to show the symbols of the nation. The editorial board of the magazine "Papağan" used the entire patriotic symbolism, which represented the Ottoman Empire as noble lions in different variations. Several newspapers such as "Dalkavuk" or "Geveze" were less epic in their satirical illustrations⁹.

The police in the Ottoman Empire tolerated the boycott, even though the government had supposedly promised several times to stop it. When the Austrian Lloyd suggested hiring workers for unloading its ships, the police refused to approve it on the grounds that the constabulary would not be able to protect these 1,000 dockers during their work and after¹⁰.

The boycott movement, which developed in Constantinople and European Turkey, expanded or was at least staged also among Muslims in Tripoli, as well as in India and some Italian cities such as Genoa, Turin, Livorno, and others. There was also a rally even in Russia. In Moscow, a Czech named Koniček, an Austro-Hungarian citizen, organized a syndicate to boycott "German" and non-Slavic products from the Dual Monarchy. All other nationalities of the Habsburg Empire, apart from the Slavs, were considered

⁶ Y. Doğan Çetinkaya, *The Young Turks and the Boycott Movement. Nationalism, Protest and the Working Classes in the Formation of Modern Turkey* (London-New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

⁷ Haus-,Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Administrative Registratur (HHStA, AR), F 34, K. 65, 10.1.1909 и K. 64, 8.1.1909; F 34, K. 65, 8.2.1909.

⁸ Ђорђе Микић, *Аустро-Угарска и младотурци 1908-1912* (Бањалука: Институт за историју 1983), 103-109.

⁹ Brummett, *Image*.

¹⁰ *Österreich-Ungarns Außenpolitik von der Bosnischen Krise 1908 bis zum Kriegsausbruch 1914 (ÖUAP). Diplomatische Aktenstücke des österreichisch-ungarischen Ministeriums des Äußern*. Kommission für neuere Geschichte, 1. Band (Wien, Leipzig 1930), no. 686.

imperialist¹¹. How a product could be identified as Slavic or non-Slavic remains unclear.

In Serbia, the boycott began on 6 October 1908 with a demonstration of around 500 to 600 people in Belgrade. The demonstrators attacked shops and restaurants of Austro-Hungarian citizens, smashing their windows and signboards. A committee was founded to organize the boycott. Many of the local merchants received flyers with warnings not to order deliveries from the Dual Monarchy. The Serbian Traders' Association sent a delegation to Foreign Minister Milan Milovanović to discuss the boycott. The Serbian government did not officially agree to the movement, since it expected concessions from Vienna in the course of the customs war with Austria-Hungary, which was ongoing at that time. In his view, if the situation changed, the merchants could be supported by the government. Despite established contacts between the organizers of the boycott in Serbia and the Ottoman Empire, the official stance of the government in Belgrade did not allow common actions between activists in both countries. At the end of 1908, Serbia and the Dual Monarchy announced partial mobilization of their armies, and the headquarters in Austria-Hungary and Germany, united in the Triple Alliance since 1882, elaborated plans for a possible war with Serbia, supported by Russia and France. Vienna banned the export and transit of all military equipment to Serbia, which thwarted the delivery of French weapons ordered at Schneider-Creusot in 1906¹². The resistance to the annexation was fervently articulated in the Serbian press, with leading newspapers such as *Politika*, *Mali Žurnal*, *Pravda*, and *Carigradski Glasnik* playing a central role in shaping public sentiment¹³.

In Montenegro, the movement began with a protest demonstration in Podgorica, as well as with riots at the house of the Austro-Hungarian consul Filip Lukšić and at the Austro-Hungarian Consulate in Bar, where the flag of the Dual Monarchy was torn down. After a two-day meeting in the capital Cetinje, representatives of merchants from the whole country took a decision to boycott all Austro-Hungarian products and to break off trade relationships with Vienna. They elaborated detailed instructions for the boycott. Those who would violate the decisions should be pursued by criminal law. A central committee in Cetinje and commissions in the bigger cities were founded to organize the movement. The Montenegrin government officially supported the boycott, in contrast to those in the Ottoman Empire and in Serbia who only

¹¹ HHStA, AR, F 34, K. 39, K. 65.

¹² Jovan Cvijić, *L'Annexion de la Bosnie et la question serbe* (Paris: Hachette, 1909); Gottfried Hobus, *Wirtschaft und Staat im Südosteuropäischen Raum 1908-1914* (München: Verlag von Ernst Reinhardt, 1934), 132-133; Димитрије Ђорђевић, *Царински рат Аустро-Угарске и Србије 1906-1911* (Београд: Историјски институт, 1962).

