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THE GUSINJE CRISIS (1878–1880) AND THE DEMARCATON OF THE MONTENEGRIN BORDER TOWARD OLD SERBIA (1883–1887)

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the Plav–Gusinje crisis (1878–1880) as the first major geopolitical issue involving the Principality of Montenegro following the Congress of Berlin. It analyzes the complex interaction between the Ottoman Empire, the Great Powers, Montenegro, and the Albanian League of Prizren, with particular emphasis on the Ottoman strategy of obstructing the implementation of the Berlin Treaty. The study argues that the Porte pursued a deliberate policy of diplomatic delay and political manipulation, including the instrumentalization of Albanian resistance, in order to retain control over the contested territories. Special attention is given to the role of Montenegrin diplomacy, particularly the activities of its envoys in Constantinople, who sought to secure territorial gains through both negotiation and strategic positioning within Great Power politics. The paper highlights how localized armed clashes in the Plav–Gusinje region, although limited in scale, significantly influenced diplomatic outcomes by complicating peaceful territorial transfer and prompting international intervention. The research further explores the shift from the initial insistence on the Berlin Treaty provisions toward a compromise solution, culminating in the cession of Ulcinj to Montenegro in 1880 as compensation for Plav and Gusinje. In addition, the paper analyzes the prolonged and complex process of border demarcation between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire from 1880 to 1887, with special emphasis on the section of the border adjoining the Kosovo Vilayet, a region that, in Serb historiographical and national discourse, has most often been referred to as Old Serbia. This phase was marked by diplomatic disputes, conflicting territorial claims, and recurrent local vio-*

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lence, particularly in the Lim Valley and surrounding regions. Despite formal agreements reached in 1884, the final delineation of the border required further negotiations and was only effectively completed in 1887, following additional military clashes and shifting regional dynamics. Ultimately, the paper situates the Plav–Gusinje crisis and its aftermath within the broader context of the Eastern Question, emphasizing their significance for the consolidation of Montenegrin statehood and the geopolitical transformation of the late 19th-century Balkans.

KEYWORDS: *Montenegro, Ottoman Empire, Gusinje crisis, League of Prizren, Kosovo Vilayet, Old Serbia, Great Powers, Prince Nikola Petrović, Duke Stanko Radonjić, Duke Gavro Vuković, International fleet, Cession of Ulcinj, Montenegrin–Ottoman border demarcation*

The first significant historical event related to the Principality of Montenegro since the time of the Berlin Congress (June–July 1878), is certainly the Plav–Gusinje crisis. The territory of Plav and Gusinje was then part of the Kosovo Vilayet of the Ottoman Empire, which in the Serb historiography and national tradition is commonly designated as *Old Serbia*. The evolution of this geographical concept began to take shape in 1830, after the establishment of the autonomous Principality of Serbia within its then-current borders. The establishment of the aforementioned Principality was one of the main determinants for the emergence of the concept of Old Serbia as a synonym for the territory south and southeast of it. The perception of the Principality as the „new“ Serbia, combined with knowledge of the extent of medieval Serb statehood and awareness of the presence of Serb population, was decisive in attributing the name Old Serbia to these regions.¹

The Kosovo Vilayet was officially established in the war year of 1877. It was formed by combining the following regions: the Prizren, Priština, Debar, and Skopje sanjaks from the Bitola Vilayet, the Niš sanjak from the Danube Vilayet, and the Novi Pazar sanjak from the Bosnia Vilayet.² The kazas of the Kosovo Vilayet that territorially extended towards the Principality of Montenegro were: Pljevlja, Lower Kolašin, Bijelo Polje, Berane, and Gusin-

¹ М. Јагодић, *Србија и Стара Србија (1839–1868). Наслеђе на југу*, Београд, 2016. 35–36.

² At the Berlin Congress of 1878, the Ottoman Empire lost the territories of the Niš Sanjak to Serbia and Bulgaria thereby reducing the size of the Vilayet. In 1879, the Debar and Prizren sanjaks were transferred to the Bitola Vilayet. In 1880, the western part of the Novi Pazar Sanjak was organized as a distinct Pljevlja Sanjak, consisting of the kazas (districts) of Pljevlja, Prijepolje, and the mudirlik (administrative area) of Priboj. In 1881, a new Peć Sanjak was formed within the Kosovo Vilayet. In 1888, the Prizren Sanjak was returned to the Kosovo Vilayet, and the administrative center of the Vilayet was moved from Priština to Skopje. (М. Јагодић, *Српско-албански односи у Косовском вилајету (1878–1912)*, Београд, 2009, 4–7)

je.³ At the meeting in January 1878, within the framework of the presentation of its war aims for territorial expansion, the Government of the Principality of Serbia officially defined that the territory of the Kosovo Vilayet represents the geographical concept of Old Serbia in its narrowest sense.⁴ This would, from that point onward, become the most prevalent understanding of the mentioned geopolitical term in both Serbia and Montenegro.

Following the war of 1876–1878 against Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, and the Bulgarian insurgents, which the Ottoman Empire lost, it intended to obstruct the provisions of the Berlin Treaty concerning its territorial losses. In connection with this goal, the establishment of the *League for the Defense of the Rights of the Albanian People* in Prizren, in June 1878, was of particular importance. The fundamental principle of this movement was reflected in the desire to prevent the expansion of Balkan Christian states into the Ottoman vilayets where Albanians lived to a greater or lesser extent.⁵ The movement viewed the aforementioned territories (the Shkodra, Kosovo, Bitola, and Janina vilayets) as the exclusive right of the Albanian people and, in the long term, aimed to unite them into a single Albanian vilayet within the Ottoman Empire, although the Albanian population was not in an absolute majority across the entirety of the mentioned area.⁶

This represents the first programmatic-political articulation of the Albanian people, driven by the desire to prevent the territorial solutions of the peace treaties of San Stefano and Berlin. However, the position of Albanians of the Muslim faith in the Ottoman Empire was not akin to that of the Orthodox Serbs. They were not in an oppressed position; rather, they were a loyal element to the Sultan, considering any kind of their potential political unity exclusively in terms of autonomy within the Ottoman Empire.⁷ The Islamized Serbs of the area also leaned on this movement, as they too, did not wish to live under any other system except that of the Sultan. All in all, the Ottoman government decided to use the League of Prizren to prevent the loss of certain territories.

Article 32 of the Berlin Treaty required the Ottoman Empire to completely withdraw from the territory assigned to the Principality of Montene-

³ М. Јагодић, *Историја српског народа у Црној Гори, Хабзбуршкој монархији и Османском царству у 19. и на почетку 20. века*, Београд, 2022, 449–502.

⁴ С. Рајић, *Спољна политика Србије – Између очекивања и реалности 1868–1878*, Београд, 2015, 523.

⁵ Б. Храбак, *Призренска арбанашка лига: 1878–1881*, Београд, 1998, 329.

⁶ Д. Батаковић, *Косово и Метохија у српско-арбанашким односима*, Приштина – Горњи Милановац, 1991, 86.

