

*View over the Balkan Peninsula
Поглед над Балканите*

THE BALKANS IN THE EVENING BEFORE MODERNIZATION

(Academic speech)¹⁾

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Abstract. The article highlights some moments of the development of the Balkans in the period 18th - the beginning of the 19th century, preceding the Modern era of Industrial changes.

Keywords: Balkans, Central Europe, Industrial revolution, modernisation

When we are looking today at Europe's present development we see a lot of problems which have various roots. In my opinion, a few of these problems have a longer tradition, rather than existing only for the last decades or years. Without any doubt we are living in a time of radical change, we may not be able to define exactly what the matter is and how long this situation will take. With this in mind we are not able to see our immediate future and may not do anything other than hope to survive under acceptable circumstances.

I am convinced that people living in the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century understood their life horizon in a comparable manner: they noted some fundamental changes without being able to foresee the latter results. Therefore let me reflect a little bit on the perspectives of this transition period in and around the Balkans.

How could the contemporaries be aware for the great change in front of them? Certainly not all people could do that, but a growing number. Foreign soldiers like Austrians came to the Balkans during the 18th century several times and provided the chance of liberation from Ottoman rule. A similar effect created the maritime victory of the Russians against the Turks near Çeşme 1770, because a Russian fleet did push forward into the Mediterranean Sea for the first time. Also the establishment of privileges and consul offices favoring foreign traders and citizens in the Ottoman Empire (starting in the same period) symbolized something new and unusual. Along the Western periphery of the Balkan countries some individuals were appearing – looking at the local situation not only by visiting, but also by describing and mapping among other activities. Also the commercial interaction between the Balkans and

Central Europe – managed by the Greeks, the Armenians, the Tzintzars and the Jews - let different information and practices penetrate into the Southeast, above all into the cities along the transit roads to the harbors and the provincial residences of the authorities. The Serbs lived not only in the territories traditionally settled by themselves anymore, but also in Southern Hungary and built a bridge between the ‘Western’ and the ‘Eastern’ worlds. When we are looking at the cultural profile of the Orthodox Churches in the Western Greek islands under the rule of Venice or in the regions under the Habsburg crown we find a new styling of painted and printed objects based on the influence of the old Byzantine tradition and the new barock influence from outside. Certainly the majority of the Balkan population had no personal connection to the world of traders, travelers, diplomatic functionaries and secret service agents. Therefore they did not understand properly the reason (beginning with the 1770s) why a mail service was crossing the area between Vienna and Constantinople every three weeks. All these facts indicated that the times had changed, and new and unknown challenges would come earlier or later.

What were these challenges? Let me focus only at some selected ones!

Based on a flood of military conflicts in Western Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, the system of the so called “Concert of the Great powers” was being established. What does it mean? Great Britain, France, Austria, Russia and finally Prussia agreed to take common ‘responsibility’ for the continent, having the right to decide over other states and their fate. On the one hand they were intervening not only in favor of equilibrating circumstances among themselves, but also in favor of their own kind of civilization. Being occupied with peace-making after the long and cruel Napoleonic wars and knowing the actual problems within the Ottoman Empire, they refused to deal with them at the Viennese congress 1814/15. Neither in this moment nor later, did the Balkan society get any opportunity to treat with the Western powers on the same level, they only had the option to become westernized people with all advantages, but also disadvantages.

Another great challenge was the whole enlightenment impact. Reflecting their religious world view critically, a part of the Western society began to prefer a secularized approach, focusing on the future and its feasibility. This revolutionary perspective took them from the world of well known safety and confidence to an unusual horizon of uncertainty and risk. A special element of this ‘new world’ was the individualization which extracted people from the accustomed environment and made man and woman more or less anonymous members of a nation which could at first not be anything other than an abstract creation.

The invention of the steam engine in the 1760s in England changed the transport system deeply and the social mobility in an unforeseen manner. Handicraft was losing its economic, social and cultural position in a relatively short time, and industrial progress got more and more dominance. The urban life was replacing

the traditional rural life, and rivalries between the nationalistically interpreted economic systems stimulated a lot of imperialistic activities.

The idea of education represents another great challenge. Certainly the replacement of religious knowledge in favour of practical and empirical knowledge was without any doubt useful for the progress and allowed more and more people to play a role within politics, but required a lot of temporal, human and financial resources and a lot of organisational work.

Is it acceptable to speak about “the” Balkans? I don’t think so, because the situation in the different ‘corners’ of this space was not the same: The exterior regions received some impulses of modernisation earlier than the interior ones, and the plains and coastal areas earlier than the mountainous ones. Moreover the ‘Balkan’ parts of the Austrian and the Ottoman Empire cannot be compared: Based on the impact of the Habsburg’s the Serbs, Romanians and many others in Southern Hungary became acquainted the new deal with modernisation since the middle of the 18th century while similar activities and their effects started in the late period of the Ottoman rule, sometimes several generations later. Therefore, the period of time of “the evening before modernisation” was different. The duration of this period had more time in the Habsburg territories – about one hundred years (four generations); in the Ottoman territory there was not so much transition time, perhaps two generations.

The majority of the so called ‘Balkan society’ in this period was not able to get any vision about the coming challenges, and therefore it could not foresee its fate. This fate did not consist only in becoming national states, but also in applying the ‘heavy’ menu of Western kind of life which arrived in the Balkans relatively quickly. This transition in favour of modernisation needed more time than was available and needed educated elites who did not exist in a sufficient matter.

As much as people living in the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century we contemporaries may not foresee our future. Certainly the background is not comparable, but the problem seems to be the same. The single difference consists in our memory of the former situation, but: is this memory useful for the perspective of the next decades?

NOTE

1. Oration, given in the Aula of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski "(May 22, 2015) on the occasion of awarding prof. Harald Heppner with "Doctor Honoris Causa" honorary title

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