



HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

ИСТОРИЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ

DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2023-23-4-662-677


EDN: OJFUME

Research article / Научная статья

The Eastern Question in the Views of the Russian Liberals of the Early 20th Century

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Abstract. The study deals with the attitude of Russian liberals of the early 20th century to the Eastern question, which occupied a special place in international politics and whose aggravation became one of the factors leading to the World War I. Various political forces in Russia developed their own variants of its solution, realizing that the fate not only of the country, but of the whole world largely depended on the projects they proposed. The analysis of the liberals' ambiguous perception of the Russian government's actions in the Balkans, their attitude to the South Slavs, to the problem of the Black Sea Straits, and to the confrontation between the great powers united in alliances, i.e. all aspects of the Eastern question, will allow us to reconstruct and understand the liberals' understanding of the connection between foreign policy and Russia's internal development, national interests, and ideological values. Looking at the views of the liberals of the early 20th century on the Eastern question reveals not only the peculiarities of its perception by the ruling elite and representatives of the legal opposition, but also the roots of the growing alienation of the country's elite from the people. It was this alienation, which intensified during the war years and manifested itself, among other things, in the different perceptions of the importance of the Eastern question by the authorities, the liberals, and the people, that led to the fall of the first liberal Provisional Government in the spring of 1917. As a result, the people tired of the war and unable to understand the meaning of Russia's struggle for foreign lands, came to support the Bolsheviks, who exposed the "imperialist plans" of the Provisional Government and advocated peace without annexations and contributions. The paper touches upon the problem of the liberals' attitude not only to the government's foreign policy, but also to Russian statehood, the conceptual reasons for their transition from a restrained peace-loving position and the desire to prevent war to its unconditional support. The authors identify the ideological and foreign policy factors that influenced this liberal transit. The main attention is paid to the understanding of representatives of various liberal movements of the Eastern question, which, without exaggeration, took a central place not only in their foreign policy program, but also in the project of internal transformations, which envisaged the creation of Great Russia as a result of its solution. The study identifies and analyzes the innovations introduced by the liberals in the interpretation of the Eastern question under the influence not only of the changing international situation, political and economic modernization of Russia, which

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was becoming a “Duma monarchy,” but also of the development of the ideology itself; the peculiarities of its perception by representatives of various liberal currents in the country are examined.

Key words: Eastern question, Slavs, Black Sea, Straits, liberals, Cadets, Octobrists, Progressists, Great Russia

Conflicts of interest. The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contribution. The authors made an equal contribution to the design, research and preparation of the final article's text.

For citation: Arslanov, R. A., Kurylev, K. P., & Stanis, D. V. (2023). The Eastern question in the views of the Russian liberals of the early 20th century. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 23(4), 662—677. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2023-23-4-662-677>

Восточный вопрос во взглядах российских либералов начала XX в.

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Аннотация. Рассматривается отношение российских либералов начала XX в. к занимавшему особое место в международной политике Восточному вопросу, обострение которого стало одним из факторов, приведших к Первой мировой войне. Различные политические силы России разрабатывали свои варианты решения этого вопроса, понимая, что от предлагаемых ими проектов во многом зависели судьбы не только страны, но и всего мира. Анализ неоднозначного восприятия либералами действий правительства Российской империи на Балканах, их отношения к южным славянам, проблеме Черноморских проливов и противостоянию объединившихся в союзы великих держав, то есть ко всем аспектам Восточного вопроса, позволит реконструировать и осмыслить понимание либералами связи внешней политики и внутреннего развития России, национальных интересов и идейных ценностей. Оценка взглядов либералов начала XX в. на Восточный вопрос дает возможность увидеть не только особенности в его восприятии правящими верхами и представителями легальной оппозиции, но и корни усиливавшегося отчуждения элиты страны от народа. Именно это отчуждение, усугубившееся в годы военного лихолетья и проявившееся наряду с прочим в различном восприятии властью, либералами и народом значения Восточного вопроса, весной 1917 г. привело к падению первого либерального состава Временного правительства. В итоге народ, уставший от войны и не понимавший смысла борьбы России за чужие земли, выступил в поддержку большевиков, разоблачавших «империалистические замыслы» Временного правительства и выступавших за мир без аннексий и контрибуций. Затрагивается проблема отношения либералов не только к внешней политике правительства, но и к российской государственности, объясняются концептуальные причины их перехода от сдержанной миролюбивой позиции и стремления предотвратить войну к ее безоговорочной поддержке. Проанализированы идеологические и внешнеполитические факторы, повлиявшие на этот либеральный транзит. Основное внимание уделяется пониманию представителями различных либеральных течений Восточного вопроса, который, без преувеличения, занял центральное место не только в их внешнеполитической программе, но и в проекте внутренних преобразований, предполагавшем создание в результате его решения Великой России. Выявляется и изучается то новое, что было привнесено либералами в трактовку Восточного вопроса под влиянием не только меняющейся международной обстановки, политической и экономической модернизации России, становившейся «думской монархией», но и развития самой идеологии, отражены особенности восприятия этого вопроса представителями различных либеральных течений страны.

Ключевые слова: Восточный вопрос, славяне, Черное море, Проливы, либералы, кадеты, октябристы, прогрессисты, Великая Россия

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Авторы внесли равнозначный вклад в разработку дизайна, проведение исследования и подготовку текста статьи.

Для цитирования: Арсланов Р. А., Курылев К. П., Станис Д. В. Восточный вопрос во взглядах российских либералов начала XX в. // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2023. Т. 23, № 4. С. 662—677. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2023-23-4-662-677>

Introduction

Today, the subject of the attitude of Russian liberals of the early last century to the Eastern question may seem academic, of interest only to a narrow circle of specialists. In fact, it provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at a number of problems of contemporary concern. First of all, considering the views of the liberals of the past on the foreign policy of the imperial state will allow us to compare not only the ideological attitudes of the opposition of the early 20th and 21st centuries, but also the reaction of society of the two eras to its attitude to the government's actions in the international arena. The foreign policy doctrine and practice of the leadership of modern Russia, which has taken the course of its revival as a great power, using military methods and going to a decisive confrontation with the West, arouse the condemnation from some intellectuals, on the one hand, and the support of the majority of the population, on the other.