⁷ С. Недељковић, „Призренска лига (1878–1881) између мита и стварности“, у *Зборник радова Хуманизације Универзитета*, Научни скуп са међународним учешћем „Наука и савремени Универзитет 2“, Ниш, 2013, 399–411.

gro. This provision included, among other, the territory of Plav and Gusinje. The government in Istanbul decided to employ a perfidious political strategy in order to avoid the implementation of this contractual article. The Porte consistently persuaded other powers, at the level of public narrative, that its will to adhere to the provisions of the Berlin Treaty was maximal, but that its implementation was hindered by the growing Albanian movement. The reality, however, was that it was precisely the Porte that was stoking this movement and pushing it towards greater resistance to Cetinje's efforts to establish effective control and authority in Plav and Gusinje.⁸

The perfidy of the official Istanbul went so far as to have one *mushir*⁹ deliberately sacrificed as a strategic maneuver to obstruct the handover of the aforementioned territories to Montenegro. This refers to the fate of Mehmed Ali Pasha, an Islamized German who had joined the Ottoman army and rapidly advanced in its hierarchy. The Porte sent Mehmed Ali Pasha to Prizren with the task of overseeing the handover of Plav and Gusinje, while simultaneously working to stimulate a bloody Albanian reaction. As a former Christian, Mehmed Ali Pasha was not at all popular, nor did he inspire any trust among the local Muslim population. This sentiment was exploited by local Ottoman authorities and trusted individuals to spread rumors that Mehmed Ali Pasha had betrayed the Sultan and was ready to easily surrender the territory promised to Montenegro. The irate Albanian masses, inflamed by their belief in this propaganda, launched an attack on the inn where Mehmed Ali Pasha was staying in Đakovića, resulting in his death.¹⁰ Just one day later, Grand Vizier Safet Pasha sent a letter to Cetinje in which he expressed the opinion that the provisions of the Berlin Congress should be implemented as soon as possible. However, in the following part of the letter, he noted that the moment for the handover of the Gusinje region was unfavorable, given that the recent events proved that allegedly, the local Muslim population was hostile even toward the Ottoman government.¹¹

The first ever head of the Montenegrin diplomatic mission in the Ottoman Empire was Duke Stanko Radonjić. Naturally, his first task was to make every effort to ensure that the Gusinje crisis was resolved favorably for Montenegro. He was instructed to clearly convey to the Porte Montenegro's firm desire to acquire the territories guaranteed to it in the Berlin Treaty, but also to refute the Ottoman propaganda to the representatives of the

⁸ Д. Бакић, *Политика Црне Горе према Османском царству од Берлинског конгеса до Другог балканског рата*, докторска теза, Универзитет у Београду, Факултет политичких наука, 2017, 52.

⁹ The highest military rank in the late Ottoman Empire.

¹⁰ Краљ Н. I Петровић Његош, *Мемоари II*, Подгорица, 2009, 214–219.

¹¹ С. Поповић, *Мемоари*, Цетиње–Подгорица, 1995, 277–279.

other powers, which claimed that Montenegro was not particularly interested in Plav and Gusinje and would be willing to exchange them for another territory.¹² Radonjić was advised in Cetinje to also make it clear to the ambassadors of the Great powers at the Porte that among the Muslim population of that region, there were more who had a Serb ethno-linguistic character than those who had an Albanian one, as Turkey had persistently promoted. Furthermore, the Montenegrin envoy was tasked with demanding that the Ottoman government prevent the involvement of Albanians from other regions in the issue of Gusinje.¹³

Even before the official audience with Sultan Abdul Hamid II in the second half of 1879, Radonjić had the opportunity to engage in talks with senior representatives of the Ottoman authorities, including Safet Pasha. During these discussions, the Duke indirectly emphasized that, in the event it became impossible for Plav and Gusinje to be handed over as stipulated, Montenegro would be compelled to resort to the use of force.¹⁴ However, shortly after, a directive came directly from Prince Nikola Petrović Njegoš, instructing that force should not be threatened in diplomatic engagements with the Ottomans. This was a directive that Duke Stanko had to take into consideration.¹⁵

In his report from August 1879, Duke Stanko states that he made an effort to explain to Safet Pasha that Montenegro was striving to strictly adhere to the provisions of the Berlin Congress, and that, according to this logic, any territorial exchange was not an option. In the further part of the report, the Duke notes that he was asked by the Pasha for more patience, as the issue of the handover of Gusinje and Plav would be put before a session of the Porte. In reality, the Ottoman Empire was buying time, given that the mentioned government session did not lead to any resolution.¹⁶

Until the fall of his government in October 1879, Safet Pasha continued to buy time, assuring Duke Stanko that Turkey, due to the rising Albanian movement, was allegedly still unable to hand over Plav and Gusinje, and that Montenegro needed to show more patience. In addition to this, the Grand Vizier still pointed to the option of exchanging Plav and Gusinje for another territory that could be perceived as an adequate compensation. The fact that Radonjić was aware that this entire situation was nothing more than a strategic Ottoman maneuver is confirmed by his report to Prince Nikola

¹² Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, Цетиње, 1979, 99.

¹³ Same.

¹⁴ Државни архив Црне Горе (hereinafter: ДАЦГ), Фонд Министарства иностраних дјела (hereinafter: МИД), 1879, ф. 3, док. 204/1.

¹⁵ Г. Вуковић, *Мемоари*, Цетиње, 1996, 345.

¹⁶ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1879, ф. 3, док. 204/3.

from September 1879, in which he emphasized that from the very beginning, he had realized that control over the Plav–Gusinje region could not be established without the use of force.¹⁷

Starting in October, Radonjić continued discussions regarding Plav and Gusinje with Yannis Sava Pasha, the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the new Ottoman government, who was of Greek descent. In these talks, Yannis Sava Pasha initially proposed that Montenegro, instead of Plav and Gusinje, be given the Krajina of Kuči, Gruda, and Hoti. After this offer was rejected, the Pasha promised to take all necessary measures for the handover of Plav and Gusinje, provided that Cetinje refrained from intervention until then. For this reason, Mukhtar Pasha, who had been sent to Prizren two months earlier, was ordered to take all measures to ensure that the Plav-Gusinje region would be handed over to Montenegro.¹⁸

This was yet another stage in the strategic double game of the Ottomans. It was important for the Porte to ensure that Montenegro refrained from any attack while the Albanians were still not sufficiently organized for combat. Guided by this intention, the Ottoman side set November 29 as the official date for the handover of Plav and Gusinje, hoping to gain enough time to organize an Albanian-Muslim attack. Mukhtar Pasha, who was supposed to personally carry out the handover of these towns to Duke Božo Petrović, who had been delegated by the Montenegrin side, was actually working all along on arming the Albanians and organizing their resistance.¹⁹ Prince Nikola, in his memoirs, states that several battalions of the regular Ottoman army were dressed in Albanian folk attire and sent to Gusinje.²⁰ In this way, alongside the presence of well-armed and well-trained troops, an illusion was created of Albanians coming from other regions, giving the appearance of a large popular uprising.

The Ottoman-Albanian units launched an attack on the small Montenegrin guard near Velika on November 25, 1879.²¹ Two battalions from the Vasojevići, under the command of Todor Vuković, quickly arrived to protect the guard. They managed to push the attackers back toward the demarcation line near Plav. The legendary Kuči chieftain, Duke Marko Miljanov Popović assessed that this retreat of the Ottoman-Albanian forces was an ideal moment for a more decisive counterattack. He then struck with his two battalions, composed of men from Kuči and Bratonožići.²² At first, Duke Marko

¹⁷ Државни музеј Цетиње (hereinafter: ДМЦ), ф. Никола I, 1879, док. 91, 93.

