

BALKAN RAILWAYS DEVELOPMENT: CONTRADICTIONS IN THE PAST, COOPERATION AT PRESENT

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Abstract: *The paper presents an overview on the railways development in the Balkans during the past 150 years, after the Crimean War (1853-1856). It is emphasized on the reasons for the failure in creating an integrated regional railway system for more than a century after the reestablishment of the Bulgarian kingdom in 1878 as well as on the new political realities that have made possible the regional cooperation as part of the EU policy of sustainable transport development.*

Key words: *railways development, Balkan region, national contradictions, cooperation.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the Balkan railways is similar to the entire past of the region: full of contradictions and national confronting. It is logical because railways have always been connected with the national interests – both economic and strategic. It was true especially for the period of their “golden age”, from 1850s until 1960s, when they symbolized the technical progress, sustainable development and prosperity.

Examining the implementation of the railway projects in the Ottoman Empire, it has become clear that they were much influenced by the Great Powers, each trying to achieve supremacy in compliance with its own political and economic interests. The situation after the reestablishment of the Bulgarian kingdom in 1878 did not change much: it became even worse due to the growing nationalism that was a source of severe contradictions in the relations of the Balkan countries. For a long period of time, the strategic aims prevailed over the economic interests and made impossible the development of a single railway network in the region. The rivalry and mutual suspicion set barriers to any reasonable railway project in South-Eastern Europe.

The period after the Second World War did not bring many novelties in the railway connections in the Balkans except for the construction of the Danube Bridge between Rousse and Giurgiu, the railway line from Sofia to Thessaloniki and the new border pass between Bulgaria and Turkey.

What changed the past radically was the policy of the European integration and especially of the pan-European corridors. For the Balkan countries that has imposed the necessity to cooperate in the field of railway transport that is to become inseparable part of the European transport system. It is now when for the first time there is a real possibility to integrate the railways in the region for the sake of its prosperity.

The increasing railway collaboration in the Balkans has also covered the area of research and higher education. The aim of the RRTC project, which is being implemented under the FP6 of the European Commission, is to establish a common organization, Regional Railway Transport Research and Training Centre that is to contribute to joining the scientists from the region into the European research area (ERA).

2. GREAT POWERS' INFLUENCE ON THE BALKAN RAILWAY PROJECTS

The railway construction in the Balkan region began when it was within the territory of the Ottoman Empire. After the Crimean war it became clear that the country urgently needed modern infrastructure (railways, telegraph) to keep pace with the rest of Europe. Even Russia had already built its first lines, the longest of which was St Petersburg – Moscow opened in 1851. Had the Romanovs' Empire managed to connect the Crimean Peninsular by rail, the Russo-Turkish war of 1853-1856 would have had a different end.

Although being part of the general reforms in the Ottoman Empire, the infrastructure projects were pushed mainly by the Great Powers, which manipulated the government (High Porte) according to their political interests and expansion to the Eastern markets. Each of those countries wanted to take a maximum advantage for its own, so the relations among them were often characterized with severe rivalry, particularly between England and Austro-Hungary. The change of lobbies in Istanbul resulted in a displacement of the order of railway lines that had to be constructed on the Empire's European territory.

Being most experienced in intrigues and bribing, the English diplomatic representatives arranged the first railway concession in the Balkans for the Barkley Brothers Company. Initially, it was a project of a channel from Cherna voda (Black Water) to Kyustendzha (Constance) in Northern Dobrudzha. However, the concessionaire built a railway line instead motivating the change with the difficulties and bigger costs of the water connection between the Danube and the Black Sea. The track was ready in 1860 but was of little use due mainly to the inconvenience of the two ports. It was the reason for beginning a new project: a railway line passing in parallel from Rousse to Varna. From being number 2 in the list of Empire's railways plans, the latter became a priority with the support of the military commandment who hoped to link three points of the so-called "strategic rectangular" (Rousse – Shoumen – Varna – Silistra) by rail.