Currently, as in the early 20th century, there is a growing gap between the perceptions of the elite and the masses regarding the purpose of the state and the goals and methods of its foreign policy. The ideological experience of the liberals of the early 20th century, who tried to overcome socio-political contradictions and consolidate society, power and the elite around the project of the Eastern question, which, according to their assumptions, led to the creation of a liberal empire — Great Russia, can be taken into account and rethought today. Modern liberals, unlike their predecessors, oppose imperial plans and criticize the government for its policies, especially with regard to Ukraine. They advocate the need to restore cooperation with Western countries, seeing them not only as an effective partner, but also as an exemplary model of the country's development.

Thus, the relevance of the topic is determined, first of all, by the need to understand the theoretical search of Russian liberals of the early 20th century, to identify, on the one hand, the degree of relevance of their foreign policy projects to the requirements of the time and national interests, and, on the other hand, the original proposals that made it possible to realize their goals and achieve, as it turned out, the impossible — the triumph of liberalism in the country.

The differences between the liberal elite and the mass consciousness in the perception of the international situation and the foreign policy goals of modern Russia also make the issue relevant. As at the beginning of the last century, they have different ideas about Russia's place in the world and its goals in the international arena. It is true that while in 1917 the masses, unlike the liberals, favored withdrawal from the war and the priority of solving domestic problems, but today their positions seem to have reversed. Experiencing a post-imperial syndrome, the people support the government in its confrontation with the West, while the liberals oppose what they see as an expansionist and militarist course.

Despite all the differences in the interpretation of the tasks of the country's foreign policy between the liberals of the past and the present, the main thing remains — the real split with the people in the perception not only of Russia's international position, but also of the role of the state in the life of the country. For the liberals of the early 20th century, Russia's sovereignty, its foreign policy power while ensuring the rights and freedoms of the individual, law and order in the country were determined by the decisive role of the state. Modern liberals see totalitarian intentions in the strengthening of statehood, which only increases the differences in worldview not only with their predecessors, but also with the

majority of the population of post-Soviet Russia.

The relevance of the topic is also given by the fact that liberals of the past and present have based their foreign policy on the idea that the choice of a pro-European civilizational vector of the country's development is predetermined. However, the propaganda of Western values, which did not take into account the national traditions and peculiarities of the country, ultimately led to the rejection of liberal cosmopolitanism by the people's consciousness. The reasons for the failure of liberal propaganda in Russia may also attract the attention of modern society.

As a result, the development of the topic makes it possible to determine not only the scientific thoroughness of liberal reflection, but also the extent to which it understands the vital interests of the country and the mentality of the people, and, consequently, the prospects of liberalism in Russia. Moreover, the comparative approach will reveal the content of such a complex concept as patriotism and the differences in its interpretation depending on the "spirit of the times."

Modern liberals can be guided by the balancing experience of their predecessors, or, more precisely, by their search for a synthesis between the ideas of patriotism and political freedom, statehood and civil society, empire and the rights of nationalities.

Addressing this topic gives an opportunity to reveal the liberal understanding of the complex and contradictory interaction of Russia's foreign policy and internal development, to reveal the content of the project of creating a liberal empire as a result of solving the Eastern question. The main significance of the development of the topic lies in the fact that the study makes it possible to measure the degree of realism of the foreign policy constructs of the liberals, to correlate the views and historical context, their ideological basis and propaganda form, to determine the channels of influence on the foreign policy practice.

The history of the Eastern question itself has received a fairly complete coverage in Russian historiography (Kinyapina et al., 1978; Kinyapina & Pisarev, 1985; Nezhinsky & Ignatiev, 1999; Zadokhin & Nizovsky, 2000). Along with Russian authors, foreign authors have also addressed this issue (Burgaud, 2009; Frary & Kozelsky, 2014).

The most complete definition of the content of the Eastern question was given by one of the founders of Russian liberalism, philosopher and historian B.N. Chicherin as a result of understanding the disastrous results of the Crimean War (1853—1856) for Russia. In his opinion, the Eastern question "combined in itself the existence of the Turkish Empire, the European balance, questions of nationality, issues of liberalism."¹ Thus, the content of the Eastern question can be presented as a certain system, the core of which was the Ottoman Empire, or more precisely, the struggle of the great powers over its "inheritance." For Russia, the main element was to establish itself in the Balkans and to control the Straits. It also included the aspirations for sovereignty of the Slavic and Orthodox peoples oppressed by the Porte, as well as the confrontation between the great powers leading to a balance of power in the Balkans.

The significance of the development of the topic lies in the fact that the study of the foreign policy views of the liberals in pre-revolutionary Russia makes it possible to identify and analyze their understanding of the relationship between national interests and the values of individual freedom and the sovereignty of peoples, and, as a result, to destroy the historiographical myths about the liberals: either as a party defending the interests of the bourgeoisie in the international arena, or as an anti-patriotic force detached from its national roots.

¹ Chicherin B. N. The Eastern Question from the Russian Point of View // Notes of Prince S.P. Trubetskoy. Appendix 1. The Eastern Question from the Russian Point of View. St. Petersburg : Tipografiya "Sirius" publ., 1907. P. 133. (In Russian).

