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## THE EUROPEAN PARADOX OF CROATIA: INTEGRATIVE 'DISINTEGRATIONS' OF THE XVI AND XVII CENTURIES.

**Abstract.** Following the theses cited in the title, the author follows the thread of events, changes, social, economic and political conditions – from the battle of Krbava to the end of the 17th century – which influenced the course of integrative and 'disintegrative' processes in the Croatian ethnic area.

### Introductory thesis

The theme of the second congress of Croatian historians – *Croatia and Europe – integrations in history* – is very provocative, demanding and at any rate emblematic. The historian who – in the framework of his/her craft, experience and wide (and with every day all the more wide) boundaries of his/her profession – considers this problem, will bring into his/her account not only consideration of the reality of past centuries, but also the interlacement of circumstances that link our time with times past. Historical facts, but also the complex 'mental' frameworks in which they took place, conceal many dramatic questions of Croatian history. All this together makes up the complex of the problem that we could call the *Croatian case*.

It is a generally familiar fact that during the course of history every nation living on the territory of 'geographical Europe' accumulated numerous experiences – frequently negative! – in connection with 'political Europe'. Although these two syntagms were never emphasized in the past, there is no doubt that they have been present for centuries in the relations between those parts of the old continent that we call the European *West*, *Mitteleuropa*, the European *East* and *Southeast*. Today the relation between 'geographical' and 'political' Europe has emerged, in the first place, into such a *rigid, exclusive and intolerant* form that historians – equally those from 'political' and 'geographical' Europe – have found themselves called to draw attention to the need to develop a *common Europe*.

It is probably not too pretentious to stress the thesis that this second congress of Croatian historians fits in some way into the large all-European project organized theoretically by the draft of perhaps the greatest living historian of the present time, Jacques Le Goff, under the title of *Faire de l'Europe* ('Creating Europe').<sup>1</sup> The series of these books have come across an extraordinary reception in many European lands, even though, unfortunately, Croatian publishers have not joined this enterprise.

1 | The books from the series *Faire de l'Europe* are printed in Paris, Oxford, Barcelona, Rome, Bari, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Athens, Budapest, Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava, Sofia, Ljubljana, Belgrade, Vilnius, Istanbul, Seoul and Tokyo.

### **The long duration of the Krbava defeat**

The early modern period of Croatian history belongs to the period when the ancient European divisions of Latin and Greek Europe, and what is more, Islamic Europe, became parts of dramatic and conflicting realities. Croatia was a particular 'Triplex confinium', a frontier region between three great powers: the Habsburg Empire/the House of Habsburg, the Venetian Republic/the Republic of St. Mark and the Ottoman Empire/Turkey. In this region, the inhabitants, in one part, to paraphrase the familiar poetic saying, 'fought duels on its fields' (*dijelili megdane ne njezinim poljima*). The Croatian early modern period and the continuity of misfortunes, which were reflected in all layers of Croatian society, began with the tragic collision with the Ottomans on the field of Krbava in the year 1493. In historical testimonies, in literature and historical *memory* this event remained marked by the epithet of 'the bloody field' (*chervavo pogle*). Although of short duration, the Krbava defeat left a long and deep trace afterwards. Such a heavy blow was dealt to the Croatian nobility that it could no longer recover from it, while the peasant population was forced, for sheer survival, to leave its hearth and seek a more secure existential space. With that began the centuries-long migratory processes that brought huge changes in Croatian society. Croatia also lost its spatial integrity. The former parts of the Croatian state in the Dalmatian littoral and its hinterland were transformed into Ottoman sancaks, while their ethnic structures were also somewhat changed. In spite of the difficult conditions, the Croatian regions were also a theatre of internal ferments, and also open conflicts: in the course of the dynastic conflicts, the kings endeavoured to press back the landed gentry, leaning on the lower nobility and bourgeoisie. Already from the time of Mathias Corvinus, calls were addressed to the international public for help because of the Ottoman danger, for one's own forces could not hold back their advances. In such conditions, the ruler could not engage the defence of Dalmatia, nor stop the political, social and economic crisis into which the Kingdom was all the more sinking. The extraordinary war taxes were transformed into yearly taxes that hit hard all layers of Croatian society.