When the English company surrounded Shoumen, the biggest fortress in that part of the Empire, without warning the government in Istanbul, the disappointment was so deep that the High Porte gave up the intention to officially open the operation on the line in 1866. Moreover,

the quality of construction was extremely low so most of the year the line was flooded or closed because of frequent accidents. In fact, it did not meet the expectations to reduce the traveling time between London and Istanbul by 100 hours as a section of the London – Bombay transcontinental route. Its traffic capacity could have been higher with a bridge available over the Danube, an idea that came from England and was strongly supported by the Chamber of Commerce in Braila, especially after the Giurgiu – Bucharest line had been set in operation (1867). But even the Great Powers did not manage to overcome the fears in Istanbul that the bridge would make easier the attacks from North.

The only attempt to connect the Danube riverbanks was made by the Russian Army during the war of 1877-1878. On strategic purpose, the Russians designed a bridge at Svishtov – Zimnicea despite that the Franesti – Zimnicea and Svishtov – Veliko Tirnovo railway lines had not been constructed yet. The choice was determined by the fact that Rousse was one of the Empire's strongest fortresses and, consequently, after Rousse had been concurred, the Russians ceased the construction works in Svishtov.

Comparing the significance of the two lines, Rousse – Varna and Vienna – Istanbul, it becomes evident that the change of the first and second positions in the Ottoman Empire's plans was against its own interests and even much more against the interests of Austro-Hungary. England did not only delay the project implementation, but also forced its beginning in opposite direction, from Istanbul, making impossible for Vienna to penetrate into the Eastern markets simultaneously with the line construction.

The concession of that big transcontinental project was assigned to Baron Hirsch's Company, which by the middle of 1873 had already laid the tracks to Belovo (a station between Plovdiv and Sofia). It was where the Ottoman government organized a big opening ceremony.

Fortunately for England or more probably due to its inference, the Baron Hirsch's company did not continue the construction works to Sofia – Kyustendil – Skopje where the line had been designed to join the Mitrovitsa – Skopje – Thessaloniki line (1874). Instead, the concessionaire started a new track intended to be a connection with the Rousse-Varna line. He managed to finish only Tirnovo-Seimen

(Simeonovgrad) – Yambol section (1875), which was the end of the Ottoman Empire's railway projects in the region within the boundaries of one country.

Tracing the history of the railways in the Balkans, it should be underlined that, despite the contradictions of the Great Powers, they were designed and developed as a system to be connected with the European railway network. Especially for the Vienna – Istanbul line, it can be easily seen that the biggest part of that railway route entirely coincides with the present corridor 8, which still remains the most problematic in the region.

3. TRANS-BALKAN CONNECTIONS: HOPES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

The political realities after the Russo-Turkish War and particularly the decisions of the Berlin Treaty (1878) were followed by a long period when the relations in the Balkans were based on the principles of nationalism and hostility (often inspired by the Great Powers). The disputes on boundaries and the clashes of economic and strategic interests made the development of common transport projects impossible even when the benefits were evident and economically beneficial for the region as a whole.

3.1. The “Railway question” in Bulgaria

Situated on the former Ottoman Empire's territory Bulgaria inherited its obligations in the field of railway infrastructure according to articles 10 and 21 of the Berlin Treaty that put the beginning of the so-called “Railway question” existing for more than 30 years. According to some historians the problem had wider contents influencing both the internal and international relations of the country but it primarily referred to the purchase of the Rousse – Varna line from the English Company of Barclay Brothers and the construction of a “connecting” section of the Istanbul – Vienna line on Bulgaria's territory.