¹³ Enes Turbic, "1908 Annexation of Bosnia in the Serbian Press," *Osmanli Mirasi Arastirmalari Dergesi*, vol. 11 (November 2024).

tolerated it. In addition, high duties on Austro-Hungarian import goods were introduced and the planned minting of a significant amount of silver coins was ordered in Paris and not in Vienna, as initially agreed on¹⁴.

The Romanian government announced neutrality in the crisis. At the same time, it started trade negotiations with Austria-Hungary aiming at concessions for the country's agricultural export. Nevertheless, a syndicate was founded in Ialomița to organize the boycott of Austro-Hungarian imports. A declaration in Iași supported it. In Wallachia, 40 of the biggest landowners founded another boycott syndicate headed by Alexandru Marghiloman, one of the biggest landowners, former Minister of Justice and Chairman of the Conservative Party. The Romanian Agricultural Society also joined the movement. King Carol described the activists of the boycott in Romania as predominantly "decent people without explicit political orientation". In this situation, a contract between Austria and Hungary of 16 March 1909 granted Romania the entire quota for the import of cattle into the Dual Monarchy; Bulgaria should be granted the not realized part of the quota. Serbia, the only Balkan state that had the privilege to import cattle into Austria-Hungary in the past, was not mentioned in this contract at all, i.e. was excluded from the agreement between Vienna and Budapest. Soon after, on 23 April 1909, a trade agreement between Bucharest and Vienna granted the corresponding advantages for the Romanian exports¹⁵.

The Annexation Crisis of 1908–1909, also known as the Bosnian Crisis, had another development until 1911. Crete added a conflict line to it, too. Despite the active participation of its population in the War for Independence of 1821, this largest Greek island remained outside the Greek state. The struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire did not cease in the following decades. The broad autonomy, which the Great Powers granted it in 1898 after the uprising of 1896/97, did not reduce the efforts to unite with Greece. The proclamation of the independence of Bulgaria in 1908 motivated the Cretan population to announce the unification with Greece following the secret suggestion of the Greek Prime Minister Georgios Teotokis. Officially, Teotokis assured the Young Turk government in Constantinople that the events in Crete were not hostile to the Ottoman Empire, but only a reaction to the Bulgarian declaration of independence. The government of Kâmil Pascha

¹⁴ Нико С. Мартиновић, „Отпор народа у Црной гори против анексије Босне и Херцеговине,” in *Југословенски народи пред Први светски рат*, ed. Васа Чубриловић (Београд: Научно дело, 1967), 506; John D. Treadway, *The Falcon and the Eagle: Montenegro and Austria-Hungary, 1908-1914* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1983).

¹⁵ *Österreich-Ungarns Außenpolitik*, 1, no. 760; HHStA-AR, F 34, K. 66; Румяна Прешленова, *Австро-Унгарија и Балканите 1878-1912* (София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2018), 120.

called the Great Powers to restore the status quo, whereas Teotokis built on an international conference to approve the unification of Crete with Greece. At the end of 1908, the parliament and government in Constantinople were sharply criticized for ignoring the Turkish interests on Crete. A protest rally in the Ottoman capital against the declaration of Cretan unification with Greece triggered a fierce anti-Greek campaign. After the acceptance of the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina in January 1909 and the independence of Bulgaria in April 1909, the Young Turk government aimed at revenge. At the end of May 1909, Greece proposed financial and territorial compensation to the Ottoman Empire in addition to an alliance, but the Young Turk government rejected any agreements on Crete. Eleftherios Venizelos, the interim commissioner for foreign affairs of Crete, refused to remove the Greek flag as a symbol of the unification, which led the Ottoman government to boycott the Greek trade¹⁶.

Only the interference of the four powers, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Russia, which were internationally recognized as protectors of Crete and peace makers there, mitigated the tensions between Athens and Constantinople. In March 1910, the Muslim deputies in the parliament in Chania refused to swear to the Greek king and left. This triggered a new wave of anti-Greek boycott in the Ottoman Empire, which was defined by foreign diplomats as a real economic war against the positions of the Greeks in many economic sectors. The Grand Vizier Hakki Pascha declared that every change in the status of Crete would be a *casus belli* against Greece. Only the intervention of the Great Powers, which confirmed the sovereign rights of the sultan over Crete, prevented a Turkish attack on Crete. The boycott against Greek merchants in the Ottoman Empire broke out violently again in 1911 and lasted until the outbreak of the Italian-Turkish war in October of the same year¹⁷.

