

The Ottoman And The Russian Empires After The Death Of Catherine II: A Thaw In Relations, 1797-1798

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Abstract

Following the death of Catherine II and ascent of Paul I to the throne, the nature of the Ottoman-Russian relations distinctly changed: the previous tensions reduced and risk of the new war diminished. At the same time, the victorious advance of the French armies in Europe, along with the French annexation of the Ionian Archipelago, raised the reasonable security concerns on the part of the Ottoman government. Amid the rising French power and the domestic conflict with Osman Pazvantoğlu, the perception of the immediate Russian threat began to wane at the Porte. The new Russian Emperor consistently made it clear that he was not going to engage into risky projects of his mother, whereas for the Ottoman government the war with Russia was as well out of the question.

Keywords: Ottoman-Russian relations, Catherine II, Ionian Islands, Osman Pazvantoğlu, Napoleonic France

*II. Katerina'nın Ölümü Sonrası Osmanlı ve Rus
İmparatorlukları: İlişkilerin Çözülmesi, 1797-1798*

Öz

II. Katerina'nın ölümü ve I. Pavel'in tahta çıkmasının hemen akabinde Osmanlı-Rus ilişkilerinin tabiatı çok açık bir şekilde değişti: önceki gerginlikler yatıştı ve yeni bir savaş çıkma ihtimali azaldı. Aynı zamanda, tüm Avrupa'da Fransa ordularının muzafferane ilerlemesi ve İyonya Adalarının Fransa tarafından işgal edilmesi Osmanlı hükümetinin güvenlik endişelerinin artmasına sebep oldu. Bir yandan yükselen Fransız gücü, diğer yandan da Osman Pazvantoğlu ile devam eden iç çatışma, Osmanlıların Rusya tehdidi korkusunu ikinci plana attı. Yeni Rus İmparatoru, annesinin riskli projeleri ile uğraşma niyetinin olmadığını açık olarak belirttiyse de, Osmanlı hükümeti için Rusya ile savaş mevcut koşullarda zaten söz konusu olamazdı.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı-Rus ilişkileri, II. Katerina, İyonya adaları, Osman Pazvantoğlu, Napolyon Fransası

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1. Introduction

On 17 November 1796 at about ten in the evening the reign of Catherine II, which proved to be so disastrous for the Ottoman state, ended. The Russian Empress passed away, and was succeeded by her notoriously unloved by his mother son Pavel. This news was received by the Ottomans with unconcealed joy as well as

with some credence for Pavel's peaceable intentions (Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 1876: 157, 170; Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 1879: 74). Upon his ascending the throne Paul I indeed declared his amicable dispositions towards all of his neighbours and in the first place turned to domestic affairs, in all earnestness trying to get rid of the abuses that were taking place during the rule of his mother.

The Russian ambassador in Istanbul, Viktor Kochubei, hoped that under the new emperor the relations between two countries would change for the better and that he himself would also feel much more tranquil (Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 1879: 74). Kochubei wrote to S. R. Vorontsov, his elder colleague in London, about his personal satisfaction with the "wise system, which we have adopted for our policy with the Porte." (Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 1880:128). "The instructions I have received and the frank manner of the Emperor to express himself", continued Kochubei, "make me believe that all we wish is to have peace with all our neighbours."

The enthusiasm of Kochubei about the possibility of a new turn in Russian foreign policy could well be explained, as with the death of the Russian Empress a whole epoch had come to an end. In the context of the Ottoman-Russian relations the reign of Catherine II was marked by two large Russo-Ottoman wars, the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula, infamous 'Greek project', and a profound geopolitical shift towards the Russian domination over the northern coastline of the Black Sea. The latter ceased to be an 'Ottoman lake' and witnessed the birth of the rising Russian naval power, when such seaport cities as Kherson¹, Nikolaiev, Odessa and Sevastopol were founded by the orders of the Empress. No wonder that the end of Catherine's more than 34 years long rule could be looked upon as a new promising point of departure in the Ottoman-Russian relations, all the more that the reputation of the new Emperor, Paul I, seemed to justify such prospects.