¹⁸ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 56.

¹⁹ Same, 57.

²⁰ Краљ Н. I Петровић Његош, *Мемоари II*, 239.

²¹ *Застава*, бр. 184 (2. децембар 1879).

²² Н. Ражнатовић, *Плавско-гусињска афера 1879. и Марко Миљанов*, Историјски записи, 3–4/1982, 66.

was highly successful in driving the Albanians away. However, this initial success and the force of his attack led him into a state of strategic carelessness. He ventured too deep into enemy territory, chasing the Ottoman-Albanian attackers without securing his flanks, all while moving through deep snow. The remaining Muslim forces took advantage of this situation and set an ambush in the form of a striking encirclement around the Duke's battalions near the village of Novšići, putting them in a very difficult position. Reinforcements from Rovca and Morača rushed to their aid and managed to break the Ottoman-Albanian encirclement, allowing Duke Marko and his surviving men to retreat. All in all, the deadline for the handover of the Plav-Gusinje region expired amidst bloodshed, without the transfer of the designated territories to Montenegro.²³

The Russian Empire made a proposal for the mediation of the powers. This initiative was based on the idea that all the signatory powers of the Berlin Treaty would send their representatives to the field, who would jointly oversee the handover of Plav and Gusinje to Montenegro. However, the other powers were still not ready for any more direct involvement in the matter and rejected the proposal, explaining that its implementation was not feasible.²⁴ As for the Ottoman Empire, it continued its double game. Shortly after the earlier armed clash, Mukhtar Pasha, from Prizren, issued a proclamation from the Porte to the inhabitants of Gusinje and Plav, urging them to comply with the provisions of the Berlin Treaty. Among other things, the proclamation promised that those who did not wish to live under Montenegrin rule would be provided land in the Kosovo, Bitola, and Shkodra vilayets.²⁵

All Ottoman proclamations and public narratives of this type were performances, primarily aimed at the European public, intended to cover up the further organization of the Albanian-Muslim reaction, while buying as much time as possible.²⁶ Moreover, Mukhtar Pasha, by logical extension, was the field executor of the Turkish organization of this resistance.²⁷ On December 27, 1879, the Albanians advanced toward the Montenegrin outpost on the Pepići – Ržanica – Velika line, setting fire to the aforementioned villages.²⁸ The mentioned Montenegrin forces took up a new position near Murine. There, the Lijeva Rijeka battalion, commanded by Todor Vuković, managed to repel the Albanian-Ottoman attack and push the enemy back

²³ *Застава*, бр. 185 (4. децембар 1879).

²⁴ *Застава*, бр. 188 (9. децембар 1879).

²⁵ *Застава*, бр. 198 (28. децембар 1879).

²⁶ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 188, 190, 191, 193, 196–198, 203, 213–214.

²⁷ Краљ Н. I Петровић Његош, *Мемоари II*, 239.

²⁸ *Глас Црногорца*, бр. 1 (5. јануар 1880).

behind Pepići.²⁹ However, the aforementioned Albanian forces were significantly reinforced and launched a new attack.³⁰ Aware of the numerical inferiority combined with his exposed position, Todor Vuković had to order a strategic withdrawal. At that moment, Marko Miljanov came to the rescue with two more battalions, and the Albanian counterattack was eventually repelled. In the end, both sides found themselves back at their initial positions.³¹

In this engagement, there were also regular Ottoman soldiers among the Albanians. In support of this, Prince Nikola, in his memoirs, mentions the presence of military trumpets, as well as the organized movement of units in response to trumpet signals, which, in the Prince's view, the local Albanians would not have been able to understand without the presence of Ottoman forces. Moreover, he emphasizes that the entire Albanian movement could not have been carried out independently or with serious intensity, given that the broader Albanian masses were not permeated with national consciousness. He further argues that this entire scenario would not have been possible if the Porte had genuinely intended to hand over the Gusinje region to Montenegro.³² Even the Austrian envoy in Cetinje, Baron Temel, in his reports to Vienna, stated that the doubts about the Porte's direct patronage of the Albanian resistance were well-founded.³³

Although contemporary Albanian interpretations of their national history attribute great and triumphant significance to these battles, the fact is that they play a marginal role in the overall history of the Montenegrin-Ottoman conflicts. They would likely not have been worth mentioning had they occurred during the Montenegrin-Ottoman War of 1876–1878. However, the very fact that the Gusinje crisis was complicated by armed clashes, in strategic terms was a victory for the Albanian-Ottoman objective – the retention of this territory within the Ottoman Empire. Of course, these clashes pushed Montenegro further away from the possibility of peacefully incorporating this part of Old Serbia into its territory, making the idea of exchanging it for another territory much more realistic.

The scenario in which the Principality of Montenegro insisted on the provisions of the Berlin Treaty, while the Ottoman Empire claimed the impossibility of enforcing them regarding Plav and Gusinje, led nowhere and was no longer sustainable. On the other hand, the armed clashes at Novšići

²⁹ Н. Ражнатовић, *Сукоб Црне Горе са Турском и Албанском лигом око извршења Берлинског уговора о предаји Плава и Гусиња*, Гласник цетињских музеја, Цетиње, 1972, 68–69.

³⁰ П. Ровинский, *Черты из боевой жизни Черногории*, Русская Мысль, Москва, 1880, 9–28: 9.

³¹ Н. Ражнатовић, *Сукоб Црне Горе са Турском и Албанском лигом*, 69.

³² Краљ Н. I Петровић Његош, *Мемоари II*, 239, 245.

³³ Д. Микавица, Г. Васин, Н. Нинковић, *Срби у Црној Гори 1496–1918*, Никшић, 2017, 232.

and Murine alarmed the Great powers about the possibility that the situation could escalate into broader dimensions, potentially reigniting the Eastern Question. The writings of Montenegro's new envoy to the Porte, Duke Gavro Vuković, suggest that the latter scenario was allegedly desired by Austria-Hungary, as it was willing to use its newly won strategic position in the Balkans to gain control over additional territories, all under the guise of promoting stability and calming tensions.³⁴ Austrian expansion across the Balkan Peninsula was a segment of the idea of the broader German eastward expansion, which was basis of political strategy of the Berlin-Vienna axis. The other Great powers viewed this hypothetical chain of events with little sympathy and decided to intervene in order to prevent it, diplomatically preparing plans to exchange the Plav-Gusinje region for another Ottoman territory that would be acceptable to the Principality of Montenegro.³⁵

The ambassadors of Britain, France, and Italy at the Porte (with the knowledge and consent of Russia) invited Gavro Vuković to their secret meetings, wishing to hear Montenegro's views on the idea of exchanging Plav and Gusinje. Duke Gavro expressed his opposition to this proposal. As he himself stated, this reaction was of a strategic nature. Vuković knew that establishing control over the Gusinje region was impossible for Montenegro at this time, but with his stance, he aimed to push the Great powers into the position of having to propose a better offer for Montenegro, one that would serve as adequate compensation and satisfaction.³⁶

The Great powers reached an agreement that Corti, the Italian ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, would present the formulated proposal to the Porte regarding the exchange of the Gusinje region for another territory. Meanwhile, Gavro Vuković made efforts to establish a good personal relationship with Corti and to win him over to a broader formulation of the proposal. The proposed project envisioned that the Principality of Montenegro would expand east of Podgorica, encompassing Gruda and Hoti, as well as nearly the entire stretch between Lake Shkodra and the Adriatic Sea, which had been envisioned for Montenegro in the San Stefano treaty. This project also included a clause demanding 2 million francs from the Ottoman Empire for Montenegro.³⁷

The negotiation of such Italian proposal was also part of Duke Gavro Vuković's diplomatic strategy. He knew that such a broadly conceived project had no real chance of success. However, the Ottoman Empire aimed to offer Montenegro the absolute minimum in its first official draft, so Vuković

³⁴ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 365.