The boycott against Austro-Hungarian imports and ships in Constantinople, in European Turkey and in several cities in India and Italy began as a protest against the detachment of 600,000 Muslims from the Ottoman Empire¹⁸. For Serbia and Montenegro, the motif was the conquest of areas that were populated by Serbs, although they had been Islamized long ago. After the Berlin Congress in 1878 and the unification of Eastern Rumelia with Bulgaria in 1885, when a considerable number of Muslims remained in Bulgaria, there had been no analogous reactions. Serbia "only" attacked Bulgaria in 1885, which led to the short war between the two countries and the defeat of Serbia.

¹⁶ Werner Zürer, "Das Kreta-Problem 1908-1912. Über die Unfähigkeit zur diplomatischen Konfliktlösung vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," *Südost-Forschungen* 38 (1979): 1-12.

¹⁷ Zürer, "Das Kreta-Problem 1908-1912".

¹⁸ Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998); Davison, "The Ottoman Boycott".

It would be problematic to consider the boycott movement as a means of containing the foreign penetration of the economy in the Balkans. Some authors rightly point out that the boycott affected Greek and Armenian merchants as much as the Austro-Hungarian imports¹⁹. The boycott was probably much more effective for mobilizing patriotic sentiments and strengthening national identity in Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, and Greece. It also created a kind of quasi-Ottoman identity in the empire, although one can talk about it only very carefully. The boycott clearly and undoubtedly constructed the image of Austria-Hungary as an imperialist power in the public space. Paradoxically, the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Dual Monarchy only a few years later. Then, no protests against the alliance with the imperialist power were reported.

The boycott movement in the Ottoman Empire could also be placed in a social context. Zürcher notes that inflation in Turkey was about 20 percent at that time and that workers demanded wage increases. There were over a hundred strikes in the first six months after the Young Turk Revolution²⁰. These indicate considerable social unrest in which the boycott fitted.

The solution to the Annexation Crisis was reached after months of negotiations - officially between the Ottoman government and the Austro-Hungarian ambassador in Constantinople, Johann Markgraf Pallavicini, and unofficially between the Committee for Union and Progress in Thessaloniki and the Austro-Hungarian Consul there, Alfred Rappaport. In addition, diplomacy in Vienna negotiated with Belgrade and Bucharest, on the one hand, and Sofia, Petersburg and Athens negotiated with Constantinople, on the other hand. The most influential actors in the crisis - Germany, Russia, Great Britain and France - acted in the background, whereby the core question was whether a war would be risked at that moment or not. The intensity of the boycott followed the ups and downs of the negotiations between the respective parts conspicuously. In the Ottoman Empire, the boycott of Austro-Hungarian ships and imports ended only after the formal agreement between Vienna and Constantinople on 26 February 1909. In addition to full religious freedom and equality of the Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Austria-Hungary paid a compensation of 2.5 million Turkish lira for the province to let the Sublime Porte accept the annexation. Bulgaria, in turn, had to pay 125 million francs as compensation for its independence - not to Turkey, but to Russia. This sum was deducted as part of the debts of the Ottoman Empire to Russia as a result of its defeat in the war of 1877/78.

While the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by the Dual Monarchy was a purely imperialist act, the proclamation of Bulgarian independence from

¹⁹ Erik-Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 104.

²⁰ Zürcher, *Turkey*, 98.

the Ottoman Empire and the attempted unification of Crete with Greece were part of the liberation process of the Balkan countries in the long 19th century. The three violations of the Berlin contract were evaluated equally by the parties concerned and by the Great Powers. In the course of the crisis, the Young Turks, organized in the Committee of Union and Progress, mobilized significant masses to trigger the boycott for blackmailing the perpetrators. On the other hand, the Ottoman, Serbian, Montenegrin, Romanian and Russian governments used it to gain economic advantages. The crisis ultimately developed into a business. The examination of the intersections between rhetoric and practical action shows that the boycott was exploited as an instrument of the Young Turks and the governments of the involved parties. The individual events were neither coordinated nor was there a common slogan that united them. Nevertheless, the crisis consolidated the image of the Dual Monarchy as aggressor and culprit in Southeast Europe. Further, it would not be exaggerated to characterize the boycott movement in 1908-1911 as a unique episode in Balkan history with regard to its goals, occurrence, means, scope, and effectiveness, even if one disregards its manifestations outside of Southeast Europe.