2. Late 1796-1797: Easing of Tensions

In general, the tension in the Ottoman-Russian relations began gradually subside starting from the end of 1796. At the time the Ottomans continued to closely follow the political developments in Europe and kept reinforcing their land and naval forces. The Russian side in its turn had any reason to believe that the risk of the Ottoman assault was minimal, if any. This did not mean, however, that the necessary defensive measures were not taken. With a view to protect Russia from any unexpected dangers, in case of hypothetical Ottoman-French attack, the commanders of the Russian Black Sea fleet were given orders to regularly monitor the situation in the Ottoman Empire and on the borders, to strengthen the coastal fortifications as well as patrol the Black Sea along the Russian coastline

¹ Located on the right bank of the Dnieper River not far from its mouth, and founded in 1778, Kherson became the first base of the Russian Black Sea Fleet.

(Mordvinov, 1951: 643-644, 646-647). What is worth noticing is that the instructions to the Russian naval forces at the given point look to be of exclusively defensive character. Even the doctrine of preventive naval strike, quite common some couple of years ago during the rule of Catherine II (Mordvinov, 1951: 604-605), had been not mentioned. Preparing to protect his Empire from the smallest possibility of the foreign aggression, Paul I himself did not contemplate at this time any aggression of his own.

A good example of the Ottoman-Russian peaceful coexistence at the moment may be seen in the situation around the frigate "Tsar Konstantin", a vessel of the Russian Black Sea fleet that had to spend the winter of 1796-1797 in Istanbul. In November 1796 "Tsar Konstantin" headed out to the sea from Ochakov, carrying various cargos for Sevastopol. Because of heavy weather she sustained a serious damage and had been drifted to the Ottoman coast, after which she had to enter Bosphorus and to stay there for the whole winter (Mordvinov, 1951: 662). The officers of "Tsar Konstantin", apart from the Ottoman naval preparations that were going on in Istanbul with the participation of some French specialists, also noted in their reports the kind treatment afforded them by the Ottoman side. These officers of the Russian navy "except friendliness did not notice anything that would indicate at the hostile attitudes on the part of the Porte", and, according to their evidence, "one could not see any troubles in Constantinople" and the Russian merchant vessels were treated with the "utmost politeness, quietude and pleasantry" (Mordvinov, 1951: 662-664).

"Tsar Konstantin" arrived at Sevastopol only in late April 1797. The Ottoman official who escorted the Russian ship received a warm welcome in Sevastopol, in addition being presented with a gold watch, fox fur and 200 roubles (Mordvinov, 1951: 664-665). Moreover, Vice Admiral F. F. Ushakov, a hero of the recent Ottoman-Russian war and for that moment the Deputy Head of the Black Sea Admiralty, asked the Russian ambassador at the Porte V. P. Kochubei to express his gratitude personally to *Kapudan Pasha* (the Grand Admiral of the Ottoman Navy) (Mordvinov, 1951: 664). Ushakov ordered also to send to the Ottoman Admiralty two anchors and two naval ropes, which had been lent by the Ottomans instead of those the Russian frigate lost in the storm (Mordvinov, 1951: 665). The abovementioned occurrence with "Tsar Konstantin" is yet more proof showing that by spring-summer 1797 the Ottoman-Russian relations experienced even if not an outright warming, at least certain détente.

3. The New Security Concerns for the Ottomans

When it comes to the further French military successes in Europe, the Porte obviously could not turn a blind eye to the new territorial acquisitions made by

France throughout 1796. At a time when the bellicosity of the French Republic kept growing and General Napoléon Bonaparte started to gain one by one his first victories as an army commander on the battlefields in the Northern Italy, the potential French expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean necessarily raised the Ottoman concerns. These concerns proved well-founded especially after the French secured themselves a foothold not only on the Apennine Peninsula, but also on the Ionian Archipelago not far off the coast of continental Greece and Albania.