While the bargain on the Rousse – Varna line concerned only the relations between Bulgaria and England, the completion of the Vienna – Istanbul line was a subject of agreement with three other countries: Austro-Hungary, Serbia and the Ottoman Empire. The nearly two-year negotiations ended with signing the “Convention of the four (“a quatre”)", which can be considered both a “failure” and “success” for

Bulgaria. The Bulgarian representatives did not manage to preserve the initial route of Baron Hirsch from Sofia to Skopje as the most favorable one for the country and finally approved the new route between Bulgaria's boundaries with Eastern Roumelia (Vakarel) and Serbia (Tsaribrod, today the town of Dimitrovgrad, Serbia). It had become the shortest “linking” distance because meanwhile Serbia had extended the track from Belgrade to Nis, thus providing a chance to cover most of its territory with an international railway route.

The old Baron Hirsch's design was rejected not only by Serbia, but also by the Ottoman Empire. The High Porte changed its opinion (in the contract of 1869), motivating its decision on economic reasons (insufficient funds after the war of 1877-1878) but it was mainly for the fears that the reestablished Bulgarian kingdom would influence on Macedonia through the railway line. What Bulgaria won, was only the right to independently build and operate its railways abolishing Baron Hirsch's concession.

The construction of the “connecting section” began in 1885 and finished in 1886 but its operation was delayed due to the internal political events in Bulgaria (known as the “Bulgarian crisis”). In 1888 the traffic along the Vakarel – Tsaribrod line was opened but only for internal communication as the Company of Vitalis refused to allow trains passing through the Belovo – Vakarel section. The reason was that it had not been paid by the Ottoman government when the autonomous district of East Rumelia was under the Empire's rule. Although the territory had become part of the Bulgarian kingdom (1885), it turned very difficult to get to agreement with the company. Finally, the Bulgarian Prime Minister Stefan Stambolov provided the international traffic by occupying the section motivating his action as necessary to “protect the track from robberies”. The country's violation on the private property of Vitalis (who was compensated six years later, in 1894) was not punished according to the international law because thus its government made possible to directly travel from Paris via Vienna to Istanbul, one of the most famous railway routes in Europe known under the name of “Orient Express” (28¹ October 1888).

Concerning the traffic on that line, no problems existed in the bilateral relations between the Bulgarian and Serbian railway administrations. On the contrary, they organized the trans-border operation in a way remarkable for that period

(only three years after the Serbian-Bulgarian War of 1885) and rarely used even in Western Europe – at a single station, Tsaribrod. The usual practice in the world was to maintain two stations opposite at each border side. It is worth mentioning that quite recently the governments of Bulgaria and Serbia have decided to restore that practice again using Dimitrovgrad as the only cross-border station.

Unlike the coordination with Bulgaria's neighbour to west, the relations with the Company of Baron Hirsch operating on the line from Belovo to Istanbul (respectively to the Turkish border) were very complicated. The private operation of railways was in contradiction to the Act of Rail Roads in Principality of Bulgaria (1885) imposing public property on railways. Moreover, the infrastructure belonged to another country, the Ottoman Empire. The Bulgarian authorities tried to contact the operator and arrange the problem according to the Bulgarian legislation many times but all attempts were in vain. The lucky moment came in September 1908, when the government of Alexander Malinov was asked to operate on the line during the strike of Baron Hirsch's employees. After the strike had finished, the Bulgarians refused to give the line back to the company of Baron Hirsch declaring it to be a national possession. That time the Great Powers punished the law-breakers with a commercial blockage that inevitably made the government begin negotiations both with the Company and Turkey. Bulgaria had to buy both for the infrastructure and the right of operation. The impossibility of the state to pay back resulted in a crisis, which was settled with the help of Russia. In 1909 the latter reduced the debt of Turkey by a sum equal to the price of the line and to the amount of the loan given to Bulgaria under very favourable conditions: a low rate of interest for a period of 75 years. However, in 1922 the debt was abolished by the Soviet government which expected to make easier the renewal of the diplomatic relations with the country.