³⁵ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1880, ф. 4, док. 499.

³⁶ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 365.

³⁷ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 60.

hoped that this proactive start to the negotiations with the Turks, initiated by another power, would increase the likelihood that the initially proposed Ottoman draft would be territorially larger than what the Turks had actually planned.³⁸ The aforementioned project, presented to the Porte in January 1880, was categorically deemed unacceptable by the Ottoman side, and it was now their turn to present their proposal. After several unofficial proposals circulating in diplomatic exchanges, the Ottoman Empire presented its official draft of the proposed border with the Principality of Montenegro in February.³⁹ According to the aforementioned Ottoman proposal, instead of the Plav-Gusinje region, Montenegro would be granted only the following localities: Dinoša, Mataguži, Milješ, Vranj, Šipčanik, and the Krajina of Kuči.⁴⁰ It is evident that the Italian proposal did not shake the Porte's desire to offer Montenegro anything more than the bare minimum. Rather, this was an Ottoman strategic move aimed at ensuring that the final accepted version would be as close as possible to the aforementioned minimum.

The Great powers were dissatisfied with this Turkish proposal, especially Italy. The powers agreed that some form of collective pressure needed to be applied on the official Istanbul in order for the current crisis to finally come to an end. To this end, the ambassadors of the Great powers in the Ottoman Empire jointly sent a protest to the Porte, suggesting that such proposals were inappropriate. Yannis Sava Pasha defended himself by stating that the draft presented was not the final word of the Ottoman government.⁴¹ Just four days after the proclamation in which the Sultan approved the Ottoman proposal, a response from the Montenegrin government followed. Of course, the Porte's proposal was rejected, but this was done in such a way that the Montenegrin side expressed a desire for further negotiations to proceed peacefully, with the Porte being obligated to present a new proposal by March 31.⁴²

The understanding of the fact that Montenegro „pulled back” by giving the Ottoman Empire a whole month likely lies in the influence that Alexander Yonin, the Russian Empire's ambassador in Cetinje, had on Prince Nikola. Yonin had been advised from St. Petersburg to convey to the Montenegrin prince that, at this moment, the importance of preserving peace outweighed everything else, and that only by acting peacefully in these current circumstances could Montenegro emerge from the predicament it had found itself in.⁴³ It is possible that this perception of Russia was also based on its

³⁸ Исто.

³⁹ Д. Микавица, Г. Васин, Н. Нинковић, *op. cit.* 233.

⁴⁰ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 231.

⁴¹ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 370.

⁴² Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 68.

⁴³ ДМЦ, Приновљени рукописи (hereinafter: ПР), ф. 28, Гирс – Јонину, (12) 24. II 1880.

fear that, due to further Balkan entanglements, Vienna might indeed gain an opportunity to advance its eastern imperial ambitions – even as, thanks to the Berlin Congress, it had already emerged as the greatest beneficiary of the Balkan conflict without firing a single shot.

Be that as it may, after much diplomatic turbulence and maneuvering, and with the mediation and initiative of Italy, Yannis Sava Pasha and Gavro Vuković signed a memorandum in Istanbul on March 31, 1880, regarding the exchange of the Plav-Gusinje region for Gruda, Hoti, and part of Kastrati. The memorandum stipulated that ten days after its signing, the Ottoman Empire would cede the specified territory to the Principality of Montenegro, with the commander-in-chief of the Ottoman forces in Shkodra required to notify the Montenegrin commander in Podgorica of the exact time when the Ottoman troops would begin withdrawing from the territory, twenty-four hours prior to the act.⁴⁴ Cetinje was not particularly dissatisfied with this territorial arrangement, considering that it would acquire strategically significant territories to the east of Podgorica, which would reduce the town's vulnerability in the event of potential future conflicts with the Ottomans. The Ottoman forces did leave their positions ten days after the signing of the memorandum; however, the obligation to notify was not respected. The commander-in-chief of the Montenegrin army for the acquisition of the territories specified by the memorandum, Ilija Plamenac, did not receive any notification before the Turkish army withdrew.⁴⁵

Of course, this was a well-coordinated tactical move on the part of the Ottomans. The Turkish soldiers acted in this way to allow the rebellious Albanians to occupy their positions before the Montenegrin army, and they also left behind a significant amount of arms and ammunition.⁴⁶ When the Montenegrin soldiers arrived, they were fired upon by the Albanian troops. Following the order of Prince Nikola to avoid any armed conflict, Plamenac commanded the soldiers to retreat.⁴⁷

Both Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire supported the Albanian resistance in their own ways and for their own interests, with the aim of preventing Montenegro from achieving its contractually guaranteed rights.⁴⁸ In Cetinje, they were aware of the aforementioned fact, which is why there was so much caution and a rejection of the idea of a serious military campaign. As advised by Russia, falling into the trap of replacing diplomacy with

⁴⁴ ДАЦГ, МИД, ф. 4, Копија меморандума од 12. IV 1880.

⁴⁵ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 242–243.

⁴⁶ П. А. Искендеров, *Србија, Черногория и албанский вопрос в начале XX века*, Санкт Петербург, 2013, 23.

⁴⁷ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 242–243.

⁴⁸ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1880, ф. 4, док. 592.

the politics of force could have led to unpredictable consequences. On the other hand, it would have been somewhat absurd to enter another war over territories that were already guaranteed to Montenegro by an international treaty, which had just preceded a major war for the liberation of the Serb people.

Prince Nikola summoned the envoys of European powers to Cetinje and informed them about the violation of the obligations under the Istanbul memorandum by the Ottomans, while Gavro Vuković was instructed the next day to protest before the Porte.⁴⁹ The ambassadors of the Great powers in Istanbul sent a collective protest to the Ottoman government, with an agreement that no further contact would be made with it until a response regarding the recent events was received.⁵⁰ After six days of discussion, a response from the Porte followed. The Ottoman government stated that it rejected the accusations of violating the obligations of the memorandum, asserting that there had only been a certain misunderstanding during the evacuation of the Turkish army. The Turks also submitted a letter that Ilija Plamenac had sent to the vali⁵¹ of Shkodra Vilayet, Izet Pasha, as part of their correspondence regarding the handover of the claimed territories. The Turks attempted to use this letter as an argument against the Montenegro's accusations, considering that it was written after the withdrawal of the Turkish army, and that it contained no protest from the Montenegrin side.⁵²

In April 1880, the Great powers, through their ambassadors in Istanbul, presented a collective note to the Ottoman government, demanding an answer to the question of whether Turkey would restore the situation with the memorandum-designated territories to its initial state, that is, return the positions taken by the Albanians and, according to the agreed procedure, hand them over to Montenegro, or not.⁵³ The Porte did not respond to the mentioned démarche with any concrete answer, but instead proposed the formation of a commission whose task would be to thoroughly investigate the past event of the failed handover of the territory, after which agreements on further steps would follow.⁵⁴ The further course of resolving the territorial dispute between the Principality of Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire was largely influenced by the approach toward the Porte taken by the new British government, led by William Gladstone. On April 22, Foreign Minister George Grenville sent a circular note to all the signatory governments of the

⁴⁹ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 243.

