

The Tito-Stalin Conflict and its Political Consequences over the International Regime of the Danube River

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Abstract: The discrepancies arisen between the two totalitarian communist leaders - – Joseph Vissarionovici Stalin (The Soviet Union) and Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia) – contained in themselves the seed of destruction of the political and economic Stalinist monopoly regarding the Danube. Our study proposes to identify, through scientific analysis of contemporary sources of the event, the aftermath of this conflict regarding the political evolution of the international regime of the Danube, as well as the manner in which the dissolution of the communist bloc affected the post-war international relations. Between 1948 and 1953, until the death of Stalin, the conflict blocked the Danube for both communist states from the river's basin as well as in terms of international trade that characterized the previous period (interwar). Stalin viewed the Danube River as a factor of influence and political pressure that meant to subordinate the small communist states. After Stalin's death (March 1953), Khrushchev had to make a series of major concessions regarding Yugoslavia and other communist states which led to the transformation of the international regime of the Danube and to a "thaw" between East and West.

Keywords: Cold War; international statute of the Danube; diplomacy after WWII; the Stalinization of the Bay of the Danube; Danube Commission

1. Introduction

At the end of the Second World War the international situation was extremely favorable to the implementation of the expansionist objectives of the Soviet Union in regards to the Danube River. Under the generous slogan "the Danube belongs to the riparian" the soviet diplomacy wore a fierce diplomatic war with former major allies - the United States, France and Britain - in order to impose its post-war monopoly over the entire Danube basin. At the same time, the small Danubian states were required to internally adopt the communist regimes, characterized by obedience and subservience to the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the small Danubian

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states were economically strangled by the great communist power through various means, including through the confiscation of their own vessels. Thus, on the eve of the Danube Conference in Belgrade (30 July-18 August 1948) Moscow had become the political and economic hegemony of the Danube.

And yet, paradoxically, the seeds of the destruction of the political and economic Stalinist monopoly regarding the Danube were not triggered by the antagonism between East and West, but were the aftermath of divergences occurred within the communist monolith between the two leaders: Joseph Stalin (Soviet Union) and Josip Broz Tito (Yugoslavia). Our study aims to identify the implications of this conflict regarding the political evolution of the international regime of the Danube as well as the manner in which the dissolution of the communist bloc affected the post-war international relations.

2. The Historical Context Preceding the Outbreak of the Tito – Stalin Conflict

The tensions between the two communist leaders gradually rose during the development of World War II and accelerated in the early 1948. The source of the conflict did not lie in different ideological or doctrinal motifs, but sprung from the two leaders' incompatible notions regarding the relations between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, namely the relations between the two "fraternal" communist parties. The ideological disputes were later on artificially created in order to explain the split between the two totalitarian leaders. Overall, Yugoslavia endured the Soviet's attempts to penetrate its economy and army, which prompted Stalin to abandon the previous initiatives, namely to infiltrate his own agents in the Yugoslavian institutional structures, and move on to a new stage, one in which Tito would be openly attacked in the communist media or, if necessary, physically removed. In his turn, Tito tried to internally increase his prestige and authority and, at least, in 1948, to find allies among the communist states along the Danube basin and the Balkans for the establishment of a socialist federation, which was from the beginning a threat to the obedient satellite systems managed by Stalin. In the spring of 1948, through a series of letters addressed to the Central Committee of the Communist Party from Yugoslavia, Stalin accused Tito of deviationism from the Marxist-Leninist line as a consequence of adopting an internal policy favoring the bourgeoisie and the wealthy peasants or for an attitude considered by Moscow as being unfriendly towards the representatives of this country. Meanwhile, Stalin

tried to divide the Yugoslav party by supporting an anti-Titoist wing, but this process halted with the arrest of two pro-Soviet members of the Central Committee: Zujovic and Hebrang. To force the removal of Tito, the Cominform, following an extraordinary meeting, on the 28th of May 1948 a resolution was adopted through which the Bolshevik party and other parties condemned anti-Marxist Titoism, anti-Soviet policy and excluded Yugoslavia from this organization. The resolution invited the "healthy elements" within the Yugoslav Communist Party to overthrow Tito and to rejoin Yugoslavia with the Soviet bloc (Hodos, 1984, p.4-5). The split between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia became inevitable because Tito could not be subordinated by Stalin, becoming the number one enemy for the Moscow leader, in the context in which Titoism substituted Trotskyism as the incarnation of evil in the communist ideological bloc.