The topic of Russian liberalism in the early 20th century, as well as its study, has received quite a deep development in domestic historiography (Shelokhaev, 1991; 2019; Gaida, 2003; Egorov, 2010; Makarov, 2015). The foreign policy views of Russian liberals have also found some coverage in the scientific literature (Wiśniewski, 1999; Voronkova, 2010; Kostrikova, 2011; 2017; Kurylev, 2012; Kustov, 2004; Shelokhaev & Solovyov, 2014). Thus, V.V. Shelokhaev, presenting the foreign policy doctrine of the liberals of that time as a system that sought to take into account the national interests, emphasized the role that all liberals assigned to the solution of the Eastern question in ensuring the country's progress (Shelokhaev, 2019, pp. 215, 236).

It is worth noting the controversial view of historian F.A. Gaida, who believed that it was not the socio-political differences between the liberals and the extreme left that came to the fore in 1917, but their confrontation over foreign policy issues, which paved the way for the Bolsheviks to take power (Gaida, 2003, pp. 379—380).

The important for us problem of combining the imperial project with liberal ideology in Russia in the early 20th century was touched upon by the historian D.V. Aronov (2014, pp. 129—130).

E. Wiśniewski wrote about the influence of foreign policy attitudes on the liberals' perception of the country's development prospects, stating that "Many of them believed in Russia's progress according to the Western model" (Wiśniewski, 1994, p. 186). In his conclusions, the historian emphasized the pragmatism of the liberals and their support for the government's imperialist policy in the Balkans on the eve of the World War I (Wiśniewski, 1999).

Certain aspects of the foreign policy doctrine of Russian liberals at the beginning of the last century received their special attention in the works of K.P. Kurylev (2018a; 2018b; 2018c) and D.M. Novikov (1997; 2000). Of

particular interest to domestic and foreign researchers is the concept of the "liberal empire" of the prominent theorist of the Cadet Party P.B. Struve (Pipes, 2001a; 2001b; Peftiev, 2014).

In I.E. Voronkova's study, the foreign policy program of the Cadet Party received special attention. The author, overcoming the established stereotypes, presented the leaders of the liberal movement as principled politicians who consistently defend national interests in the international arena (Voronkova, 2010, p. 7).

Of interest to us are the works that examine the foreign policy concepts of the liberals of the previous period, including the development of their views on the Eastern question (Arslanov et al., 2018; Arslanov & Linkova, 2021). In the study of N.V. Makarov, the reflection of the foreign policy views of liberals in Anglo-American historiography was analyzed. For example, the historian paid attention to the point of view of R. McKean, who revealed the presence of imperial aspirations among the liberals of the early 20th century (Makarov, 2015, pp. 203—204).

Despite the growing scientific interest in the foreign policy doctrine of the Russian liberals of the early 20th century, the problem of their interpretation of the Eastern question, which in many ways determined the domestic political strategy of the liberal parties, primarily the Cadets and the Octobrists, has not been fully clarified, which makes it necessary to address this issue.

When writing the article, several groups of sources were used. First of all, these are archival and published documents of the Constitutional Democratic Party.² A special place is occupied by journalistic materials, which were published both in the leading liberal

² See: Minutes of the Central Committee and Foreign Groups of the Constitutional Democratic Party. 1905 — mid 1930s. In 6 volumes. Moscow : Progress-Akademiya, Politicheskaya entsiklopediya (ROSSPEN) publ., 1994—1999. (In Russian); Congresses and Conferences of the Constitutional Democratic Party. In 3 volumes. Moscow : Politicheskaya entsiklopediya (ROSSPEN) publ., 2000. (In Russian).

press and in separate editions.³ Sources of personal origin were also used.⁴

One of the foundations of the article is the methodology of intellectual history, which allows us to establish the interaction between the development of the historical context, public opinion and foreign policy concepts of representatives of different currents of liberalism in Russia in the early 20th century. The comparative-historical method used in the work makes it possible to compare the views of liberal ideologists, to identify common features and peculiarities in their perception of international events and the foreign policy of the government. The work also uses a systematic approach and the principle of historicism, which allows us to present the views of the liberals as an independent system developing in the conditions of its time.

The aim of the article is to comprehensively reconstruct and analyze the views of Russian liberals of the early 20th century on the Eastern question and ways of its solution. It is supposed to consider the liberal understanding of both the main components of this international problem and their connection with the internal development of the country, to trace the evolution of the foreign policy views of the liberals, to find out the party characteristics of their development.

Development of the Foreign Policy Doctrine, 1907—1911

At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian liberals, while adhering to the basic ideas of their predecessors, significantly revised

³ See: Kotlyarevsky S. *Russia and Constantinople // Russian Thought*. 1915. Book 4. P. 1—5; Milyukov P. N. *Balkan Crisis and Politics of A.P. Izvolsky*. St. Petersburg: Tipografiya tovarishchestva “Obshchestvennaya pol’za” publ., 1910; Struve P. B. *Patriotica. Politics, Culture, Religion, Socialism: A Collection of Articles for Five Years (1905—1910)*. St. Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo D. E. Zhukovskogo publ., 1911; Pertsov P. P. *Pan-Russism or Pan-Slavism?* Moscow: Tovarishchestvo tipografii A. I. Mamontova publ., 1913. (In Russian).

⁴ Milyukov P.N. *Memoirs*. In 2 volumes. Moscow: Sovremennik publ., 1990. (In Russian).

and specified their foreign policy concept. The change was caused, first of all, by the period of “revolutionary storms and international upheavals” and the entry into the historical arena of the masses of people who were increasingly watching the actions of the authorities and the elite in the international arena. Public opinion, whose sentiments the liberals tried not only to shape but also to use for their own purposes, began to exert a noticeable influence on foreign policy.