⁵⁰ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1880, ф. 4, док. 588.

⁵¹ Governor of a vilayet in the Ottoman empire.

⁵² Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 80.

⁵³ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1880, ф. 4, док. 592.

⁵⁴ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 382.

Berlin Treaty, emphasizing that it was of general importance to end the hesitation of Turkey to fulfill the remaining obligations imposed on it by the said treaty.⁵⁵

As for the issue of the border between the Ottoman Empire and Montenegro, the letter stated that it required urgent measures, given the non-implementation of the memorandum signed by both sides, while also drawing attention to the fact that the Montenegrin-Albanian conflict was constantly hanging in the air.⁵⁶ In the mentioned circular note, Great Britain called on the other powers to issue a simultaneous *démarche*, demanding that the Ottoman Empire fulfill the territorial obligations toward Montenegro and Greece established by the Berlin Congress, as well as the reform obligations in the provinces where the Armenian people lived.⁵⁷

Britain sent George Goschen to Istanbul as a special ambassador with the aim of quickly resolving the crisis. Goschen was a highly regarded figure in the British diplomatic and political hierarchy, so his appointment in itself was meant to signal to the Sultan just how serious the official London was in its intentions.⁵⁸ Even before the official audience with the Sultan, Goschen met several times with Gavro Vuković. During these meetings, the British ambassador assured Vuković of his government's utmost determination to secure the Porte's fulfillment of the obligations from the Berlin Treaty, including those toward the Principality of Montenegro.⁵⁹ Of course, such an initiative from London instilled optimism that the crisis could be resolved to Montenegro's satisfaction. On the other hand, Germany was increasingly focusing on the desire to preserve peace in the East, warning the Dual Monarchy that it was unwise to provoke Russia for so long by obstructing Montenegro.⁶⁰ Thus, the new circumstances suggested a greater likelihood of effectiveness for the upcoming diplomatic initiatives compared to the previous ones.

The ambassadors of the Great powers in Istanbul met in May 1880, when they adopted a unified note addressing Turkey's obligations toward Greece, Montenegro, and the Armenian question. The note stated that of the aforementioned issues, the one concerning the Montenegrin-Ottoman border was in the worst state and, as such, required significant attention. It was noted that the Ottoman side had disregarded the obligations arising from the memorandum it had signed with Montenegro, allowing Albanian rebels to occupy positions that were supposed to be handed over to the Montenegrin

⁵⁵ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 82.

⁵⁶ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 383.

⁵⁷ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 255–256.

⁵⁸ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 383.

⁵⁹ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 83.

⁶⁰ Same, 84.

army.⁶¹ For these reasons, the powers called on the Porte to clearly state its intentions regarding Montenegro and to promptly fulfill the obligations stipulated by the treaty. Otherwise, Turkey would be held responsible for any consequences that might arise from further delaying the resolution of the Montenegrin territorial issue.⁶²

In its response, which would come the following month, the Ottoman government stated that it was ready to fulfill the memorandum's obligations, although it did not feel responsible for the April incident between the rebel Albanians and Montenegrin soldiers. The Porte noted that it needed enough time to effectively activate all the systematic measures necessary to resolve the issue peacefully. Furthermore, Turkey expressed its interest in considering any proposal that would lead to a peaceful resolution of the dispute. Additionally, the Turks expressed their willingness to pay the tax for these territories to Cetinje until the memorandum's obligations were fulfilled, if the other powers deemed it necessary.⁶³

This response from the Porte was a clear signal to the other powers that a new course of action was necessary, and the April memorandum should be rejected. In line with this perception, alternative territorial solutions began to be considered.⁶⁴ The British government proposed that Montenegro, as compensation for Plav and Gusinje, receive territory in the Lim Valley, basing this idea on the fact that the mentioned area was predominantly inhabited by Orthodox Serbs and, as such, suitable for this Serb principality. However, Austria opposed this proposal. In the end, the powers agreed to offer the Principality of Montenegro Ulcinj, with the coastline extending to the Bojana River. Prince Nikola tentatively accepted the proposal but insisted on a guarantee that the aforementioned territory would be peacefully handed over to Montenegro.⁶⁵ In the meantime, Abidin Pasha, an ethnic Albanian who was one of the central political figures behind the League of Prizren, took the position of Ottoman Minister of Foreign Affairs. The mentioned minister stated that the new project for the Ottoman Empire was even less realistic than the memorandum one, considering that it was morally more problematic for the Ottomans to cede Ulcinj to Montenegro, as it was an urban area with a predominantly Albanian population, compared to the rural regions from the memorandum. Furthermore, for the Ottomans Ulcinj was a kind of outpost for Shkodra – a key stronghold and the administrative center of the Shkodra Vilayet.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 86.

⁶² Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 385.

⁶³ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 262.

⁶⁴ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 87.

⁶⁵ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 256–258, 370.

⁶⁶ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 262.

However, Abidin Pasha invited Gavro Vuković for an official meeting in his office. On this occasion, the pasha, noting that the territory from the memorandum was not of particular benefit to Montenegro, offered that instead of ceding these regions, the Ottoman Empire would pay Montenegro a financial compensation as an adequate equivalent, thus resolving the matter in this way.⁶⁷ The Montenegrin envoy indignantly rejected this offer, emphasizing that no amount of money could pay for the blood Montenegro had spilled, and that such a Turkish proposal, for principled reasons, was something he would not even convey to his government. In his further statement, the duke stressed that the perfidy of Turkish policy toward Montenegro was transparent, but also that this principality would not relent in its determination until it received adequate satisfaction. After speaking these words, Vuković left Abidin Pasha's office, bypassing the customary courtesies that were conventional in the diplomacy of that time.⁶⁸

After the mentioned diplomatic incident, Prince Nikola was on the verge of deciding to sever diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire and withdraw the diplomatic mission from the Porte, but, after the insistence of the Great powers, he refrained from doing so. On the other hand, Abidin Pasha skillfully defended himself before the other powers, claiming that it was a misunderstanding and that he had allegedly never spoken about the redemption of territories, but rather about a tax on them.⁶⁹

In July 1880, a new proposal from the Ottoman government followed. It was offered that Montenegro be ceded part of the territories specified in the April memorandum, as well as a certain area from the broader Ulcinj region, excluding the city itself.⁷⁰ „From the above, it can be concluded that the Ottomans were keen to leave Montenegro with as little territory as possible between Podgorica and the border, which can certainly be interpreted as a strategic decision. The other powers assessed that this proposal from the Porte was unsatisfactory and, as such, could not be subject to further discussion. It became evident that a different form of pressure, not just diplomatic, had to be applied to the Ottoman Empire. The powers began making plans for a show of force in the waters of the Adriatic Sea in order to pressure the Porte into handing over Ulcinj to the Principality of Montenegro.⁷¹

The mentioned initiative originated from official London and received quick agreement from the other powers. An agreement was reached for a limited action by the international fleet in the Adriatic. Furthermore, it was

⁶⁷ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 88.

⁶⁸ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 309.

⁶⁹ Same, 309.

⁷⁰ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 265.