In spite of the fact that the Ionian Islands were officially transferred to France in the Treaty of Campo Formio, signed on 17 October 1797, the French de facto occupied them already in summer.² Such a neighbourhood naturally disturbed the Porte, as the Russian ambassador Kochubei put it, “not because it (the Porte; V. M.) suspects the intentions of the Directory, but because the French orders are dangerous on their own” (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 8/4. Delo 862, I. 29). The Sultan’s government grew more anxious with coming evidences of the French revolutionary propaganda among the Ottoman subjects in the Balkans. Moreover, the French emissaries were seeking contacts with powerful Ottoman local landlords Osman Pazvantoglu and Tepedelenli Ali Pasha, in fact de facto independent rulers in their Balkan possessions (Karal, 1938: 42).

The governor of Morea Hasan Pasha informed the Porte in the end of 1797 about the surreptitious French propaganda activities in Greece. Hasan Pasha even assumed that together with the Ionian Islands France could be secretly guaranteed other old Venetian territories in the Mediterranean including Crete and Morea, which were later conquered by the Ottomans. Whatever wrong could be the assumptions of the Morean Pasha, his report only added to the Ottoman suspicions with regard to the French (Soysal, 1999: 172). Somewhat later the Ottomans also intercepted the proclamation of General Bonaparte inciting the Greeks and Albanians to rebellion. In reply to the queries submitted by the Ottomans to the French government Talleyrand on 15 March 1798 (i.e. when the project of Egyptian expedition had been already officially confirmed) falsely assured that the Directory never engaged in anything like that and would always be a good friend of the Ottoman state (Soysal, 1999: 173). Obviously, that evasive answer of the French foreign minister could hardly satisfy the Ottoman side.

As one would expect, the anxiety of the Porte about the French vicinity to the Ottoman borders and possible pernicious consequences of such a neighbourhood was gladly observed by the Russians. V. P. Kochubei wrote in September 1797, that the Ottomans were much excited with the neighbourhood of the French. So, the Ottoman authorities took suspiciously the trip of some French officers from

² The Island of Corfu was occupied on 29 June 1797, later the French troops landed also on other islands

the Island of Zante to Patras in the Peloponnese Peninsula. It was generally accepted in Istanbul that under the pretext of the touristic curiosity they could as well use their journey for field reconnoitring (Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 1879: 87). From the Russian point of view, sure enough, the more distrust would appear between the French and the Ottomans the more favourably would stand the Russian positions at the Porte. In this respect Kochubei noted that the Sultan's government was quite satisfied with the Russia and he would like to see the French "occupy our place in their (the Ottomans'; V.M.) hearts and mouths" (Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 1879: 88). What is more, Kochubei by the end of September 1797 did not even exclude the possibility of the Ottoman – Russian alliance:

La Porte s'est très-bien conduite dans cette occasion, et je puis assurer votre excellence que ses intentions à notre égard sont on ne peut pas meilleures. Elle se méfie et craint les Français depuis qu'ils sont venus se nicher dans les îles vénitiennes, et je ne serais même pas surprise, bien entre nous soit dit, qu'elle voulût se rapprocher beaucoup plus intimement de nous. Une alliance avec les Turcs serait sans doute un événement assez singulier en politique (Arkhiv kniazia Vorontsova, 1879: 90).

It came to the point when the Russian ambassador at his secret meeting with Reis Efendi on 8 December 1797 in a friendly way warned the Ottoman minister about the disturbing activities of the agents of General Bonaparte in Greece and Albania. Kochubei, in spite of his personal opinion that the French would not have enough forces to attack the Balkans, still recommended the Ottomans to be always ready to face such a possibility. Besides, Kochubei advised the Porte to send the secret agents to Italy and to dispatch the necessary instructions to its ambassador in Paris, Esseyid Ali Efendi (Soysal, 1999: 173). Somewhat later, in January 1798 Kochubei again was admonishing the Ottoman side against the dangerous diplomatic intrigues of Paris, which Esseyid Ali Efendi with the best will in the world could not cope with (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 8/4. Delo 862, l.l. 27-27 ob.).