3. The Implications of the Conflict in the Context of the Danube Conference in Belgrade (30 July– 18 August 1948)

However, the Tito-Stalin split was not obvious during the course of the Danube River Conference in Belgrade. On the contrary, from its outset, the establishment of the Belgrade Conference did not take into account the traditional diplomatic rules concerning the development of such international negotiations and was conducted, from one end to another, by one delegation, that of Soviet Russia. The outcome of the debates did not leave room for interpretations, given that a minority of three Western powers - the United States, Britain and France - stood no chance in expressing their own arguments before the compact bloc of seven communist countries (Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Ukraine), grouped around a single voice, that of Moscow. In reality, the Western Allies were aware that they will not truly obtain a regime guaranteeing freedom of navigation to all flags, but in the name of compromise that usually accompanied such international negotiations, hoped to obtain some concessions from the Soviet diplomacy. Placed from the beginning in front of a hostile atmosphere in which they could not freely express their opinions, the Western powers have wondered why they were invited to participate in the Belgrade Conference in the first place. (Focas, 1987, p. 596)

As expected, the Soviet Union and the communist states satellite, its docile subordinates, voted for the Soviet project proposed by Andrey Yanuarevich Vyshinsky in Belgrade. What unpleasantly surprised the Western minority - The

United States, Britain and France - was eloquently described by the US delegate Cavendish Cannon. "Most of the participants in the Commission, with a cynical solidarity, avoided proposing even the lightest amendment to the text which resulted from their discussions, a fact that marks a unique event in the history of international negotiations" (Focas, 1987, p. 621). Basically, the project proposed by the Soviet delegate was adopted without being even slightly amended, which prompted the historian Josef L. Kunz to state that: "The painting of the Belgrade Conference can only be named a caricature of an international conference under a totalitarian regime, (...) the danger of a new era of barbarism, marked by a pronounced decline of good manners in diplomacy" (Kunz, 1949, p. 113).

The solution adopted in the capital of Yugoslavia, was based on the imposition of a regime which was unique, fixed, established and managed only by the riparian through a single Danube Commission, in reality there being organized two special Committees, the first for the Iron Gates and the second for the maritime sector of the river. Officially, on the 15th of November 1949, only four days after the newly established Danube Commission met for the first time in Galatz, the United States, France and Britain have submitted separate protest notes to the governments of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, declaring that they do not recognize the validity of the Convention of 18th of August 1948 as it flagrantly violates the principle of internationalization of navigable waterways. (Danube Commission, 1950, p. 542)

The prestigious US historian and diplomat John C. Campbell¹ wondered, only a year after the scene which occurred in the capital of Yugoslavia, what kind of triumph did Andrey Yanuarevich Vyshinsky, the Soviet representative, obtain in the Belgrade Conference? Basically, the Soviet Union had granted itself the legality of the already owned control. The new Convention had not been recognized by nations outside the communist bloc and the Danube Commission could not operate on the Upper Danube sector, with the exception of the area under Soviet control. Therefore, Austria and The Federal Republic of Germany, whose territory contained the first section of the navigable river, remained outside the jurisdiction of the given Commission. Without the participation of the Western states and without their support, the technical work and the development of the river basin were seriously affected. (Campbell, 1949, p. 326)

¹ See (Florescu, 2004, pp. 14-18)

In the context of the outbreak of the conflict between Stalin and Tito in the spring of 1948 we wonder why Tito did not take advantage of the Danube Conference to try to get closer to Western democracies and why Yugoslavia behaved like any other obedient satellite of Moscow. The answer can only emerge by understanding Tito's personality, his policy at the time and in the context of 1948. Firstly, Tito was a convinced communist and in 1948 he was still trying to find allies among other communist states against the Moscow authoritarianism. In fact, despite the harsh statements appeared in the Soviet press that compared Tito to Hitler, in reality the decisive split between the two occurred only at the beginning of 1949.

4. The Consequences of the Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict on the International Regime of the Danube between 1948 and 1953

The Danube Convention in Belgrade contains 47 articles divided into five chapters, two appendices and an Additional Protocol. According to the Belgrade Agreement, the entire international navigable course of the river was placed under the supervision of the Danube Commission, composed of one representative of each riparian state, whereof, for a period of three years, a President, a Vice President and a General -Secretary were elected. The Commission disposed of a permanent Secretariat and of all the necessary services for the its function, employees being recruited from among Member States. The Quorum of the Commission was set at five members and the decisions had to be taken following the majority of votes (the full text of the Belgrade Convention was published in the Official Monitor, 1948, No. 2).