⁷¹ Same, 266.

agreed that the powers would send a collective written statement to the Turkish government, emphasizing that, three weeks from its receipt, the Ottoman side would be required to fulfill the April memorandum. Otherwise, the powers would call on Turkey to join them in assisting Montenegro in gaining control over Ulcinj.⁷² At the end of June 1880, before the official response of the Ottoman Empire to the proposed protocol, in the late hours of the night, over a hundred well-armed Albanians opened fire on Montenegrin soldiers at the position near Golubovci, killing ten of them in the process.⁷³ Ten days later, a certain number of soldiers from the battalion of the fallen took it upon themselves to cross the demarcation line and set fire to Albanian homes in the villages of Gostić and Mataguži, as an act of revenge for their comrades.⁷⁴

In the official statement regarding the mentioned events, Abidin Pasha emphasized that it was the Montenegrins who were the first to attack, thereby allegedly undermining the sincere efforts of the Porte to persuade the Albanians to resolve the matter peacefully.⁷⁵ Following this Ottoman reaction, Vuković received a directive from Cetinje to protest, demanding that the Porte deny the false statement. In the event of refusal, he would be obligated to immediately leave the Ottoman capital.⁷⁶ The Porte made no denial but instead proposed the formation of a mixed Ottoman-Montenegrin commission tasked with investigating the events on-site. The Principality of Montenegro characterized this conduct of the Ottoman Empire as highly inappropriate and recalled its chargé d'affaires at the Porte, Gavro Vuković, on July 11, 1880.⁷⁷ Additionally, contacts with the Ottoman envoy in Cetinje were severed.⁷⁸

The Great powers also officially rejected this note from the Ottoman government, stating that the Ottoman Empire should cede Ulcinj to Montenegro, or, alternatively, be given a three-week deadline to hand over the territories from the Montenegrin-Ottoman memorandum.⁷⁹ The Porte responded in early August 1880, emphasizing that it was willing to cede Ulcinj, provided there was no adjustment to the border east of Lake Shkodra, which would mean that Dinoša would remain within the Ottoman Empire. The Great powers accepted this Ottoman proposal.⁸⁰

⁷² Same.

⁷³ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 91.

⁷⁴ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 267–268.

⁷⁵ Same, 268.

⁷⁶ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1880, ф. 4, док. 660.

⁷⁷ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1880, ф. 4, док. 663.

⁷⁸ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 267.

⁷⁹ *Глас Црногорца*, бр. 33 (16. август 1880).

⁸⁰ Ј. Вукић, *Плавско-гусињска афера и ослобођење Улциња 1880. год.* Сарајево, 1929, 29–31.

From the second half of August to mid-September 1880, ships of the international fleet arrived in the port of Dubrovnik, while at the same time, the army of the Principality of Montenegro was preparing to take control of Ulcinj. The overall command of the international fleet was entrusted to the British Admiral, Lord Seymour. The admiral convened a conference of the fleet commanders, where it was agreed to send a question to the Ottomans, asking whether they would allow the peaceful handover of Ulcinj, or if it would become necessary for the Montenegrin army to proceed with the operation to capture the city, with the assistance of the international fleet.⁸¹ Meanwhile, the vali of Shkodra Vilayet, Riza Pasha, sent a letter to the Montenegrin government in which he referred to the large concentration of Montenegrin troops at the border and stated that he would repel any attack on the Ottoman border through military action. If anyone had believed until this point that the Albanian League was independently opposing Montenegro without Ottoman instrumentalization, they surely had to abandon that belief now.⁸²

After this, Seymour once again gathered the commanders of the international fleet. He expressed the view that, due to the current threat posed by the Ottomans, the fleet's place was in the Dardanelles, not in the waters of Dalmatia. This admiral's tone was based on a good understanding of his government's stance, given that it had not been long since official London proposed the effective use of force, whereby the international fleet would seize a location in the Aegean Sea from Turkey and hold it as collateral until the Porte fulfilled its contractual obligations. On September 26, 1880, the other powers confirmed their support for the British proposal, and Seymour was ordered to begin preparations.⁸³ When the Porte learned of the disposition of the other powers, it organized its own session on the same day and decided that Ulcinj would be unconditionally handed over to the Principality of Montenegro. The Sultan's decree on this matter was officially announced on September 30. The Porte placed the blame for Ulcinj not yet being handed over to Montenegro on Riza Pasha and, instead of him, delegated Dervish Pasha to the position of vali of the Shkodra Vilayet, with the army and instructions to carry out the handover of Ulcinj.⁸⁴

After the entry of Dervish Pasha's troops into the Ulcinj region, a clash occurred between them and the Albanians who were opposed to the handover of Ulcinj, on November 12, 1880, when the Ottoman troops completely crushed the Albanian resistance. This event was characterized by Prince Nikola as a staged affair, with the Ottoman Empire trying to demonstrate to

⁸¹ Г. Вуковић, *op. cit.* 397, 398, 401, 402.

⁸² Краљ Н. I Петровић Његош, *Мемоари II*, 281.

⁸³ Same, 282.

⁸⁴ Same, 283.

the world that the determination of the Albanian League was allegedly stronger than the Porte's desires and efforts to fulfill its contractual obligations peacefully.⁸⁵ In any case, all obstacles that had hindered Montenegro's capture of Ulcinj finally disappeared. The Ottoman Empire and the Principality of Montenegro signed a treaty on November 13, 1880, in Kunje, near Ulcinj, which determined that this city would be definitively annexed to Montenegro as compensation for Plav and Gusinje.⁸⁶ The following day, the official handover of Ulcinj took place, and the Montenegrin army entered the city. The Montenegrin flag was raised on the city fortress by a detachment of soldiers from Bar.⁸⁷

As for the determination of the Montenegrin border line with the Ottoman Empire, the biggest problem once again was reaching agreement on the section toward Old Serbia. Unlike the section of the border between Gradište and Lake Shkodra, which was defined by the protocol of 1881, the part from Gradište passing near Gusinje and Plav to Šekular was not clearly specified, and the Ottomans conditioned their acceptance of this border line with certain demands.⁸⁸ The Ottoman side sought to retain possession of the dominant hills on both sides of the Lim River, as well as the local villages with Muslim populations. It was also in their interest to keep a free passage between Peć, Plav, and Berane. Furthermore, the Turks demanded that Ali Paša of Gusinje be guaranteed the right to private ownership of land in the territory that was allocated to the Principality of Montenegro.⁸⁹

The commission for the demarcation of the Ottoman Empire and Montenegro worked intermittently until January 1884. In October 1883, the commission marked the border line from Lake Shkodra to Planinica, which was confirmed by an agreement between the two sides. However, the work on further marking the border line between the two states was hindered by many differences in the positions of the Ottoman and Montenegrin commissioners, so the border route from Planinica to Šekular remained unmarked.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, Montenegrin-Ottoman diplomatic relations were, of course, restored, and Gavro Vuković was once again sent as Montenegro's diplomatic representative to the Porte in March 1884.⁹¹ Vuković's primary task was certainly to resolve the issue of the Montenegrin-Ottoman border. Discussions regarding the specification of the border in the Gusinje region

⁸⁵ Same.

⁸⁶ П. А. Искендеров, *op. cit.* 23.

⁸⁷ Н. Ражнатовић, *Црна Гора и Берлински конгрес*, 293.

⁸⁸ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 104.

⁸⁹ Same, 105.

⁹⁰ ДАЦГ, МИД, 1883, ф. 12, док. 923.