The transit of Russian statehood from an autocratic to a Duma monarchy and the transformation of the liberals into a real political force largely determined their transition from the theoretical speculations and publicistic activity of the past to practical participation in international politics. The deterioration of Russia’s international position also played its role in changing the liberals’ attitude to foreign policy issues: the weakening of its position caused by its defeat in the war with Japan in 1904—1905, the failure during the Bosnian crisis of 1908.⁵ This was called “diplomatic Tsushima” by contemporaries. These events, along with the continuing unstable internal situation, which can be described as a post-revolutionary syndrome, threatened the position, if not the very existence of the Russian Empire. One should take into account the development and complexity of liberal thought itself, which penetrated deeper into the essence of things, discovered the links between different spheres of social development, and, as a result, turned into the ideological program of a dynamic political force struggling for power. As a result, the entire complex of international, socio-political and ideological factors required the liberals to develop a clear foreign policy doctrine, the core of which became the Eastern question. In the course of understanding the main tasks of Russia’s foreign policy, the liberal current was differentiated, and its various modifications were shaped, offering their own vision of their solution.

⁵ International conflict caused by the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary in October 1908.

Thus, in response to the deterioration of Russia's international situation and the failures of the official authorities, liberals sought to develop and implement a foreign policy project that could rally society around its solution.

This is what the Eastern question became at the beginning of the 20th century, which occupied one of the main places both in the system of international relations and in Russia's foreign policy. The liberals, in the conditions of the changed historical context, began to rethink its main components and, above all, the Slavic issue, the importance of which increased in the light of the growing German threat and the expansionist plans of Austria-Hungary in the Balkans (Dyakov, 1993, pp. 143—148). A certain reaction to the challenges of "pan-Germanism," which became widespread in Russian journalism, called for the unification of the efforts of all Slavic peoples.

On the other hand, overcoming the one-sidedness of the dominant view of foreign policy in the liberal environment of the post-reform era as subordinate to domestic tasks, liberals begin to find deep interconnections, for example, between the Slavic issue and the solution of the national question in the Russian Empire itself. Not only do liberal ideologists themselves realize that the protection of Russia's national interests in the international arena is closely linked to the construction of a constitutional state and the guarantee of political freedom within the country, but they also try to convince the authorities of this.

In the views of the liberals of the early 20th century, the correlation between national interests and ideological values is becoming clearer. Thus, if in the 1870s, in the context of the aggravation of the Eastern question, many of them put forward the liberation of the Slavs from Turkish domination as the main goal, and national interests — the establishment of Russia in the Balkans — were actually subordinated to the protection of ideological values, after the Berlin Congress, which limited Russia's claims in the Balkans, geopolitical aspirations came to the fore in their constructions. At the beginning of the 20th century, however, the liberals' view

became more complex, and now their concept practically identifies domestic and foreign policy objectives, values and interests.

A peculiar example of this trajectory of liberal thought was the judgment of the publicist of the *Bulletin of Europe* ("Vestnik Evropy") L.Z. Slonimsky. It was a literary and political journal, which in the 1870s focused on the task of liberation of the Slavs by the troops of the Russian Empire. In the early 20th century it emphasized that it was the autocratic model of Russian statehood and the corresponding type of relations with its own and other peoples that led to the loss of Russia's positions in the Balkans, which it had won in the war with Türkiye. Explaining the reasons for Russia's expulsion from the region, L.Z. Slonimsky wrote in his *Foreign Review*, which he had maintained in the *Bulletin of Europe* since 1880: "We liberated the Serbs and Bulgarians from the Turkish yoke... and demanded obedience and gratitude in return, but we received only deaf resentment and protest, despite the traditional sympathy of the native peoples for Russia and the Russians."⁶

Thus, according to the author's logic, in order to change the attitude of the Slavs and achieve a solution of the Eastern question in its own interest, Russia had to transform itself. And, first of all, it had to reform its national relations, without which it was impossible to bring the Slavs to unity with the Empire.

In the reasoning of the liberals, the Eastern question increasingly became a link connecting the external and internal spheres of Russia's life, its political and economic development, its position in the world and the modernization of the country.

Project of P.B. Struve

The most vivid and complete understanding of the essence and ways of solving the Eastern question by the liberals was reflected in the article of the ideologist of the right-wing Cadets P.B. Struve with the program title "Great Russia." The thinker saw the main metaphysical

⁶ *Foreign Review // Bulletin of Europe*. 1908. Vol. 2, Book 3. P. 427. (In Russian).

meaning of Russia's existence in ensuring "Russian power," which was closely connected with the internal development of the country and its "external power." However, the revolutionary upheavals of the early 20th century, as well as the reorientation of the Empire's foreign policy course to the Far East, and the defeat in the war with Japan stood in the way of the creation of Great Russia. It is noteworthy that, according to P.B. Struve, Russia was pushed into this war by forces interested in "...preserving and consolidating the autocratic-bureaucratic system."⁷

That is, even here, in the actions of certain government circles, he found a link between the form of statehood and the country's foreign policy course. Moreover, the price of subordinating foreign policy to "domestic considerations" was Russia's defeat, indicating the loss of its military power. To correct this historical mistake, Struve argued, it was necessary to return "the center of gravity of our policy to an area" that had long been accessible to "...the real influence of Russian culture."⁸ Such an area was the Black Sea basin, where Russia had "living cultural traditions" rooted. In other words, the thinker called for a return to the important Eastern question, connected not only with the culture and historical past of Russia and the Slavic peoples of the Balkans, but also with their economic and political present. "To create a Great Russia," he argued, "there is only one way: to direct all efforts to the area that is really available to the real influence of Russian culture. This area is the entire Black Sea basin, i.e., all the European and Asian countries that 'reach out' to the Black Sea."⁹

One of the advantages of this region, according to the thinker, was the fact that, in addition to cultural ones, it created material conditions — "people, coal, iron" — for the establishment of Russian dominance. Attention should be paid to Struve's synthetic view, which

includes the economic, political, and cultural spheres of foreign policy and reveals their close interrelation with the country's internal development. He hoped to realize his project of a Great Russia only by achieving the recognition of "the ideal of state power and the beginning of the discipline of work" by all the people, especially the educated class, and by proving that "the building of state power" was possible only "on the basis of economic power."¹⁰

Unlike many liberals indifferent to the material side of life, Struve emphasized the importance of economic dominance in foreign policy, from which, he argued, "the political and cultural predominance of Russia in the whole of the so-called Middle East will flow out of itself." It should be noted that in Struve's project, this "domination" was to be realized "in a completely peaceful way."¹¹

And another aspect of his ideas attracts attention. Unlike many liberals of the past, Struve did not link Russia's assertion in the Balkans with the rights of the Slavic peoples, but spoke directly about the interests of Russia, the need to revive its "state power." But the unity with the Slavs and the acquisition of this "power," Struve argued, will only become possible when the Russian state, torn by internal contradictions, will begin to carry out reforms leading to its transformation into a "liberal empire."