The Soviet Union did not have enough time to enjoy the success of the Danube Conference as the relations between Tito and Stalin have rapidly deteriorated after the Belgrade Agreement. In terms of Soviet domination over the river, the Tito - Stalin conflict divided the Danube River into three sectors:

- 1) From the Austrian border until the small port Baračka, approximately 312 miles through which the river crosses a part of Austria, Czechoslovakia and Hungary;
- 2) The Yugoslav area of the Danube, which exclusively crosses the territory of this state, summing up 236 miles between Baračka and Kasilievo (the Yugoslavian bank) / Baziash (the Romanian bank), to which another 161 miles, that formed the Romanian-Yugoslav border, and the sector in which the Danube river entered in the area of the Iron Gates and Cataracts, were added;

3) The Lower Danube firstly included 289 miles of Romanian-Bulgarian border, plus another 142 miles through which the river exclusively crossed the Romanian territory up to its confluence with the Prut and finally, the last 40 miles through the navigable Sulina channel up to the river's mouth in the Black Sea.

Due to the Soviet-Yugoslav conflict, Moscow kept its political influence on the first and the last sector of the Danube, but in terms of actual inland water transportation the Soviet control could only manifest itself on the Lower Danube, as Belgrade blocked the navigation of Soviet ships both on its own sector and upstream. (Spulber, 1954, p. 238)

Regarding the Danube regime, the Yugoslav-Soviet conflict began by Moscow's refusal to engage Belgrade in the direct management of the newly created Danube Commission. In the first session of this Commission, opened in Galati on 11th of November 1949, the Soviet Union had imposed its complete control over the newly formed body through the Secretariat and through the rights which the secretary, namely the Soviet Morozov, had just then obtained. Thus, Morozov could name all the members of the Secretariat, taking advantage of the ambiguous wording of the text which hid the possibility of imposing the desired staff by the Soviet authorities. According to it, the Secretariat members of the Danube Commission were appointed on "merits" and not on geographical or state criteria. Consequently, Yugoslavia received only four minor posts in the Secretariat and its related services, which blocked the influence and the power of decision of this State in the Commission. (Catell, 1960, pp. 384-385) The Soviet Morozov was also the one who organized the Secretariat and its related services, established the permanent activity of its staff or negotiated on behalf of the Danube Commission with the governmental territorial authorities. Meanwhile, no mechanisms to control, subordinate or limit the power of the Secretary of the Danube Commission had been stipulated, not even by the representatives of the Member States in this Commission. (*Danube Commission*, 1950, p. 542)

In subsequent years, the Yugoslavian situation in the Danube Commission had considerably depreciated, its representative suffering enough humiliation. Documents that were to be signed were briefly advanced before him, his requests to be allotted additional time to review and consult his own government were refused or his solicitations to be informed were not answered. Moreover, he was not summoned to attend the semi-annual meetings in the subcommittees organized in order to discuss certain issues or was placed in a committee that was

concurrently organized with the plenary session, which put him in the awkward position of choosing between attending one or the another; he barely managed to get a visa to enter Romania in order to participate in the meetings of the Danube Commission, and during his stay in Galatz he met great difficulty regarding accommodation. Simultaneously, more and more naval incidents / accidents foregrounded the Yugoslavian vessels outside the territorial waters of this State, while the Yugoslavian navigation agencies have been seriously disadvantaged in Romania and Bulgaria or even banned in the Soviet Union. (Catell, 1960, pp. 385-386)

The Yugoslavian reply firstly consisted in protests. On the 13th of June 1950, Yugoslavia submitted an official note to the Soviet Union recalling the obstacles their own vessels have met while sailing on the Danube outside the national sector. Within the fourth meeting of the Danube Commission, opened on the 23rd of May 1951, the Yugoslav Minister for Foreign Affairs announced the permanent Secretariat of this Commission that his country had established its own rules of navigation, not taking into account the requirements of the Soviet Union in the Danube Commission, the latter constituting, in the view of the Yugoslav authorities, a flagrant violation of the sovereign rights of the river's riparian states. Moreover, the Yugoslav delegate abandoned the works of the Danube Commission as a sign of protest on the 2nd of June 1951, Yugoslavia also noting its financial contribution to the body's budget (Danube Commission, 1951, pp. 844-845). In the next ordinary sessions of the Danube Commission in July and December 1952, the Yugoslav motion was rejected by the representatives of the Soviet Union and its obedient acolytes (Danube Commission, 1953, pp. 300-301). However, the Soviet Union did not want to exclude or to entirely suspend Yugoslavia from the members of the Danube Commission, although it did have the authority to do so. Until the death of Stalin (March 1953), the Soviet Union pressured Belgrade through the Danube Commission to accept the status quo and its own rules imposed by Stalin on the river.