At first glance, the purchase of the Rousse-Varna line might seem only a matter of bargaining but it was prolonged for nearly 10 years. The reason was that the reestablished state did not have money to buy it. Each government carried out a policy of leaving the problem for future until the beginning of 1885. Forced by the Great Powers, the Liberal Party as a ruling power had to finally put the question under discussions in the Parliament. The money asked by the Brother

Barclay's Company for the railway line was too much in comparison of its low quality and the proposal was refused. Then, a few months later, in December 1885, the MPs adopted the same sum of money and assigned the government to finalize the bargain. What happened to make them change their opinion? It was the political situation after 6 September 1885, when the union of Bulgaria and Eastern Roumelia was proclaimed, the country urgently needed the positive attitude of the Great Powers and especially of England. The cost of the approval of the change was the agreement on the line price and in order to be paid as soon as possible, England kindly proposed a loan to Bulgaria. Thus Great Britain achieved simultaneously two goals: showed to its subjects that it protected their interest and found a way to economically influence on Bulgaria. It was how the first loan from a foreign country covered the needs of railways (1888). In fact, the bargain effect was moral rather than commercial because of the low track serviceability and consequently, the ruling circles were accused for corruption. To justify its policy, the government published the so-called "Green Book" explaining the reasons for its decisions and actions.

The purchase was finally arranged in 1888 and 11 years, in 1899, the line was connected with Bulgaria's capital and the route to Vienna by the Sofia-Gorna Oriahovitsa-Kaspichan railway line. However, its integration into the European railway network in north direction, through the Bucharest - Giurgiu line, faced a lot of objections by the neighboring countries despite the support of Western Europe as a whole. The history of the bridge to link the Bulgarian and Romanian banks was as dramatic as the entire past of the Balkans. After 1878 the necessity to build a bridge was often included in the parliament discussions in Bulgaria. Right after the Liberation in 1878 Bulgaria abandoned the idea of a bridge between Rousse and Giurgiu being afraid that it could result in increasing the price of the Varna – Rousse line. So, the first Railway Act of 1883 fixed the direction of the south-north line from Kyustendil via Sofia to Svishtov, where the Russian army had planned to span the river. The project was criticized both in the country and by the Western Great Powers, which assessed it as an attempt to connect Bulgaria with Russia prior to have fulfilled the Berlin Congress articles. However, the lack of funding made the Bulgarian politicians leave the bridge construction for the future

Fifteen years later, after some debates on the bridge location, the government of Konstantin Stoulov announced the proposal for connecting Rousse and Giurgju but Romania refused it being afraid that Varna would increase its competitiveness in comparison with the port of Constance. As the bridge at Negru Voda had already been completed, the Romanian government insisted on displacing the connection point westwards, to Svishtov. The negotiations failed because Ferdinand, the Bulgarian King, did not agree. The situation of Bulgaria went even worse when in 1898 Romania and Serbia signed a secret convention to build a bridge in Turnu Severin, which was imposed by political considerations although being against the interests of the Romanian manufactures and merchants. As Georgi Lazarov (an engineer, the Bulgarian ambassador in Bucharest in the 1940s) wrote, the history of the bridge had always been the history of the relations between the two countries, both open and hidden.

3.2. Railway development in the Balkans (1878-1945)

The new realities in the Balkans after the reestablishment of Bulgarian state did not change much the geopolitical interests of the Great Powers focused on the region. They influenced on the relations of the countries, inspiring rivalry and contradictions that resulted in disintegration and wars. For a long period the trans-Balkan railway routes: were only three: Vienna – Belgrade – Istanbul, Thessaloniki – Skopje – Nis, Istanbul – Alexandroupoulos – Thessaloniki.

As mentioned, it was not enough for Bulgaria to have only one trans-border connection with the European railway network. The need of a bridge over the Danube increased at the end of the 19th century when the country had built its longest railway line stretching from Sofia to the junction station of Kaspichan on the Rousse – Varna track. The idea of spanning the river to Giurgiu was renewed but faced a lot of objections by the neighboring countries despite the support of many European countries. The national separatism in the Balkans often seemed to be much stronger than the economic benefits for the region as a whole.