4. Russia, Pazvantoglu and the Porte: Caution is the Parent of Safety

Under the present circumstances the prospect of the new Ottoman-Russian war had increasingly diminished. The new Russian Emperor consistently made it clear that he was not going to engage into risky projects of his mother, whereas for the Ottoman government the war with Russia was as well out of the question. The Porte appeared to be faced at this time not only with the new threat stemming

from the fact of the common borders with the French Republic, but also by the end of 1797 found itself in an open armed conflict with rebellious governor of Vidin Osman Pazvantoğlu. In the full sense of the word this was a real wide-scale war that had been taking the most of attention and resources of the central Ottoman government throughout the second half 1797- first half 1798. Quite obviously the Porte was simply in no position to embark on hostilities also with Russia.

Despite the apparent anxiety of the Ottoman government as to the immediate neighbourhood with the French Republic the possibility that the Ottomans may conclude an alliance with France, albeit out of mere fear of the French might, had also been considered in St. Petersburg. In the end of 1797 Paul I issued the order demanding that the Russian Black Sea fleet should be prepared at any time to fend off a hypothetical Franco-Ottoman attack. Equally the Russian army in the Crimea under command of General Mikhail Vasilievich Kakhovskii got the orders to concentrate in the Peninsula around Karasubazar (nowadays Bilohirs'k, AR of Crimea, Ukraine) and the River of Salhir (Cr.-Tat. Salğır) so that to prevent the chances for landing of the foreign troops in the Crimea. What is worth of attention is that all the above mentioned defensive measures were to be taken secretly, with an obvious aim not to affect the currently pacific relations with Istanbul (Mordvinov, 1951: 695).

Along with having apprehensions about the latent threat of the Franco-Ottoman alliance the Russian side also kept an eye on the developments around the rebellion of Pazvantoğlu in Rumelia. A de facto independent rule of the latter over the larger nominally Ottoman territories between the Danube and the Balkan range remained the source of constant headache for the Porte, and, as it was already said, the strained relations between the Vidin governor and the central Ottoman government escalated by the end of 1797 to the point of war. When it comes to Russia, its chief concern lied in the presence of sizeable Ottoman military forces in close vicinity from the Russian border. Thus the regular fortnightly reports of V. P. Kochubei to St. Petersburg necessarily included the observations of the Porte's military preparations against Pazvantoğlu.

At the very beginning of 1798 Kochubei informed Paul I about the meeting that took place on 4 January between the dragoman of the Russian embassy Fonton and *Reis-ül-Küttab* Rashid Efendi. The Ottoman minister was authorised by the Sultan to officially notify the Russian ambassador on the measures taken by the Porte to subdue the disobedient Governor of Vidin. The conversation that followed reflected the wish of the Ottoman government to reassure the Russian side that it did not have any hidden motives behind the sending of the large army to the Danube area and once more emphasize the peaceful character of relations between the two empires. Rashid Efendi told that he would like as well to dispel

the rumours about the purposes and final destination of the squadron of three or four war ships ready to set off from Istanbul. This was to proceed to Varna and enter the mouth of the Danube, being sent exclusively against the Pazvantoglu rebels (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 862, l. l. 1- 2a ob.).

On the next day, on 5 January 1798 , Kochubei sent his answer to *Reis-ül-Küttab* in which indicated that there was no need in all of the abovementioned peaceful assurances made by the Porte, and that he personally never had any doubts as regards the true purpose of the ongoing Ottoman armaments. In Kochubei's words, expressed to Rashid Efendi, it was not Russia, but France and the French policy oriented towards the total domination everywhere ("*владычествовать везде*") that constituted a real threat for the Ottoman state. The Russian ambassador continued that in the interests of Paul I, on the contrary, was to preserve the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which appeared necessary for keeping the existing European balance of power (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 862, l. l. 2a ob- 3 ob.).