⁹¹ Т. Јовић, *Diplomska predstavništva u Knjaževini i Kraljevini Crnoj Gori*, Cetinje, 2010, 161.

and the Lim Valley were held in Cetinje with the new Turkish diplomatic envoy to Montenegro, Djevad Pasha. The Pasha suggested that the Ottoman side could not agree to, the village of Ržanica, as a settlement of Polimlje region with a dominant Muslim population being assigned to Montenegro, nor could they accept that the border line pass over the peak of Stočica.⁹²

In May 1884, Prince Nikola presented a compromise proposal for the Plav-Gusinje sector. According to the proposed plan, Cetinje would abandon the idea of the border line passing over the peak of Stočica, meaning that the mentioned mountain massif would remain within the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, the land to the east of the Šekular River would be ceded to the Ottomans, in exchange for which the Turks would agree to Ržanica being assigned to Montenegro. The suggestion was that Ržanica, given its location, would appear as a ‘pocket’ penetrating into Montenegrin territory if it remained under Ottoman administration, meaning that the natural border dictated that the village should also be part of Montenegro.⁹³

Montenegrin commissioners, led by Minister of Defense Ilija Plamenac, met with Ottoman commissioners in Berane and Andrijevića in July 1884. On this occasion, the Turks pointed out that they did not want to relinquish control over the dominant hills in the Lim Valley. Regarding Ržanica, they stated that they might agree to cede it if they were granted Velika or the entire Šekular. The Montenegrin emissaries responded that they did not have the authority to comment on this Ottoman proposal, as they had received instructions from Cetinje to strictly adhere to Prince Nikola’s original proposal.⁹⁴ The Ottoman commissioners stated that they had not yet received any stance from Istanbul regarding the alternative proposal of the Montenegrin prince.⁹⁵ The Porte’s response was received at the end of August. The Turks rejected the Montenegrin proposal concerning Ržanica but accepted the proposed border from Planinica to the Lim Valley. The Montenegrin government reconciled with the Ottoman insistence on Ržanica and agreed to proceed with the demarcation of the border from Planinica to Šekular on that basis.⁹⁶

The official Cetinje was keen to establish a peaceful border with the Ottoman Empire, aiming to ensure that the border in the Lim Valley would be traced in a way that would leave as few border issues as possible. The Turkish narrative was based on emphasizing that Montenegro, in exchange

⁹² Н. Ражнатовић, *Разграничење Црне Горе и Турске (1883–1887)*, Историјски записи, 2/1995, 14–15.

⁹³ Same, 15.

⁹⁴ ДАЦГ, МИД, ф. 13, Пламенац – Радоњићу, (10) 22. XII 1884.

⁹⁵ Н. Ражнатовић, *Разграничење Црне Горе и Турске (1883–1887)*, 17.

⁹⁶ Same, 18.

for renouncing the areas of Gusinje and Plav, had gained the territory of Ulcinj up to the Bojana River, while the Turks perceived the area of Plav all the way to Andrijevisa. The Ottoman side also pointed out that the Sultan had graciously granted Montenegro the Orthodox villages in the mentioned region, although Montenegro had actually controlled them since the Uprising in the Vasojevići region in 1875. The essence was that the Ottomans based their position on the actual situation, namely the line between the Orthodox and Muslim lands from Šekular to Planinica.⁹⁷

The agreement on the regulation of the Montenegrin border with the Ottoman Empire to the north was signed in December 1884 in Istanbul. On the Montenegrin side, the signatory was Duke Gavro Vuković, and on the Turkish side, the Sultan's adjutants Dervish Pasha and Nusret Pasha. According to the agreement, the border line stretches from Planinica to the hill of Drečin Usov, then it continues to Borova Glava, Ilijina Glava, Tomov Kamen, Silijeva Glava, and Baljasta Glava, from where it proceeds to the peak of Goleš. From the last mentioned point, the border line follows the communal line between the village of Murino, which will remain in Montenegro, and the village of Pepić, which will remain in the Ottoman Empire. The border then reaches the Lim River, leaving Ržanica to the Ottomans, then turns between Mašanica and Velika, which is assigned to Montenegro. The border line continues back to the Lim River, leaving the village of Novšić to the Ottoman Empire. From there, as determined by the Berlin Congress, the border line goes to Mokra through Čakor, then follows a long stretch along Berane to Mojkovac, and along the Tara River to Šćepan Polje, which marks the tripoint with the Austro-Hungarian occupation zone in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹⁸ All in all, the key concession in favor of the Ottoman Empire in this agreement was the possibility for them to retain Ržanica, a village with around 200 inhabitants at the time, which remained unnaturally embedded in Montenegrin territory. For the Principality of Montenegro, the significant fact was that it gained the dominant hills on both sides of the Lim River.⁹⁹

As for the field marking of the Montenegrin border to the north, it officially began in September 1885. On this occasion, a Montenegrin-Turkish commission responsible for the demarcation met in Berane. The Montenegrin delegation was led by Ilija Plamenac, who at the time held the position of Minister of Defense, while the Ottoman side of the commission was headed by Bedri Bey.¹⁰⁰ After an exchange of topographic maps, the commission, accompanied by soldiers from both states, moved to Andrijevisa, and

⁹⁷ ДАЦГ, МИД, Вуковић – Радоњићу, (6) 18. X 1884.

⁹⁸ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 115.

⁹⁹ Н. Ражнатовић, *Разграничење Црне Горе и Турске (1883–1887)*, 20.

¹⁰⁰ Same, 21.

younger topographic experts among the delegates were sent to the field. Before the end of September, they managed to mark the border line from Planinica to Velika. However, the process stalled at Velika due to the village of Bjeluhe, which the Ottomans wanted for themselves. This led to a suspension of the commission's work at the request of the Ottoman delegates, under the pretext that they needed to conduct further consultations with the Porte.¹⁰¹ The true reason behind the aforementioned Ottoman initiative lay in the *Plovdiv coup* – the annexation of Eastern Rumelia to the Principality of Bulgaria. This event prompted the Turkish decision to relocate the military units, including the order for Ottoman battalions that were accompanying the commission for marking the Montenegrin-Ottoman border to be strategically withdrawn to Novi Pazar. Without the presence of the military in the Plav-Gusinje sector, the Ottoman delegates could not continue their work on finalizing the border demarcation with the Principality of Montenegro.¹⁰²

The provisions of the Berlin Treaty certainly required that the border between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire be demarcated along the Tara River. However, although Kolašin was the first town to be ceded by the Ottomans to Montenegro, this border work was not completed for many years after the Congress, primarily due to the Muslim inhabitants of the Kolašin villages—Štitarica, Pobišići, and Polja Kolašinska – who refused to accept the authority of Cetinje and to relocate across the Tara. The main reason for this situation was the fact that Montenegro prioritized the Plav-Gusinje region, which, as already mentioned, was accompanied by intensive difficulties. However, even after the resolution of the Gusinje crisis, Montenegro did not seriously approach establishing authority in the mentioned region, considering that it would slow down the work on finalizing other parts of the border and potentially open the door for further Ottoman obstructions.¹⁰³

The unsettled situation on the border towards Mojkovac led to a series of incidents. Muslims would raid Orthodox villages, committing robberies and killings, while the inhabitants of the Orthodox villages would also respond with similar measures. Serdar Miro Vlahović, in his report to the Ministry of War from 1886, states that it had been seven years since the Orthodox population had been suffering from thefts and murders by neighboring Turks, 'especially from Podbić and Polja Kolašinska, who, neither wanted to leave their property and relocate,' nor pledge allegiance to Prince Nikola.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Глас Црногорца, бр. 38, Цетиње, 29. септембар 1885.