### **Internal ferments and Ottoman inroads: the development of the *Bulwark*.**

Also included in the defence from the Ottoman conquests, apart from the Habsburgs, was the Venetian Republic, to whom the maritime route in the Levant represented a jugular vein of its entire existence. It will employ huge monetary means, its military-maritime potential and manpower (of which a significant part was recruited on the eastern Adriatic coast and its hinterland) in order to defend Dalmatia and its possessions in the Levant. Numerous peasant and popular rebellions break out in the Croatian area, as well as throughout Europe. This chain of peasant rebellions added to the ones in the immediate vicinity of Croatia (in the Slovenian regions alongside the Sotle and in Srijem).

The decline of the peasant layer considerably weakened – at the moment when one had to oppose the Ottoman conqueror – the defensive strength of the Kingdom. Conditions worsened after the fall of Belgrade (1526), a key defensive fortification, so the road to further conquests was opened to the Ottomans. The first breakthrough ensued toward Croatia: until the year 1527, many fortifications south and north of the Velebit fell, and afterwards so too the fortification of Klis.

What followed was a row of well-known events, tragic chronological watersheds of the falling curves of Croatian history. After the battle of Mohács in 1526, Slavonia with Srijem found itself under the rule of Suleiman II the Magnificent, while the Croatian Kingdom in its central part almost disappeared. With the death of Louis II Jagiello, the throne was vacated, which opened the pages for new political crises in Croatia. With the election of the Habsburgs, the Austrian archduke Ferdinand, Croatia and Slavonia were again – for almost four centuries – united under a common crown. The Ottoman invasions considerably reduced the Croatian state and ethnic area: from a former fifty thousand square kilometres, after 1526 there remained something more than twenty, until at the end of the century that fell to 16,800 square km. Croatia – which began to be officially titled the 'remnants of the remnants of the once glorious Kingdom' – became a marginal and rejected land, a tiny part of the huge Habsburg machine, which was ever more present on the European and world scene. Though Archduke Ferdinand, in taking over the Croatian throne, pledged to 'inviolably preserve, confirm and observe' the earlier laws, rights and obligations, the state strategy of the powerful Habsburg Empire flowed into different political, military and economic canals.

### **In the whirlpool of internal crises and external dangers**

The wars with the Ottomans provoked the tragic emigration of the Croatian ethnic element during the course of the 16th century. Numerous groups and individual families from Dalmatia, Lika, Krbava and the region alongside the Una emigrate to Western Hungary, Austria, Moravia and Italy. However, there also comes to migrations within the Croatian area, especially from Western Bosnia toward Dalmatia and further into Istria, to which wars and epidemics of disease inflicted heavy demographic losses. Groups of Vlachs, Germans, Hungarians and Albanians settle in Croatian regions.

In the 16th century, one stage of the development of the Croatian estate society was completed. While the nobility closed in on itself within a privileged system, the small noble districts decayed, and the tiny layer of 'free men' barely survived. The position of the serfs, especially those in Zagorje, worsened when the frontlines shifted to the river Čazma and Pokuplje. The burden of fortifying the borders fell on them, but also the payment of still larger war taxes. As a result of the position of these subjects, all the more greater social tensions were created which threatened with new pressures and new conflicts. It was here that the well-known rebellion under the leadership of Matija Gubec (1573) broke out. It was not only a form of resistance against the feudal taxes and violence (in the case of victory, the peasants were to take over authority, organize the collection of taxes and defend the borders), but it also had the intention of opening up peasant/serf trade toward the Adriatic ports. Therefore, the almost simultaneous rebellions on other estates, in neighbouring Slovenian areas, and also the rebellion of Istrian peasants in the far principality of Pazin, have a particular significance. The peasants clashed with the noble army near Stubičke Toplice and on the 9th of February 1573, suffered a heavy defeat. Feudal pressure continued with undiminished intensity in the 17th century. The free peasant-soldiers from the Military Frontier, though living in poverty, in difficult and backward conditions, represent with

their status an incessant challenge to the aspirations of the manifold or at least doubly oppressed serfs in their vicinity: apart from work obligations, and those in money and payments in kind, they are squeezed by fiscal contributions, alongside the strict duty to participate in military conflicts. Rebellions erupt from the possessions of the Zagreb Kaptol to the subjects in Pićna, the smallest Istrian bishopric.