As an interested party, Romania had shown a positive attitude to the connection with Bulgaria during the Conference of the Four in 1884 where it participated as an observer. Its government did

not reject the project in principle but insisted on changing the bridge location. Being afraid that Varna would increase its competitiveness to the port of Constance and having the bridge at Negru Voda already completed, the government in Bucharest insisted on displacing the bridge westwards, to Svishtov. The Bulgarian king, knyaz Ferdinand, did not agree and the negotiations failed. That worsens the relations between the neighboring countries and gave a possibility of Serbia to make use of the situation. In a short time (1898) Romania and Serbia signed a secret convention to establish a bridge in Turnu Severin. Although that decision was against the interests of the Romanian manufactures and merchants, it was imposed by political considerations. As Georgi Lazarov (an engineer, who was the ambassador of Bulgaria in Bucharest in the early 1940s) wrote, the history of the bridge had always been the history of the relations between the two countries, both open and hidden.

The next stage of discussing the idea to connect Bulgaria and Romania over the Danube was in 1908 when it was included in the plan of building a railway line crossing the Balkans from the river to the Adriatic Sea. The agreement seemed quite near as the bridge between Serbia and Romania had not been built yet but the negotiations failed again due to the obstinacy of both sides. Bulgaria did not want to move the point of connection from Rousse or Svishtov farther than Boril, while Romania insisted on Corabia – Gigen link. When finally the Bulgarian engineers agreed to design the line despite the difficulties through the marshy Karaboaz valley, the work of the mixed commission was suddenly postponed by the Romanians who once more changed the place of the bridge: to Becket – Oriahovo hoping to better “save” Constanta from the competition of the port of Varna.

The survey on historical facts has shown that Bulgarian politicians used any possibility to renew the negotiations with Romania, even while signing the Bucharest Peace Treaty in 1913 (after the Second Balkan War). The negative response was not the only factor to discourage the government in Sofia during the following 20-25 years. Those two decades were full of severe military battles during the World War I, two national catastrophes for Bulgaria and big crises (the postwar crises and Great Depression). The lack of funds limited the economic activities of the country but it preserved the hope to build a bridge. That is why the governments in Sofia

highly appreciated the initiative of Poland and other northern countries to “connect the “cold” and “warm” seas (the Baltic and the White Sea)” motivated by their interests in the southern markets. The project received also the support of Greece and in the early 1930s the Bulgarian and Romanian diplomats sat at the table to negotiate on the Danube Bridge. It was the first time they achieved consensus on the place where to span the river: between the Rousse and Giurgiu. Finally, in 1937 the two neighboring countries signed Convention on Arrangement of the Ferryboat Equipment. The change of the way of connection from a bridge into a ferry was made on the insistence of Germany, which hurried to faster complete the project due to strategic reasons. On this purpose, the main elements for the construction as well as the two boats were delivered by German companies. The ferryboat was opened in 1940 but from the very beginning of operation it became clear that its traffic capacity could not satisfy the army needs. So, in 1942 Germany forced the establishment of another ferry between the towns of Vidin and Calafat (where the construction of the Danube bridge 2 has recently begun).

The Danube Bridge was not the only case when the hostile relations of the neighbouring states blocked the integration of the railway systems in the Balkans, even when the rest of the European countries supported the idea. For a long time, until the beginning of 1940s, the cross-border passes with Serbia (Yugoslavia) and Turkey were the only points of railway interaction for Bulgaria, while Turkey had railway connections with Greece through Thessaloniki – Mitrovitsa line until 1912 and through Istanbul-Thessaloniki after 1913. The political changes as a result of the World War I converted the Thessaloniki – Mitrovitsa line into a link between Greece and Serbian-Slovenian-Croatian kingdom that later became known as Yugoslavia.