¹⁰² Д. Бакић, op. cit. 116.

¹⁰³ Н. Ражнатовић, *Разграничење Црне Горе и Турске (1883–1887)*, 21–22.

¹⁰⁴ Н. Ракочевић, *Исељавање муслимана и разграничење Црне Горе и Турске у области Колашина послје Берлинског уговора*, Историјски записи, 2/1962, 255–274.

These problems led Montenegro to begin the final resolution of the issue. At that time, Montenegro took all the positions in this zone that were guaranteed to it by the provisions of the Berlin Congress. For this action, Montenegrin battalions from Morača and Rovca, under the command of Miro Vlahović, were used, and they entered Štitarice, Pobišići, Polja Kolašinska, and Bjelojevići in March 1886. On this occasion, the entire Muslim population from Polja Kolašinska and Bjelojevići was relocated. This action to secure the border along Tara was carried out smoothly for the Montenegrin soldiers, with only a few marginal incidents, in which a total of 3 Montenegrin soldiers were killed.¹⁰⁵ After this, an agreement was reached between the local authorities of Kolašin and Berane regarding a free border crossing near Mojkovac, the only condition being that no weapons be carried. The captain of Kolašin, Bojić, met several times with the kaymakam of Berane with the aim of setting a good example for the border population, in order to help prevent unrest in this area.¹⁰⁶ However, the situation on the ground was not without further clashes. In July 1886, around 700 Muslim fighters from Zatarje region suddenly launched an attack on Polja Kolašinska. The Montenegrin guard was small in number, so battalions from Rovca and Morača had to arrive to repel the attack. In this skirmish, the Montenegrin side had 25 wounded and killed, while the Muslim side had 75 casualties. The Montenegrin army also managed to capture 40 attackers, among whom, as reported, were several beys from Bijelo Polje.¹⁰⁷

The unrest did not subside even in the area of Mokra and Velika. The neighboring Albanians of Rugova constantly provoked, and especially notable was their attempt to steal livestock from the Montenegrins in Mokra, which resulted in several deaths on both sides. It was conveyed from official Cetinje that if they behaved as good neighbors, the Montenegrin side would reciprocate in the same manner. Additionally, Montenegro offered the Rugovans free passage across its territory to go to Berane on market days.¹⁰⁸

The work on demarcating the Montenegrin border in the north continued in May 1887. On this occasion, a commission met in Berane, consisting of Brigadier Jovo Martinović and Minister Ilija Plamenac from the Montenegrin side, and from the Turkish side: the Ottoman envoy in Cetinje, Djevad Pasha, the vali of the Kosovo Vilayet, Ibrahim Edhem Pasha, and Ali Pasha of Gusinje, who was at that time serving as the mutessarif of the Peć Sanjak.¹⁰⁹ The request of the Ottoman representatives was for the main pastures

¹⁰⁵ Н. Ражнатовић, *Разграницење Црне Горе и Турске (1883–1887)*, 24–25.

¹⁰⁶ ДАЦГ, МИД, Бојић – Радоњићу, (19. V) 1. VI 1886. 417.

¹⁰⁷ ДМЦ, ПР, Агриропуло – Гирсу, (25) 27. VII 1886, 9.

¹⁰⁸ Н. Ражнатовић, *Разграницење Црне Горе и Турске (1883–1887)*, 29.

¹⁰⁹ Same, 29–30.

in Mokra, along with the village of Vaganica, to remain under the control of the Ottoman Empire. This insistence by the Turkish delegates was deemed unfounded by the Montenegrin side.¹¹⁰

The situation was finally moved off the deadlock due to new clashes on Mokra and Čakor. In July 1887, two linked clashes occurred between the Rugovans and the Vasojevići. In these battles, the Albanians were heavily defeated, which convinced them that they could not independently oppose Montenegro's efforts to establish its internationally recognized legal status. All this accelerated the process of marking the border along the previously unmarked section, which took place in August 1887.¹¹¹ The border line ran around Velika and over Mokra, starting from the point where the border crosses the Lim River near Novšić, then south of Berane, to Bjelasica, Šiško Lake, and Mojkovac. After that, the border route follows the course of the Tara River, all the way to its confluence in Šćepan Polje.¹¹² Although this implementation will not lead to a fundamental calm in this sector of the border towards Old Serbia until the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), it certainly marked the final phase of the affirmation of Montenegrin statehood and put a definitive end to an issue that had been preventing the Principality of Montenegro from solidifying its sovereignty for many years after the Berlin Congress.¹¹³

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¹¹⁰ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 117.

¹¹¹ Same, 117–118.

¹¹² ДМЦ, ПР, Агринопуло – Гирсу, (23 VIII) 4 IX. 1887. 11

¹¹³ Д. Бакић, *op. cit.* 118.

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Nemanja POPOVIC

THE GUSINJE CRISIS (1878–1880) AND THE DEMARCATION OF THE MONTENEGRIN BORDER TOWARD OLD SERBIA (1883–1887)

Summary

The paper examines the diplomatic, military, and political dimensions of the Plav-Gusinje crisis, one of the first major challenges faced by the Principality of Montenegro after the Congress of Berlin. Although the treaty awarded Plav and Gusinje to Montenegro, the Ottoman Empire systematically obstructed its implementation through a strategy that combined diplomatic delay and indirect military resistance. A key instrument in this strategy was the League of Prizren, which opposed the expansion of Balkan Christian states into Ottoman territories inhabited by Albanians. While presented as a spontaneous national movement, the League was actively encouraged and manipulated by Ottoman authorities to resist Montenegrin territorial claims. The crisis escalated through a series of armed clashes between Montenegrin forces and Albanian-Ottoman units, most notably in the battles near Novšići and Murine in 1879. Despite formal Ottoman commitments to comply with the Berlin Treaty, the Porte engaged in a “double game,” publicly expressing willingness to cooperate while covertly organizing resistance on the ground. Montenegro, under Prince Nikola Petrović Njegoš, initially pursued a diplomatic solution, supported by Russia, while avoiding open war. Its diplomats, including Gavro Vuković, worked to counter Ottoman narratives and gain support from the Great Powers. However, repeated Ottoman delays and failed agreements made it clear that the peaceful transfer of Plav and Gusinje was unachievable. As tensions grew, the Great Powers—especially United Kingdom—increased pressure on the Ottoman Empire. This culminated in a coordinated naval demonstration in the Adriatic, forcing the Porte to accept a territorial compromise. Instead of Plav and Gusinje, Montenegro received Ulcinj in 1880. The final phase involved prolonged negotiations and commissions to define the new border between Montenegro and the Ottoman Empire. Despite continued local resistance and sporadic violence, especially in the Lim Valley and around Kolašin, Montenegrin border toward Kosovo Vilayet was gradually demarcated between 1884 and 1887. In conclusion, the Plav-Gusinje crisis illustrates the complex interplay of diplomacy, great power politics, and local resistance in the Balkans after 1878. Although Montenegro failed to secure the territories initially promised, it achieved international recognition and territorial expansion through Ulcinj, marking an important step in the consolidation of its statehood.