### **Lagging behind *political Europe***

Today we could assert that the integrating processes of the Croatian ethnic and political area into the area of *political Europe* was unnaturally interfered with and broken by international conditions, the relations of the great powers of the anti-Ottoman block toward Croatia, but also the deep crisis that shook Croatian society from the inside. In all of the aforementioned events, Croatian conditions (and difficulties) were interwoven with European political interests, diplomatic strategies, military tactics... in a word high politics administered the fate of small nations. The European centre sought to transform its continental margins not only into a place for discharging accumulated international tensions, but also into an area of the first defensive lines. A characteristic example is represented by the completion of the Uskok War (1615-1617/18) – one local conflict which grew to international proportions – ending with the peace agreements of the great powers in Madrid and Paris, even though the plundering guerrilla war continued for another eight months in Istria and the north Adriatic territorial waters! This was a *European* peace, which did not bring an end to the war and suffering to the main part of its battlefield.

After the battle of Sisak in 1593 and the defeat of the Ottomans, the frontier regions facing the Ottomans became a detached belt under the administration of the Austrian military authorities. King Ferdinand II gave a row of privileges to settlers, mostly Orthodox Vlachs, deserters and re-settlers from the region under Ottoman rule, through a specific document ("The Vlach Statute"/*Statuta valachorum*) of 1630, which, alongside the efforts of the Viennese Court exempted this stratum from the authority of the Sabor and Ban. An almost separate region, the Military Frontier, with two commanding generals – one *Generalität* in Karlovac (for the Croatian Frontier) and another *Generalität* Varaždin (for the Slavonian Frontier) – influenced in a particular way the social organization of Croatia. As a region without feudal lords and dependant serfs, it existed – paradoxically! – alongside a system in which the feudal and serf relationship was very developed and alive.

Tensions, controversies and conflicts also shook the feudal sphere of Croatian society. The main magnate families in Croatia and part of the Hungarian ones were dissatisfied with the Habsburgs because of their political indecision and vacillation in taking the initiative in the Danube basin and moving into an attack against the Ottomans. On top of that, the Court appointed German officers as commanders in the Croatian-Slavonian border – in fact detached from the integrity of the Kingdom of Croatia – and contributed to the atmosphere of dissension between the frontiersmen and the Croatian nobility. Directed largely toward the West, where they protected their dynastic interests and sought to strengthen their international prestige, the Habsburgs

devoted less attention to the defence of the Croatian and Hungarian possessions. Their political combinations were certainly based on the danger that the Croatian and Hungarian nobilities – strong also under these unfavourable conditions – would strengthen so much after the cessation of the Ottoman danger that they would become a great obstacle to the absolutist tendencies of the Habsburg dynasty. Although the Ottoman army suffered a heavy defeat at St. Gotthard, the Emperor Leopold I (1657-1705) offered the Sultan peace (contracted in Vasvár in 1664) by which both sides retained what had been occupied, and on top of that, an indemnity of 200,000 ducats was paid to the Porte. With that the hopes of the Croatian nobility that the war would be continued until the expulsion of the Ottomans from these parts were buried. The most powerful Croatian magnates decide to resist.