It is very interesting and ironical, though to some extent may be wandering off the point, that approximately at the same time when Kochubei sent his note to Rashid Efendi, the opinion of some French diplomatic agents regarding the Ottoman Empire was quite similar to that one of the Russian ambassador. The only difference was that according the French perspective the Ottoman dominions were threatened by "the ambitious views of two Powers [meaning the courts of Vienna and St. Petersburg; V. M.], which for a long time have been coveting these beautiful lands" (Archive des Affaires Étrangères, Paris. (AAE), CP Turquie 197, fol. 56) and it was the French Republic alone who could save the integrity of the Ottoman state.

Returning to the note of the Russian ambassador to *Reis-ül-Küttab*, apart from declarations of friendship and warnings against the potential French encroachments, Kochubei even offered the Ottomans the Russian help. He pointed out that in view of the difference of religions and some related to it circumstances he was not proposing the assistance with the army, but should the communication between Istanbul and the Danube region be interrupted, Russia could help the Porte with delivering of munitions, artillery, rifles etc. (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 862, l. 4 ob.). However, this was nothing more than a tricky diplomatic move, as Kochubei himself in his report to the tsar wrote that "the offer like that... was made by me in full persuasion that it would not be accepted" (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 862, l. 5).

As a matter of fact, Russia was not willing to upset relations neither with the Porte nor with Pazvantoglu. General A. A. Bekleshov, the Military Governor of

Kamenets-Podolskiy (nowadays Kamyanets-Podilskyi, Ukraine) exercising control over Volhynian, Minsk and Podolsk Governorates, and the highest commander of the troops located on the South-Western borders of the Russian empire, received in January 1798 the respective instructions from Kochubei. The ambassador demanded that in case if Pazvantoğlu suffers a defeat and applies to the Russian border authorities for asylum, he should be denied the access to Russia under the pretext of the border quarantine. The orders concerning this delicate subject, continued Kochubei, should be issued with the utmost care so that neither the Porte nor Pazvantoğlu would know about the abovementioned Russian decision. On the one hand, the Porte could feel offended as on this occasion it would definitely like to see Pazvantoğlu arrested and given over to the Ottoman authorities. On the other hand, should the rebellious Vidin Governor learn of the intentions of the Russian side, the interests of the Russian merchants conducting trade across the Danube would be seriously jeopardized (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 862, l. l. 34- 35).

When for Russia it was enough to know that for the moment nothing threatened its southern borders, for the Sultan's government the conflict with Pazvantoğlu became the most central issue of the first half of 1798. Meticulous preparations of the costly punitive expedition towards Vidin, of which the highest commander was appointed Kapudan Pasha Küçük Hüseyin, continued throughout the winter and spring. The Porte spent for the whole expedition about 28 thousand purses, or 14 million *kurushes* (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 871, l. 15 ob.). In compliance with the advice of the court astrologers the departure of Küçük Hüseyin and his expedition from Istanbul took place on 9 April at six hours and eighteen minutes in the morning (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 871, l. 4). After having gathered his forces at the place called Davut Pasha near Istanbul, Küçük Hüseyin moved on 12 April towards Vidin (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 871, l. 19). The army amounting to about 80 thousand men (Dry, 1906: 484). besieged Pazvantoğlu in his well-fortified capital city of Vidin. For all that, to gain a victory over Pazvantoğlu appeared not that easy. Due to the lack of coordination among the Ottoman forces (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 89/8. Delo 871, l. 40). and the impregnable fortifications of Vidin the rebellious Pasha managed to withstand the siege. Upon the news of the French aggression against Egypt in summer 1798 the siege of Vidin became even more inefficient and did not bring the desired results.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Ottoman-Russian border the Russian authorities kept watching the events that were taking place on the Danube. Even though the chances of the serious threat to the Russian dominions were quite small, if at all, the Russian Black Sea fleet still had the orders of Paul I to stay on high alert. Taking into consideration that the Porte intended to send some naval squadron to the Black Sea, which was to proceed to Varna and then to the mouth of the Danube with the alleged aim to act against Pazvantoğlu, the Russian