Another consequence of Yugoslavia seceding from Kremlin's orbit was the deliberate delay of the establishment of a Romanian-Yugoslav special joint administration at the Iron Gate.¹ The provision, stated in the text of the Convention of 1948, had remained for a long time merely a concept and only in late 1953 the establishment of such a joint administration finally succeeded, but its powers were

¹ For the Romanian-Yugoslav relations until 1957, see (Preda, 2004, pp. 647-658).

severely reduced in favor of the Danube Commission (Spulber, 1954, p. 238). Until the establishment of that Joint Commission, registered only after Stalin's death, the Romanian authorities took over the administration of the Iron Gates, dismissing the Yugoslav officials and seizing all facilities on the Romanian bank. In response, Yugoslavia had established its own administration on the Yugoslav sector of the Danube (Catella, 1960, p. 38). Meanwhile, in order to rebuild its lost prestige in the communist bloc and for certain military purposes, the Soviet Union intensively supported the project of digging the Danube - Black Sea Channel and forced the Romanian government to spend heavily in this respect. (Cojoc, 2000, pp. 342-352)

Until Stalin's death, a time-frame in which the Soviet control over the Danube River was at its peak, the technical activities of developing the river were minimal. Moscow had turned its attention to the political side of its dominance, encouraging its satellite Members to standardize regulations concerning navigation, police, customs or health in order to meet their economic and commercial interests. Moreover, in addition to hindering the development of the river's navigability, Moscow also blocked the linking of the Danube to its outside world through their disinterest concerning the maintenance of the Sulina channel. This arm, placed in a special mixed Soviet-Romanian administration and considered to be a segment of the international Danube, had not been dredged and repaired as was necessary. On the contrary, the Soviet authorities gave great importance to the development of their own navigable channel, through the Chilia arm, which led increasingly more ships to use this route. Being removed from the custody of the Belgrade Convention, the Soviet authorities were unhindered to disadvantage, on the Chilia Channel, the vessels of the small communist Danubian states in relation to their own flag. (Catell, 1960, pp. 387-388)

In the Stalinist period (1948-1953) the Danube River's links with other trade routes were completely blocked. There had been no contact, not even on an informal level, with the West or at least with the Austrian and the Federal-German authorities. The Danube Commission, at Moscow's orders, refused to meet the demands of the United Nations and its specialized agencies. The Western flagged vessels were non-existent on the communist portion of the river, navigating only on the Austrian and the Federal-German sector due to the linking of the Danube River to the Rhine. (Catell, 1960, p. 387)

5. Extinguishing the Soviet-Yugoslav Conflict after the Death of Stalin (March 1953) and Reforming the International Regime of the Danube

The Soviet Union's attitude towards the Danube changed dramatically after the death of Stalin (March 5, 1953). Just three months after the demise of the Kremlin dictator, in June 1953, the Yugoslav delegate returned to the workings of the Danube Commission, thereupon requesting the reorganization of the Secretariat and of the permanent services, amendments that were meant to dilute the control of the Commission held by the Soviets. The Soviet-Yugoslav conflict had been extinguished and the issue of the international regime and of the Danube Commission, the compromise between Nikita Khrushchev, the new Soviet leader, and the Yugoslavian Josip Broz Tito, consisted in the increase of the number of officials and the importance of their posts, acquired by the Yugoslavians in the Danube Commission. In response, the Belgrade authorities allowed the up-river passage of 26 Soviet ships through its own Danube sector. In the ninth plenary session of the Danube Commission in December 1953, the model imposed by Stalin on the Danube was completely repudiated. (Danube Commission, 1954, p. 417).