This was a reflection of a specific 'public opinion', not only in feudal circles, but also in the wider layers of Croatian society. Although the whole idea of a decisive and armed resistance in essence represented an oppositional and defensive act, its organizational framework was conspiratorial. From that comes the traditional, simplified title, *conspiracy*, for this exceptionally important, complex, but also watershed event of Croatian history. Historiographical interpretations drew attention to the deeper and multi-layered dimensions of this event, its political, social, economic, and at any rate, 'mental' context. The main initiator and organizer of the resistance was the Zrinski family, the owners of huge landed estates from Medimurje and Zagreb to those in Pokuplje, and then all the way to the northern Adriatic with the town of Bakar. This wide territory (as a whole very large in relation to the divided Croatia of the day), with its economic power, military strength, large number of inhabitants, and social complexity all gave attributes of statehood to the Zrinski possessions, in which were also included the Frankopan estates, won by purchase or family ties. As a member of the old Croatian nobility, and alongside being economically strong, the Zrinski family, along with the Frankopans, was very powerful and influential in the social life of Croatia and Hungary. Their rise threatened the absolutist and centralist aspirations of the Court, while after the conclusion of a disadvantageous peace with the Porte, the resistance of the magnates began to unfold according to a conspiratorial scenario. In spite of its secrecy, behind the scenes ties with some powerful international factors, even a desperate attempt to rely on the Porte, the rebellion was doomed to failure from the very beginning. Neither the mission of reconciliation undertaken by the bishop of Zagreb, nor the journey of repentance to Vienna could hinder the unfolding of the macabre scene of 30 April 1671 at the place of execution in Wiener Neustadt: the beheading of the 'high traitors' Petar Zrinski and Fran II Krsto Frankopan (Tržački) and the execution of the leading heads of the conspiracy. With this act, the attempt to resist the centralist policies of the Habsburgs was broken, the Croatian nobility lost its oppositional strength, while the most distinguished magnate families were economically destroyed (after the sentences were carried out, the property of the Zrinskis and Frankopans were subject to court expropriations). A large part of the Croatian area now came under the administration of the Court chamber. However, the executed Croatian magnates became the bearers of the tradition of the continuity of Croatian statehood, while their 'political bodies' continued to live in the shape of a national myth.

It was remarked in the beginning that the battle of Krbava in 1493 marked the beginning of the time framework of this paper, and now it is necessary to argue that it ends with the period between the defeat of the Ottomans near Vienna in 1683 to the Great war – in which were included other central European countries – of 1699: during this period, Croatia stretching to the Velebit, Slavonia, Bačka and Banat (from the mouth of the Bosut to the mouth of the Tisa rivers) were liberated. The Venetian republic also participated in this war, motivated by a wide range of state-political and economic interests. The weakening of the Ottoman Empire enabled the continuity of Venice's role in the Levant, more successful commerce in the eastern Mediterranean, but also the encompassing of possessions in Dalmatia and its hinterland, by which it strengthened its role in the Adriatic. Stimulating anti-Turkish sentiments among the wider layers of the population, Venice achieved, with the help of the domestic population significant military successes and succeeded encompassing its possessions along the former border and in Boka Kotorska. However, this successful war against the Ottomans was deeply imprinted not only on the Croatian geopolitical area, but also on the consciousness of people, on their 'mental picture' of the small world of their existence. The new geopolitical reality separated the northern parts of Croatia from Dalmatia. As a result, the now dominant Dalmatian appellation began to increasingly suppress the former Croatian name, creating thereby a deeper separation.

#### **Crisis and recoveries: the two parts of Europe in the XVII century**

Seen through the prism of the political events described, as well as the unavoidable existence in the geopolitical area of this part of Europe, Croatia – side by side with Mitteleuropa and the European West – fell into ever more complex crises. These difficult crises also affected, however, the other area. The aforementioned wars, as well as many others that were not fought on Croatian soil, were accompanied by huge destruction and human losses. During the course of the XVI, and especially, XVII century, Europe suffered from epidemics of disease, great and frequent shortages (the term 'epidemics of hunger' is used), from elementary catastrophes (a voluminous work in French historiography has been written on the subject), climatic and cosmic changes. It would be useful to mention a very interesting work dealing with the 'general crisis of the XVII century' in which two historians, Parker and Smith, mention the appearance of a great number of 'sun spots' in the period between 1610 and 1715.<sup>2</sup> If historians, as the editors of this book stress, are unable to interpret astronomical appearances, they can, on the basis of archival research, deal with their consequences.

Such troubles and catastrophes certainly did not occur on a greater scale on Croatian soil than in the remaining parts of the European continent. Some regions of Europe experienced even worse moments. Yet even so, central and western Europe began their processes of faster recovery already by the end of the XVII, and especially during the XVIII century. Croatia could not follow them in this.

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2 | Geoffrey Parker – Lesley M. Smith (a cura di) *La crisi generale del XVII secolo*, Genova 1988.