Because of that, Bulgaria was mostly interested in new railway projects in the Balkans. In 1908, after the coup d'état of the Young Turks, it proposed to accomplish Baron Hirsch's design of a railway line from Kyustendil via Kumanovo to Skopje but did not receive any support from the Turkish government. More than 30 years later, during the World War II the government took up the construction of the line. For a short period (1941-1944) the route was shaped by railway bed and a number of tunnels but the end of the war stopped works turning the line a dream for the following 60 years, even now when it is part of

the Pan-European corridor 8. In fact, the history of that line covering 3 centuries (from 1869 to 2007) could be used as an example of the bad influence of political disagreements on the economic development of the region and especially the advantages of an integrated transport system.

Tracing the history of national railways in the Balkans, it is easy to notice that the two world wars resulted in substantial infrastructure changes. In 1917 Bulgaria tried to establish a connection with the White Sea by rail buying the Lyubimets – Edirne – Dede-Agach line with a loan from German Disconto Gesellschaft bank. When the country turned to be among the defeated countries and withdrew from the territory, according to international laws the line became a property of Greece. Bulgaria lost also the narrow-gauge railway line from Skopje to Ohrid (via Tetovo) as well as some other short sections built by the Bulgarian Railway Troops. The restoration of the border with Greece hindered the Radomir – Dupnitsa – Demirhisar narrow-gauge line from performing its function to connect the Southwestern Bulgaria with the White Sea.

The situation in the World War II was similar and even worse for Bulgaria whose administration in Vardar Macedonia and the White Sea region did a lot of construction to improve the local infrastructure. The new railway projects were part of the special governmental plan developed to unite the railways in the so-called “old and new lands” of the country. Besides the start of Kyustendil – Kumanovo – Skopje line mentioned above, the state railway authorities carried out surveys for other new lines between Momchilgrad and Porto Lagos, Gorna Dzhumaya (Blagoevgrad) and Kochani, Polikastron and Kilindia. The latter followed the railway route designed in the World War I to connect the railway lines Thessaloniki – Skopje and Thessaloniki – Edirne, shortening the distance between the two districts under Bulgarian administration and was actually the only line completed and shortly operated until 1944. After 1945 the track became useless for Greece and was destroyed.

Another big project in Bulgaria implemented from 1941 to 1944 was the reconstruction of the Radomir – Demirhisar railway line to turn it from a narrow-gauge track to a normal-gauge one. The change was imposed both by the current military needs and the governmental plan to provide integrated economic development in all

regions of the country. Despite the technical difficulties in the valley of Kresna the works were done comparatively fast and reached beyond the old border. However, the connection with Thessaloniki was not established. In 1945 Bulgaria was forced to disassemble the already built track, at that much farther inside the country, to the village of Marikostenovo.

During the World War II Bulgaria was given also the right to operate part of the Skopje – Tetovo – Ohrid narrow-gauge railway line built by its Railway troops during the previous war. The rest of the track was managed by Italy as it followed just the border between the two administration regions. There were a lot of misunderstanding and disagreements but the Bulgarian position was clearly determined by its economic policy in the “new lands”. The government acted not as an aggressor or temporarily ruler but as a proprietor who considered the new territories part of the country cruelly divided by the Berlin Treaty of 1878.

3.3. Railways connections based on “Good neighbours” policy

After the World War II, for 45 years Bulgaria developed within the Soviet block and its transport policy was subjected to the commercial relations with the other countries of the community. The increased traffic to Romania, Poland, the Soviet Union imposed the necessity of a more stable connection over the Danube. With the financial and technical aid of the USSR, in 1954 the ferry was replaced by the Bridge of Friendship (now the Danube Bridge). Its transport capacity soon became insufficient but neither of the two countries had enough money to build another bridge although they often discussed different possibilities of its location. The bottleneck at Rouse – Giurgiu route was compensated by using the Vidin – Calafat ferry and the other two connections of the same type developed during the socialist period: at Silistra – Calarasi and Oriahovo – Bechet (1993).