The real content of the Eastern question, according to Struve, could be revealed "...only by combining a correct foreign policy with a reasonable solution of our internal problems." This formula needs a certain concretization, which we find in Struve's article. In his opinion, the "solution of internal problems" should lead to the realization of the "national idea," which meant "... reconciliation between the authorities and the people who have awakened to self-consciousness and self-activity and who are becoming a nation."¹²

⁷ Struve P.B. *Great Russia. From Reflections on the Problem of Russian Power // Russian Thought*. 1908. Book 1. P. 144. (In Russian).

⁸ *Ibid.* P. 145.

⁹ *Ibid.* P. 146.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* P. 148.

¹¹ *Ibid.* P. 146.

¹² *Ibid.* P. 155.

Thus, following the logic of the thinker, we can build the following syllogism: the combination of democracy, liberalism and power, achieved as a result of internal transformations, will lead to the acquisition of Russia's "state power." This power, strengthening Russia's position in the Eastern question, creates conditions for its solution, which, in turn, opens up opportunities for internal reforms. This was a logical circle, the realism of which could only be confirmed by historical practice.

In general, the liberals of the early 20th century, overcoming the legacy of their predecessors, who perceived foreign policy as a sphere subordinate to the tasks of internal reforms and modernization of the country, began to realize more and more that the protection of Russia's national interests in the international arena was closely linked to the building of civil society and ensuring political freedom.

Project of P.N. Milyukov

The general theoretical ideas on the Eastern question found practical reflection in the speeches of the leaders of the Cadet Party, who repeatedly addressed the Slavic issue, especially in the conditions of the Bosnian crisis of 1908. The attitude of the liberals towards the Slavs was formulated very eloquently and clearly by P.N. Milyukov at one of the meetings of the Cadet faction in October 1908. "The Slavic question," he argued, "must be of interest not because of affinity and sentimental Slavophile motives, but because it is a part of the international Russian question. It must be mastered by proving to the Right that the opposition knows it better than they do, and by depriving them of their monopoly on patriotism... Slavism is a gift force against the Germanization of the Balkans, and this gift must be used."¹³

¹³ Congresses and Conferences of the Constitutional Democratic Party. In 3 volumes. Vol. 2. 1908—1914. Moscow: Politicheskaya entsiklopediya (ROSSPEN) publ., 2000. P. 65. (In Russian).

Thus, in the narrow circle of his fellow party members, P.N. Milyukov, perhaps somewhat bluntly and even cynically, brought to the fore not feelings and values, but the real interests of Russia in the Balkans in the solution of the Eastern question. At the same time, he called for the use of Slavic solidarity to counter German expansion in the region.

Another condition for Russia's support of the Slavs, clearly formulated by P.N. Milyukov, seems important: the refusal to use force. "We must stand by the fact," he declared at a meeting of the Central Committee of the Cadets in March 1909, "that we are not ready for war, and must do everything to reject the possibility of war."¹⁴

The moderate position of the Cadet leader, his reserved attitude towards the Slavs did not find support among the majority of the members of the Central Committee of the Cadet Party. Thus, according to N.A. Gredeskul, "The war in the Balkans creates a favorable situation for Russia, not for Austria: not Russia will be the instigator of the war, if it can no longer be avoided. The war is highly undesirable, but even for the prevention of the war it cannot be avoided — and from this point of view the position of P.N.M. (Milyukov. — *Authors' note.*) is dangerous and undesirable."¹⁵ He was echoed by F.F. Kokoshkin, who stated that "...the Straits are a vital interest for Russia. We are not indifferent to the distribution of forces in the Balkans. Our sympathies should be with the Slav."¹⁶

Thus, despite the disagreements, the majority of the Cadets in their speeches emphasized the close connection between Russian and Slavic interests, and allowed for the possibility of using military force in their defense. And the peace-loving attitude of the party leader was situational, caused not by innate pacifism or ignoring the Slavic cause, but

¹⁴ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GA RF). Fund 523. Reg. 1. File 7. P. 29—29 turnover. (In Russian).

¹⁵ GA RF. Fund 523. Reg. 1. File 30. P. 228. (In Russian).

¹⁶ GA RF. Fund 523. Reg. 1. File 245. P. 50. (In Russian).

by his assessment of the level of Russia's readiness for war. Moreover, he did not exclude the possibility of Russia entering the war, but only if it was necessary to defend its national interests, which he did not identify with the interests of the Slavs. Moreover, based on the idea of the inevitability of war, which became widespread in the early 20th century, P.N. Milyukov supported the rearmament of the Russian army.

Here we would like to focus on one of the key contradictions of the foreign policy doctrine of the liberals. Guided by the "spirit of the times," they were, on the one hand, influenced by the theoretical attitude of "fatal predetermination of wars in the history of society" (Shelokhaev, 2019, p. 216). On the other hand, pragmatism, the understanding that the extreme instability of Russia's internal situation could turn war into a trigger of revolution, pushed them towards peace. These hesitations would end only with the outbreak of World War I, when on the wave of patriotic enthusiasm, as well as the possibility of a practical solution of the Eastern question in the interests of the Empire, the liberals would become strong supporters and proponents of the idea of "war to the victorious end."

