Captive States, Divided Societies: Political Institutions of Southeastern Europe in Historical Comparative Perspective

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Some relevant publications:
• The Mirror and Behind it. In: SHVUT 16/1993.

The Age of Bureaucracy in South Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective

This chapter deals with the rise of national bureaucracies in post-Ottoman South-Eastern Europe. I plan to trace the progress of a Western model of state in patrimonial an environment dominated by feudal or patronage links, but also to understand how this model imposed from above restricted the freedom that the population had managed to preserve until then through many layers of new regulations. In other words, this chapter will survey the process of rationalization in the framework of state building efforts of SEE rulers, but also the response of Balkan societies to this challenge.

In South-Eastern Europe enforcement of tax collection preceded the enforcement of law, both being of a highly punitive character. The lack of literacy sharply limited for a long while the ability of the central authority to introduce a written form of its decisions and to crystallize a category of officials (scribes) to whom this special service was entrusted. Bureaucracy” is a frequently misused term, when it is applied to the organized power networks that developed during the state-building period in the history of every European country. To speak of a proper bureaucracy one should be able to identify the Weberian characteristics, or at least the formal organization marked by a clear hierarchy of authority, the existence of written rules of procedure, staffed by full-time salaried officials, and strife for the efficient attainment of organizational goals. By Western standards, the existence of a bureaucratic system can not be discussed in South Eastern Europe before the seventeenth century, with one exception which is a reduced imitation of the Venetian government, the small Republic of Dubrovnik. Even in the Ottoman Empire it is doubtful if the very active correspondence maintained between the Porte and every corner of this immense territory, consisting in orders and reports, be it on the minutest details, affected the traditional structures in the sense of bureaucratization. As long as it concerned individual cases, this practice was still inspired by a patriarchal spirit. The late adoption of print is another relevant factor that indicates the slowness of the movement toward modernization; once print was introduced, the pace of bureaucratization quickened. A substantial degree of culture was required also for dealing with financial matters and for the difficulties of reconciling the old norms of oral judicial tradition with codified law.

We shall stipulate the existence of three different situations at the beginning of the 19th century in South Eastern Europe: Ragusa-Dubrovnik (based on aristo-democratic principles),
the Balkan area (organized according to the Ottoman system, with an autocracy at centre combined with local autonomies at the periphery) and the Romanian Principalities (possessing a local tradition, but implementing some Western innovations on top of a structure influenced by the Ottoman governance). The first disappeared when the French army occupied Croatia, the second introduced further bureaucracy and broke down military anarchy, without however fighting corruption. When Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria and in the end, Albania arose as independent states, they changed the formal institutions, but inherited, among other mentality problems, the way of considering the bureaucratic mechanism as a buffer between state and citizens and as an estate by itself, able to dominate and efficient in the extortion of revenues. The same development occurred in Romania, in spite of the attempts to reorganization.

The question which we must try to answer cautiously is which one of these states has a substantially better record in adjusting bureaucracy to the standards of modern administration and the needs of its population, and what factors led to this performance.