Because of its crossroad position, Bulgaria continued to maintain the international traffic on the Vienna – Budapest – Belgrade – Istanbul railway line. Moreover, transport became one of the priority fields where Bulgaria implemented a specific attitude to the relations with the Balkan countries) despite their ideological differences. The nature of that policy was to behave as “good neighbours” who have been destined to live in one of the most problematic regions in Europe.

The tendency of gradual overcoming the mutual distrust and hostility intensified in 1960s making possible to activate economic relations including the development of new railway projects. The bilateral meetings on a governmental level between Bulgaria and Greece resulted in a project of connecting Sofia with Thessaloniki and respectively Athens by rail. In 1964-1965 the two countries built the line General Todorov – Kulata – Siderokastron which now is part of the Pan-European transport corridor 4.

Two years later, in 1967, Bulgaria signed an agreement with Turkey on improving the route of the railway line from Sofia to Istanbul. To avoid the double crossing of the borders with Greece, a bridge over the Maritza River was built and after its opening in 1971, to travel through Svilengrad – Kapikule became faster and much more comfortable.

4. POSSIBILITIES OF COOPERATION ON PAN-EUROPEAN CORRIDORS

The development of the railways in the Balkans as a system has become possible under the conditions of European integration and particularly under the concept of the Pan-European corridors. The new requirements for a high level of quality to both infrastructure and cross-border services have put the necessity for the countries in the region to work hard to achieve the EU standards as a basis for the harmonization of railway systems. They have started to coordinate their national transport policies but have not developed a single regional strategy of the transport flows along the Pan-European corridors yet.

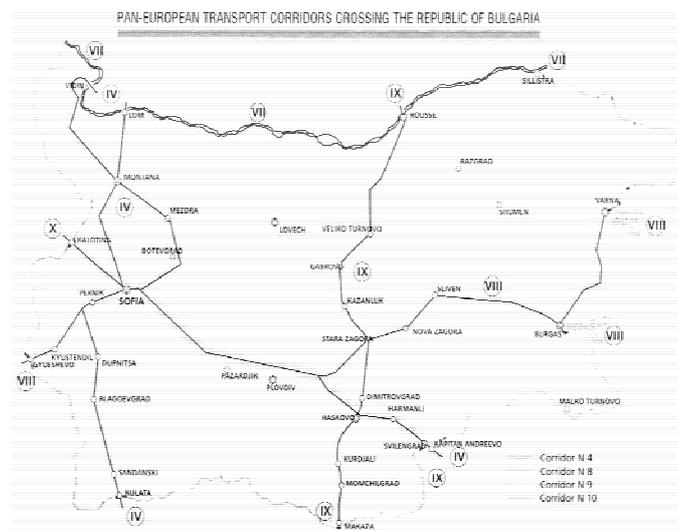
Analyzing the situation in the transport sector in the Balkans now, it seems that the tendency of competition often prevails to cooperation. There are a number of examples when two or three countries join to develop new routes parallel to the corridors passing through the peninsula. However, that is not a consequence of the past contradictions. The reasons are mainly of technical nature or due to insufficient economic activity. Such is the case of Bulgaria, which sometimes is surrounded by commercial and forwarding companies because of the low technological capacity of its railways (bad infrastructure and aging rolling stock) and low quality of transport services.

As a whole, the cooperation in the field of railways has been expanding using different

European programs: PHARE, ISPA, RTD Framework projects of the EC, etc. Among the results achieved one should mention the improvement of the Rouse – Giurgiu Bridge (1997), the electrification of the rail line Dupnitsa-Kulata (the border with Greece), the electrification and rehabilitation of the railway line from Sofia to the border with Serbia (2005), etc. It is expected that Bulgaria will be preferred much more as a transit destination after the completion of the Danube Bridge 2 (Vidin – Kalafat), and the two projects for the line from Dimitrovgrad (Serbia) via Sofia to the

Greek/Turkish borders. That part of the “Orient Express route” is intended to be the first Bulgarian track for high-speed trains running at 160 km/h.