Actualization of the Eastern Question, 1912—1914

In the fall of 1912, when the First Balkan War began, P.N. Milyukov still maintained his peace-loving position. At the same time, he believed that Russia should solve the Eastern question together with the "European machine of the Triple Entente agreement," and not go to war alone "because of the known Slavic problems." On the other hand, the Cadet leader stated that "If it is in Russia's own interests, the matter may be different."¹⁷

¹⁷ Minutes of the Central Committee and Foreign Groups of the Constitutional Democratic Party. 1905 — mid 1930s. In 6 volumes. Vol. 2: Minutes of the Central Committee of the Constitutional Democratic Party. 1912—1914. Moscow : Progress-Akademiya publ., Politicheskaya

Defending himself against accusations of betrayal against the cause of the Slavs, P.N. Milyukov, addressing not only the leadership of the party, but also with the help of the Cadet mouthpiece newspaper "Speech" to the entire society, wrote: "There is no need to shout, push and wave your hands. Go, gentlemen, tensely restrained gait, look ahead, leave sensitive words and talk about the 'real' interests of Russia."¹⁸ Some researchers found, in this flowery phrase and in a number of other speeches of the leader of the Cadets a desire to conceal the real goals of the party: to inspire the masses to believe that it does not have any imperialist intentions. Thus, V.V. Shelokhaev, on the basis of the analysis of party documents, came to the conclusion that P.N. Milyukov "tried to impress upon his colleagues in the Central Committee that the party should behave so subtly and diplomatically on the Balkan issue that the masses would maintain the illusion of its non-involvement in an invasive imperialist foreign policy" (Shelokhaev, 2019, p. 228). However, the party leader's "masked imperialism" caused discontent among a part of the party leadership, which demanded a more open and decisive position in the Balkan crisis.

On the basis of the documents, it is difficult to judge the extent to which the Cadets tried to conceal their foreign policy plans before the World War I, but it is obvious that their leader called for abandoning the emotional perception of the idea of Slavic solidarity, the defense of abstract values, and justified the need to be guided in foreign policy by national interests.

The Balkan crisis, which in fact became a prelude to world upheavals, made liberals think about the country's readiness for a major war. P.B. Struve used international events not only as a signal for the mobilization and consolidation of society, but also as an incentive for its reform. "Never before," he wrote, "has Russia been so in need of a firm liberal domestic

entsiklopediya (ROSSPEN) publ., 1997. P. 92—99. (In Russian).

¹⁸ Speech. 1912. November 15. (In Russian).

policy... to unite all the forces not only of the Russian people, but of all the nationalities of the Empire, as now.”¹⁹

The above quotation leads us, albeit indirectly, to turn to the liberals’ views on popular participation in the foreign policy of the state. It should be immediately noted that the liberal concept combined an elitist distrust of the masses, of their ability to understand the complexities of international problems, with a democratic conviction of the need to involve popular opinion in their solution.

It seems that the democratic trends of the time were not fully taken into account by the leaders of the liberals, which was one of the factors of their alienation from the masses during the revolutionary upheavals of 1917.

In general, the liberals did not correctly perceive the programmatic attitude formulated by P.B. Struve: “State power is impossible without the implementation of the national idea. The national idea of modern Russia is reconciliation between the authorities and the people who have awakened to self-consciousness and self-activity and who are becoming a nation.”²⁰

There was also no unity in the Cadet Party regarding the Balkan Union. To some extent, the liberals actively used the ideas of neo-Slavism, opposing it not so much to the old Slavophilism as to Pan-Slavism, which preached Slavic unification under the aegis of Russia.²¹ On the other hand, with the help of neo-Slavism, they hoped to unite all patriotic elements of the liberal and moderate nationalist spectrum inside the country, and in foreign policy — all Slavic peoples. The creation of the Balkan Confederation appeared to the liberals not only as a practical embodiment of Slavic

unity, but also as a tool for solving the Eastern question in the interests of Russia.

It should be noted that in Soviet historiography the attitude of the liberals to the Slavic issue was interpreted in the spirit of a class approach, according to which the leaders of the liberal parties only “...covered up the narrow class interests of one or another group of the Russian bourgeoisie with extravagant speeches about Slavic reciprocity” (Dyakov, 1993, p. 176).

However, an objective analysis of the attitude, for example, of the Cadet leader to the Eastern question in general and to its Slavic component in particular leads to the following conclusions. Milyukov proposed to support the Slavs insofar as it corresponded to the interests of Russia and its agreements with the European powers. In his opinion, “The actual grouping of the Slavs goes parallel to the alliances of Russia, against Germanism. This state of affairs and should be determined by the Slavic policy.”²²

Thus, Milyukov demanded to base Russia’s relations with the Slavs on the principle of sober political calculation and mutual benefit and to discard “vulgar sentiments” such as ancestral love for the “Slavic brothers,” etc. The viewpoint of the Cadet leader was eventually recognized in the party, where it was believed that the Slavs as a whole were at that time a natural ally of Russia. “Not the notorious ‘historical mission of Russia’ in the Middle East, but its international tasks at this historical stage,” stated Milyukov, “that put the Slavs in the center of our attention.”²³

Gradually, the issue of Slavism in the speeches of the liberals began to turn from the main topic into a marginal one, giving way to

¹⁹ Russian Thought. 1912. Book XII. P. 160. (In Russian).

²⁰ Struve P. B. Great Russia. From Reflections on the Problem of Russian Power // Russian Thought. 1908. Book 1. P. 155. (In Russian).

²¹ See: Great Russia: A Collection of Articles on Military and Social Issues. Book 2 / ed. by V. P. Ryabushinsky. Moscow, 1911. P. 108. (In Russian).

²² Minutes of the Central Committee and Foreign Groups of the Constitutional Democratic Party. 1905 — mid 1930s. In 6 volumes. Vol. 1: Minutes of the Central Committee of the Constitutional Democratic Party. 1905—1911. Moscow: Progress-Akademiya publ., Politicheskaya entsiklopediya (ROSSPEN) publ., 1994. P. 333. (In Russian).