emperor demanded from the Black Sea fleet Commander-in-Chief Admiral N. S. Mordvinov to place both the fleet and the coastal fortifications in operational readiness (Mordvinov, 1952: 3-5).

Moreover, upon receiving the news about the armaments going on in the Ottoman Empire, there appeared some rumours on the Ottoman-Russian border stating that these would be directed not against the governor of Vidin, but rather against Russia. Already mentioned commander of the Russian Dniester army General Bekleshov, shared in this respect his concerns with Kochubei, asking whether it was possible that the Ottomans could give a free passage to the French troops moving towards the Russian borders. The Russian ambassador at the Porte, in his turn, completely ruled out such a possibility. Kochubei believed that the French merely did not have the necessary amount of troops in the Adriatics and, furthermore, the Ottomans would have never accepted the French into their domains inhabited by the Christian peoples who could easily adopt the "ideas of freedom". As a conclusion, Kochubei wrote: "You should not be surprised on hearing that the Divan and a part of people look on us, may be, as on their best friends" (Kleinman, 1945: 15).

Following the principle that caution is the parent of safety, the Russian side in winter – spring 1798 obviously still sought to exclude all surprises on the part of the Ottomans. First, although the Russian ambassador in Istanbul reported in January 1798 that the Sultan's government at the moment was greatly satisfied with Russia and would hardly conclude an alliance with France (AVPRI. Fond 89. Op. 8/4. Delo 862, l. 30), St. Petersburg to the last contemplated the possibility of the successful French influence upon the Porte, which naturally could lead to the latter's decision to open war on Russia (Mordvinov, 1952: 5). Second, the fact of the presence of the Ottoman naval squadron not far from the Russian coasts was itself a reasonable cause for the Russian authorities to increase the vigilance on the borders. Together with this, the instructions of Paul I to his commanders emphasized the wish of the Russian Emperor that there would be observed "all the good harmony that exists now with the Ottoman Porte and there would be not the slightest pretext to upset it" (Mordvinov, 1952: 4-5). In this way, even while taking the necessary precautions against any unexpected attack, St. Petersburg preferred to keep the existing peaceful state of affairs with the Ottoman Empire and tried not to provoke undesired conflicts on its southern borders.

5. Conclusion

Consequently, the death of Catherine II, the advent of Paul I and the growing French threat in the Central and Eastern Mediterranean reduced the tensions in

the Ottoman-Russian relations. Paradoxically enough, while the relations between the Porte and its inveterate enemy Russia towards the end of 1790-s were slowly improving, the Ottomans were increasingly concerned with the growing aggressiveness of their traditional friend and ally, France. According to the Peace of Campo Formio (1797) the French gained control over the Ionian Islands along with the small coastal strip of the former Venetian possessions on the Balkan Peninsula. This meant that France now had a common border with the Ottoman Empire and became a potential threat to Balkan possessions of the Sultan. Moreover, the French revolutionary propaganda could be more easily spread among the Ottoman Christian subjects, raising the serious concerns of the Porte.

On the other hand, as regards the Ottoman-Russian relations during the discussed period, neither party intended to attack the other and both had all reasons to be satisfied with their neighbours. However, one still had to take the necessary defensive precautions in order to be ready for any unexpected surprises that might come up. Finally, it would be important to note that both the Ottomans and the Russians were not planning any offensive moves and were in the first place preoccupied with considerations of their own security.

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