The greatest problem of the railway development in the Balkans is still Corridor 8, the part from Kyustendil to Skopje. The railway line between the border and the Macedonian capital has not moved further from the stage of political talks although Bulgaria prepared the track and the cross-border station of Gyueshevo a few years ago.



What seems especially hopeful is that the collaboration in the field of transport has already involved the areas of research and higher education. The project “Regional Program for Transport Staff Qualification” coordinated by the Higher School of Transport (VTU) in Sofia and supported by the Open Society Institute was the first one to establish closer contacts of the academic institutions in the Balkans. In June 2002 the VTU organized a regional meeting of the institutions training transport staff where four Balkan countries, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia, discussed the possibilities of cooperation. Also, the number of participants in the VTU’s annual International Scientific Conference *TRANSPORT* has been increasing including representatives of Greece, Macedonia, Romania, Turkey and Serbia.

Faculty of Mechanical Engineering in Kraljevo, Serbia. The foundation of the international non-government organization will facilitate the scientists from the region to join the European research area (ERA). The activities implemented under the RRTC project have resulted not only in greater applicability of transport-related research, but also in establishing mutual trust and professional contacts in the region, especially in Bulgaria’s neighboring countries.

For the past two years the process of integration has been much intensified thanks to the FP6 project RRTC (Regional Railway Transport Research and Training Centre Foundation) coordinated by the VTU in partnership with the

Another example of the creative atmosphere was the success of the CONSTANT project (CONcepts for life long learning to further increase SafeTy on rail based trANsporT systems) in the competition for projects funded by the Zentrum für Soziale Innovation, Austrian Science and Research Liaison Offices (ASO) in Ljubljana and Sofia within the *Research Cooperation and Networking between Austria and South Eastern Europe* program. The project was coordinated by the VTU with participants from the Institute of Transport Studies of the University of Natural Resources and Applied

Life Sciences in Vienna, Austria, University POLITEHNICA in Bucharest, Romania and Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (MFK) in Kraljevo, Serbia. In a short period (1 June 2006 – 31 May 2007), the partners made a survey on the good practices and on that basis developed concepts of lifelong learning according to the new requirements and the needs in the Balkan region. Since the project showed the irreplaceable part of universities in transport staff's training and sustainable transport development, it was not a surprise that the Faculty of Maritime Studies and Transport in Portoroz, Slovenia expressed their willingness to cooperate with the team in a similar project under the EU programs.

5. CONCLUSION

The new political realities as a result of the European integration processes have been changing the relations of the countries in the Balkans from confronting to collaboration. The concept of Pan-European corridors has imposed the necessity to harmonize the railway transport in the region with the European transport system. It is how for the first time the possibility to integrate the railways has turn to be perspective and real.

The accomplishment of the tasks for improving the Balkan railways infrastructure and operation needs employment of scientific approaches that require not only considerable funds but also cooperation of university teachers and scientists in the field of transport. Thus they will contribute directly to the development of modern, ecological and sustainable transport and indirectly to the reintegration and economic prosperity of the region.

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РАЗВИТИЕТО НА БАЛКАНСКИТЕ ЖЕЛЕЗНИЦИ – ПРОТИВОРЕЧИЯ В МИНАЛОТО, СЪТРУДНИЧЕСТВО В НАСТОЯЩЕТО

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Резюме: В доклада се прави преглед на железопътното развитие на Балканите през последните 150 години след Кримската война (1853-1856 г.). Подчертават се причините за неуспеха за създаване на единна регионална железопътна система след възстановяването на българската държава през 1878 г., както и новите политически реалности, които направиха възможно регионалното сътрудничество като част от политиката на Европейския съюз за развитие на устойчив транспорт.

Ключови думи: железопътно развитие, Балкански регион, национални противоречия, сътрудничество