²³ GA RF. Fund 523. Reg. 1. File 7. P. 29 turnover. (In Russian).

other aspects of the Eastern question. Most likely, this transit can be explained by the disappointment of a part of the Russian liberal elite with the Slavic idea and, most importantly, with the results of the Balkan wars of 1912—1913, which finally split the South Slavic world and buried the plans to create an anti-German bloc of Balkan states.

The Problem of the Straits in the Polemics of the Liberal Parties

On the eve of the war, the issue of the Black Sea Straits, which had previously been somewhat overshadowed by other aspects of Russia's Middle East policy, began to occupy an increasingly prominent place in the speeches of the liberals. It is important to take into account that their interest was caused, on the one hand, by the growing economic importance of the Straits and the demands of domestic business circles to ensure the uninterrupted passage of ships, and on the other hand, by the aggravation of international relations and the growing external threat to the country's southern borders. The Straits not only focused the economic and geopolitical aspects of Russia's development, but also became an object of controversy for various political forces. Moreover, even among liberals there was no unanimity in determining their position and affiliation in the future.

Moderate representatives of the Cadet Party insisted on preserving the existing status of the Straits, which had been confirmed at the Congress of Berlin and which effectively closed the Russian navy in the Black Sea. Nationalists and rightists, as well as some liberals insisted on the need for Russia to acquire the "keys to the Black Sea," i.e. to seize the territory through which the Straits ran, including Constantinople. Thus, in the opinion of the cadet B.E. Nolde, "...the solution of the problems which for Russia are connected with the Straits... is possible only by solving the Eastern question."²⁴ B.E. Nolde considered this

"solution" possible only as a result of Russia's seizure of Constantinople.

The moderate liberals took a different, more balanced position. They were enthusiastic about the revolutionary events of 1908 in the Ottoman Empire, which raised hopes in their ranks for the beginning of a peaceful solution of the Eastern question, the possibility of which they associated with the unification of all the Balkan states, including Türkiye.²⁵ Russia in these conditions, according to P.N. Milyukov, should "stand for the preservation of the integrity of the Turkish regions until the international situation occurs in which they can become autonomous..."²⁶ The Cadet leader explained his position by the fact that the preservation of the Straits in the hands of a weakened Türkiye would be more profitable for Russia than their transfer in case of the complete collapse of the Porte in the hands of any great power. At the same time, the politician convinced his opponents that this was a temporary measure, arguing that in the long term, with the strengthening of Russian power, the Straits and part of the neighboring Turkish territories were supposed to go to Russia.²⁷

However, already in the spring of 1912, after the Porte closed the Straits to merchant ships in the conditions of war with Italy, the position of the Cadet leader changed. And during the World War I he openly declared the need to seize the Straits, not neutralize them. Only then, in his opinion, "...the structure of the great state organism will be complete," otherwise "this organism will be constantly shaken by convulsions of broken exchange and

²⁵ See: Milyukov P. N. *Balkan Crisis and Politics of A. P. Izvolsky*. St. Petersburg : Tipografiya tovarishchestva "Obshchestvennaya pol'za" publ., 1910. P. 23—24, 97. (In Russian).

²⁶ See: State Duma. Third Convocation. Session five. Verbatim reports. Part. 3. St. Petersburg, 1912. Column 2231. (In Russian).

²⁷ Yearbook of the "Speech" ("Rech") Newspaper for 1912. St. Petersburg : Izdatel'stvo redaktsii gazety "Rech" publ., 1912. P. 14. (In Russian).

²⁴ Nolde B. E. *Bosphorus and Dardanelles // Russian Thought*. 1911. Book. 4. P. 21. (In Russian).

will not get out of foreign dependence.”²⁸ The imperial ideas of P.N. Milyukov were most fully reflected in the article “Territorial Acquisitions of Russia,” in which he assumed the acquisition of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles straits with a sufficient part of the adjacent coasts to ensure their defense, as well as Constantinople, to be “full possession of Russia.”²⁹

Thus, P.N. Milyukov’s views on the ways of solving the problem of the Straits, although they changed depending on the historical context, but the understanding of its importance for the development of the country remained constant.

The Union of October 17, which represented the right wing of the liberals, took a more aggressive stance on the problem of the Straits.

According to the historiographical scheme established in Soviet times, the Octobrist’s determination was explained primarily by the bourgeois and landed gentry composition of the party, which consistently defended the class interests of the entrepreneurs. And it was this layer of society that most of all needed to ensure the uninterrupted supply of bread and other products through the Straits (Kostrikova, 2007, p. 3). This is why the Octobrists opposed the neutralization of the Straits, arguing that “it makes no sense for us to call the whole world to the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles and to place both these straits under international control on the model of the Suez Canal. On the contrary, we must stand firmly and unwaveringly on the principle that the question of the Straits concerns only those powers whose possessions lie in the Black Sea, and above all, of course, Russia and Türkiye.”³⁰

²⁸ Milyukov P. N. Tactics of the People’s Freedom Faction in the War. Petrograd: Tipografiya tovarishchestva Ekateringofskoe pechatnoe delo publ., 1916. P. 8. (In Russian).

²⁹ See: What Russia Expects from the War: Collection of articles. Petrograd: Izdatel’stvo “Prometei” N.N. Mikhailova publ., 1915. P. 5—62. (In Russian).

³⁰ Voice of Moscow (Golos Moskvyy). 1911. October 29. (In Russian).