Within that session, the Yugoslav delegate had focused his requests on two issues: the relocation of the headquarters of the Danube Commission from Galati in Budapest and a fairer redistribution of posts within the permanent Secretariat. In the case of his first request, the Member States have decided that, beginning from 1954, the headquarters of the Danube Commission are to be moved from Galati to Budapest, which remained to date its current location. The decision of relocating the headquarters was geographically motivated, Budapest having a more central position on the Danube navigable sector, but behind this decision stood mostly political considerations, the Galatz port being very close to the Soviet border. Basically, the relocation of the Commission's headquarters also had an imagology function, namely that it was a sign of the Kremlin's renunciation to its right to exercise its totalitarian control over the communist sector of the Danube. After 1954, the Danube Commission, which had been until that moment a primarily technical body, transformed itself into a political body, the delegates of the riparian states within the Commission also serving as ambassadors of their countries in Hungary (Badescu, 1992, p. 340). The new direction of Moscow's policy towards its satellites, characterized by a greater freedom, not limited only on the Danube, was translated in the abolition of joint societies in 1954 (Anton, 2004, pp. 196-202).

These loosening measures have not meant a renunciation of Kremlin's domination over mentioned area, but this hegemony will be made, from this day forward, in a much more diplomatic and indirect way.

Following Belgrade's pressures, a new leadership of the Danube Commission was chosen, made up of the Yugoslavian Djuric as General Secretary, the Hungarian Silk as president and the Bulgarian Guenov as Vice President. Certain procedures of the Commission were also changed, through which the attributions of the Secretariat were diminished. Since then, the Danube Commission served, through its innovations applied by the new leadership in the Kremlin, as a laboratory for experiments of Soviet foreign policy, both in the communist world and in East-West relations. Inside the communist bloc there was a shift from bilateral to multilateral relations in the technical field and the "thaw" of the Danube Commission manifested itself by its members' participation in international conferences concerning the development of transport and trade; by transparency of its activities- in June 1956, an observer from the European economic institutions was invited, for the first time, to participate in the plenary session; by launching projects concerning the development of the Danube for a better navigation, by resuming trade and economic relations with Western countries and by technical cooperation with specialized agencies of the United Nations.¹

The Danube River's openness to trade with the West had been a major policy change that the Soviet authorities have assumed after the death of Stalin. In order to gain credibility, in view of attracting technical cooperation of the Western democracies and in view of the reintegration of the Danube in major international trade routes, the communist states firstly had to truly link the navigation on the entire course of the river. As such, the mutual exchange of information between the communist states on the river's basin and the other two non-Communist riparian states - Austria and the Federal Republic of Germany - had become a necessity. Therefore, the two countries, following the received invitation, have sent their representatives, starting from June 1957, to participate as experts in the plenary sessions of the Danube Commission and at the activity of various permanent subcommittees. (Catell, 1960, pp. 392-293) On the 23rd of May 1955, the Soviet Union urged Austria to join the Danube Commission. Following pressures from its western allies which feared the inclusion of the Austrian Danube sector in the sphere of Soviet control, Vienna initially refused to join the Danube Commission.

¹ See (Catell, 1960, p. 389).

Only in January 1960 did Austria effectively join the Danube Commission.¹ Not the same could be achieved with the Federal Republic of Germany. The Soviet estimation in the organization of the Belgrade Conference (30 July-18 August 1948), that denied the presence of this state's representatives in the workings of the River's development, proved to be incorrect. Meanwhile, the fact that Stalin blocked the Danube in the communist sector, determined the Federal German authorities to finalize the Nazi project that targeted the unification of the Danube River with the Rhine. The accomplishment of this objective had two major negative effects on the navigation on the communist sector of the Danube: the German commercial traffic on the Upper Danube was conducted through the Rhine towards the North Sea; respectively, the Federal Republic of Germany showed no interest in joining the Danube Commission.

6. Conclusion

Although triggered by entirely other causes, the refusal of the Yugoslavian communist leader Josip Broz Tito to unconditionally subordinate to Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin had major consequences in terms of navigation and the international regime established on the Danube River by the Belgrade Agreement (August 18th 1948). Until the death of Stalin, between 1948 and 1953, the conflict had severely damaged the navigation on the communist sector of the Danube and led to Moscow's total control on the Danube Commission through the body's Secretariat. After Stalin's death (March 1953), the new Kremlin leader, Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, was forced to make a number of concessions towards Yugoslavia - and, as default, to other communist countries along the Danube - in order to settle the conflict, concessions that have reformed the Danube Commission, have reinstated the territorial authorities the sovereignty over their own river sections and have led by a "thaw" between East and West, materialized by Austria's adherence to the Danube Commission in 1960.

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¹ See (Kastory, 2005, pp. 279-292).

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