Although there are no specialist works in our historical science of an interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary type that could thoroughly substantiate the reasons for Croatia's backwardness and inability to recover from crises, on this occasion I mention the recent study of prof. Vladimir Stipetić, an economic specialist with an accentuated historiographical sensibility.<sup>3</sup> Relying on the theses of the renowned world economist Angus Maddison, Stipetić elaborated on the relation between population and the gross domestic product of Croatia in the long period between 1500 and 1913. According to his research, from 1500 to 1700, Croatia not only lost more than one-fourth of its population, it was also impoverished by almost two-thirds (p. 138). The contributing factors to this were, among other things, the years of the Viennese war (during which a third of Slavonian villages became deserted, while the rest suffered from the pillaging of armies), the stagnation and decay of Venice and its capital, as well as the dramatic loss of the economic potential of the republic of Dubrovnik (p. 147). Following Maddison's model of research and adding his own, in comparing Croatia and Europe, Stipetić has produced a reliable, but also upsetting picture of the backwardness of the Croatian ethnic area. It is worth citing the following paragraph:

'The figures of Maddison's research show a strong contrast in the economic performances of Croatia and other countries. Austria, France and all the Scandinavian countries increased their gross domestic production (BDP) per person during these two centuries – between 1500 and 1700 (Austria by 40%, France by 36%, England by 75%, Denmark and Switzerland by 41%, etc!). Mediterranean Europe had a slower growth – Italy stagnated in 1700 to the level reached in 1500, while Spain increased its BDP per person by 29% – more slowly than other west European countries, in spite of its huge colonial empire. Croatia, one of the European countries for which we have figures registered an economic decline, seeing as it had a BDP per person 5,5% lower in 1700 than in 1500. Croatia in 1700 has the lowest BDP per person of all the countries (...)'(p. 154).

Croatia did not have at its disposal the productive, financial, educational, human and other potential, and it did not control its own political destiny, so it could not follow the trends of European recovery from crises. It shared in many respects the fate of Europe, but not the ability of economic and social recovery. It is in this sense that one should examine the thesis of the Croatian European paradox, embodied in the 'integrative disintegration' which the Croatian area experienced in the XVI and XVII centuries.

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3 | Vladimir Stipetić, Stanovništvo i bruto domaći proizvod Hrvatske (1500-1913) u kontekstu najnovijeg rada Angusa Maddisona, *Anali Zavoda za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku*, XLI, 2003, 91-156.

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## **Europski paradoks Hrvatske: integracijska „dezintegracija“ 16. i 17. stoljeća**

Ovo je izlaganje djelomično rezultat arhivskog proučavanja, djelomično pak erudicijskoga poznavanja povijesne literature o Hrvatskoj, ali i one, u prvome redu, francuske i talijanske koja raspravlja o današnjem političkom imaginariju „domišljanja“ Europe 21. stoljeća, dakako s retrospektivnim pogledom u epohe koje mu prethode. (Mislim pritom na monografske studije objelodanjene u dobro osmišljenoj seriji Jacquesa Le Goffa *Faire l'Europe*, koja već desetak godina potiče povjesničare diljem Europe na preispitivanje povijesne zbilje i konstruiranje integracijskih silnica unutar vječno razmravljenog i sukobljenog *Staroga kontinenta*.)

Jedan od mogućih načina hrvatskog uključivanja u taj nakladnički – a samim tim i znanstveni, kulturni, gospodarski, svakako i politički – pothvat predstavljala bi posebna studija o kompleksnim hrvatskim posebnostima o težnji da svoje *regionalne* dijelove održi utjelovljene u političkoj, napose kršćanskoj sferi europskoga Zapada. Važan fragment hrvatskog *Faire l'Europe* predstavljaju dramatična zbivanja u 16. i 17. stoljeću kada se hrvatsko političko i etnokulturno biće našlo

u povijesnome paradoksu: političku i teritorijalnu *dezintegraciju* – svedenu na tragične „ostatke ostataka“ – istodobno su obilježavala snažna integracijska nastojanja, koja su hrvatski etnički prostor trajno poistovjetila s europskim, napose onim zapadnoga kulturnoga kruga.

U referatu su ocrtane i hrvatske pokrajinske posebnosti, ali i njihova djelomična prožimanja.