The Octobrists insisted on the necessity to pursue a decisive policy in the Balkans, which, in their opinion, would be in the best interests of Russia. “...We wish Austria and its allies,” they declared in the *Voice of Moscow*, “to finally understand that we will not allow any territorial expansion in the Balkans... We are tired of sitting in a house whose keys are in someone else’s pocket. We demand that we have them.”³¹ Thus, the main demand of the Octobrists becomes the seizure of the Straits, carried out at the expense of a diplomatic deal. However, the outcome of the Balkan wars revealed the illusory nature of these hopes and led the Octobrists to demand that the government take decisive measures capable of “opening the Straits.”³²

The most decisive position on the Straits problem was taken by the liberal Progressive Party. The party mouthpiece, the *Morning of Russia* newspaper (“Utro Rossii”), argued that not only the Straits themselves, but also the adjoining lands, should go to Russia. “It is necessary to explain to Europe in a confidential way, but certainly in an authoritative manner, with the final liquidation of the Ottoman territory, the entire Balkan and Asian littoral of the Black Sea should go to Russia.”³³

The Progressists, who took the most militant position on the issue of the Straits, criticized the conciliatory policy of the government, which, given Russia’s unpreparedness for a major war, was forced to make concessions to Germany and Austria-Hungary (Kurylev, 2005, p. 191). The *Morning of Russia* newspaper wrote: “Our diplomacy should use the present moment in the sense that the results of the two Balkan wars... did not distance us from the possibility of realizing sooner or later the possession of the Straits.”³⁴

³¹ Voice of Moscow (Golos Moskvyy). 1912. October 24. (In Russian).

³² Voice of Moscow (Golos Moskvyy). 1913. July 21. (In Russian).

³³ Morning of Russia (Utro Rossii). 1912. July 27. (In Russian).

³⁴ Morning of Russia (Utro Rossii). 1913. July 21. (In Russian).

The Progressists also addressed the Slavic issue. Thus, according to E.N. Trubetskoy, “the unification of Russia with other Slavic peoples should not be the monopoly of someone else: on our part, it should not be the work of opposition or reactionary circles, but the matter of the entire nation.”³⁵

He was echoed by the major Russian industrialist, one of the leaders of the party, A.I. Konovalov, who believed that “The fire of patriotism and sympathy for the Slavs burns in all Russian people... The government, relying on these currents, could take a much better position in this serious and difficult Balkan problem.”³⁶

The leader of the Progressive faction in the Fourth Duma, I.N. Efremov, emphasized that “...our people are certainly peace-loving, we cannot and do not want to take anything for ourselves at the expense of the blood of our Slavic brothers. This is why we can categorically say that we do not want war, but we cannot tolerate insults to the national feelings.”³⁷

Such a resolute position of the Progressive Party, appealing to national feelings, is explained by the fact that, on the one hand, it was the most consistent exponent of the aspirations of the Moscow group of the Russian bourgeoisie, and on the other hand, it perceived itself as a national-patriotic force. That is why the Progressists, even more than the Octobrists, favored forceful methods of solving the Eastern question.

Conclusion

The analysis of the views of the Russian liberals of the early 20th century on the content and ways of solving the Eastern question allows us to come to the following conclusions.

³⁵ Moscow Weekly. 1908. No. 20. P. 1—2. (In Russian).

³⁶ Morning of Russia (Utro Rossii). 1913. March 24. (In Russian).

³⁷ State Duma. Fourth convocation. Session one. Verbatim reports. Part 1. St. Petersburg, 1913. Column 370. (In Russian).

First of all, it should be noted the internal dynamics of the development of their views, which consisted in the transition from the contemplation, inherent in their predecessors, to the development of a foreign policy program that became a guide to action both within the country and in the international arena. The declarative statements about national interests were replaced by polemics about their content, real consideration and identification of ways of their realization adequate to Russia’s capabilities. In considering the Eastern question, instead of arguments about Russia’s historical mission in the Balkans and concern for the needs of the Slavs, pragmatism is asserted, and projects are developed to establish an alliance with the Balkan states as Russia’s support in the region.

The liberal thought of the early 20th century was characterized by differentiation, associated with the emergence of politically formalized currents of liberalism, specificity, as well as dynamics of development, generated by rapid changes in the international situation, the growth of internal contradictions and the desire of Russian intellectuals to find adequate responses to the challenges of the time.

For most of the “old” liberals of the post-reform era, the Eastern question remained subordinate to the tasks of internal development of the country, which needed peace and stability to continue transformations. They argued about Russia’s geopolitical interests and the need to keep the “keys to the Black Sea” in their pockets, but were still opposed to war, hoping to gain control over the Straits through diplomacy.

For the “new” liberals of the early 20th century the Eastern question focused the main lines of tension in Russian society — national, social, economic, and international. They did not, as before, contrast the internal development of the country with its international tasks, but discovered their close relationship. For example, they proved that the solution of the national question in Russia would win the sympathy of the Slavs for the country, rally

them around the liberal empire, which in turn would strengthen Russia's power, its position in the Black Sea region, and become one of the factors in creating Great Russia. On the other hand, once strengthened, the liberal empire could take control of the Straits, which it needs to ensure international trade relations and economic development. Thus, there is not so much a pragmatization and rationalization of the perception of the Eastern question, but rather a complication of its vision. The Eastern question is increasingly understood as the quintessence of Russian aspirations, as a center that accumulates internal and external aspects of Russian life, national interests and liberal values.

Looking at the views of the liberals of the early 20th century on the Eastern question, it

possible to see not only the peculiarities of its perception by the representatives of the legal opposition, but also the roots of the growing alienation of the country's elite from the people. This alienation, which intensified during the war years and manifested itself, among other things, in the different perceptions of the authorities, liberals, and the people of the importance of the Eastern question, that led in the spring of 1917 to the resignation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the leader of the Cadet Party, P.N. Milyukov, who was ironically nicknamed "Milyukov-Dardanellsky" by the public for his plans to seize the Black Sea Straits. His resignation marked the beginning of the decline of liberalism in Russia, which ultimately found itself on the sidelines of history.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 22.06.2023

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 10.04.2023

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 31.10.2023

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