

FROM ENCOURAGEMENT TO CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENED ABSOLUTIST REFORMS: NIKOLA ŠKRLEC LOMNIČKI AND HIS VIEWS ON THE REFORM OF LOCAL ADMINISTRATION IN THE HABSBURG MONARCHY *

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In this paper, the example of Nikola Škrlec Lomnički (1729 – 1799), a distinguished legal expert and public servant in Croatia during the era of enlightened absolutism, is used to posit that the dissemination of knowledge and ideas was not a linear progression, flowing solely from top to bottom. Rather, the experience of living and working within a specific political milieu significantly impacted political choices made by premodern public servants. Škrlec's involvement in local administration and his writings directed towards higher authorities underscore that the introduction of progressive changes necessitated a confluence of both contemporary intellectual currents and influence from "below". Such reforms needed to be firmly grounded in changes that were practicably feasible within a specific local political and social context. For understanding political history, resistance to change emerges as being equally valuable a phenomenon as alignment with enlightened ideas.

Keywords: Enlightened Absolutism, 18th century, Habsburg Monarchy, Croatian history, Nikola Škrlec Lomnički

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Introduction

Enlightened absolutism in the Habsburg Monarchy during the second half of the 18th century was significantly characterised by changes in administrative structure and the perception of public authority. With the establishment of the ruler's sovereignty, there emerged an imperative of state integration and the development of a stable public administration. This transformation positioned the abstract power of the state as the decisive initiator of progress. Internal governance saw the establishment of a clear hierarchy, standardisation of administrative procedures, and the laying of foundations for later specialisation and professionalisation of administrative activities.

These reforms had a notable impact on local administration as well, particularly on the estate-based structures within local governance in the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia. Reforms in state administration at the local level, carried out intensively during that period, necessitated the coexistence of new institutions and the administrative structures of the *ancien régime*. The nobility continued to play a substantial role in local governance and served as intermediaries, while methods of political and administrative leadership, the selection and behaviour of those in power, and the conception of rights and obligations in public service underwent significant changes. Within this period, nobility in public service became officials serving the ruler, the state, and the 'common good' showcasing a notable interplay between 'traditional' and 'new' practices and values. Habsburg rulers endeavoured to foster the development of a new type of public servant, qualified to respond to the demands of a developing state. Higher education became more focused on the fresh requirements of public service, leading to the educational strategies of the nobility exerting an increasing influence on individual career paths. Moreover, nobles pursuing public service careers needed to be receptive to reforms and loyal to the Court's interests.

By utilizing the example of Nikola Škrlec Lomnički (1729 – 1799), a prominent legal expert and public servant in Croatia during the era of enlightened absolutism,¹ this paper aims to illustrate how the careers of educated nobles, who also demonstrated a readiness to implement enlightened ideas in the

¹ Škrlec's life and work are best presented in four volumes published by Eugen Pusić et al., ed., *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički 1729-1799*. Vol. I-IV (Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet, HAZU, Hrvatski državni arhiv, Pravni fakultet, 1999-2007). In this paper, where sources for Škrlec's career are not specifically indicated, reference is to the data provided in these volumes. Some aspects of Škrlec's work biography, observed within the context of the development of public service in the 18th century, have been published in Ivana Horbec, "Javni službenik prosvijećenoga apsolutizma Nikola Škrlec Lomnički (1729. – 1799.)", *Ljudi 18. stoljeća na hrvatskom prostoru. Od plemića i crkvenih dostojanstvenika do težaka i ribara*, ed. Lovorka Čoralčić et al. (Zagreb:

local administration of the Habsburg Monarchy, could evolve. Although the Viennese court relied heavily upon him for local administration in the late 18th century Croatia, in his career Škrlec was not solely marked by obedient adherence to central authority. It will be argued that Škrlec's experience reveals that the transfer of knowledge and ideas was not a linear process, flowing solely from top to bottom. Instead, the experience of working within a specific political environment regarding the necessity of upholding tradition significantly influenced the political decisions of public servants.

Education of a Public Servant: Enlightened Standards

During the evolution of proto-modern states, the education of public servants played an indispensable role. It went beyond mere expressions of humanitarian concern for subjects, serving as a tool for their political and social conditioning. This was especially crucial for future public servants tasked with implementing enlightened absolutist ideas at the local level. In the latter half of the 18th century, a comprehensive reform of the educational system was undertaken within the Habsburg Monarchy. This reform initiative commenced at prominent educational institutions in Vienna – the university and noble academies – and subsequently extended to other higher learning establishments across the Monarchy.²

According to Johann Ignaz Felbinger (1724 – 1788), a principal figure in the educational reform within the Monarchy, the objective of state education was to “shape individuals to God’s honour, as instruments of His celestial will, capable members of His Church, loyal subjects to the ruler, useful citizens to the states, inheritors of paradise, and recipients of enduring happiness”.³ In this context, the concept of “wise governance” (*Gute Polizei*) gained significant traction. As the network of public institutions grew, this concept expanded beyond the ruler and his closest advisors to encompass local public

Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2016), 291-299. In addition to existing literature, this paper is based on new archival sources that have not yet been utilized in Croatian historiography.

² Gerald Grimm, *Die Schulreform Maria Theresias 1747-1775. Das österreichische Gymnasium zwischen Standesschule und allgemeinbildender Lehranstalt im Spannungsfeld von Ordenschulwesen, thesianischen Reformabsolutismus und Aufklärungspädagogik* (Peter Lang, 1987); Wolfram Fischer and Peter Lundgreen, “The Recruitment and Training of Administrative and Technical Personell”, in *The Formation of National States in Western Europe*, ed. Charles Tilly (Princeton University Press, 1975), 456-561.

³ Quoted according to Grimm, *Die Schulreform Maria Theresias*, 105 (translated from German).

servants. This notion underlined the moral components that legitimized state authority.⁴

To secure the loyalty and astute counsel of public officials well-versed in local politics, the Viennese court allocated substantial resources to the education of the nobility. A trend emerged within the Habsburg Monarchy wherein the state took on the responsibility for educating prospective public servants.⁵ In addition to emphasising the intrinsic value of education, Habsburg rulers encouraged the acquisition of ‘useful’ sciences for public administration, encompassing foreign languages, law, applied mathematics, engineering, history, geography and medical sciences, among others. During this period, legal science emerged as a paramount discipline for those seeking to enter public service. Law became significantly intertwined with politics and focused extensively on administrative and constitutional issues. Public law (*ius publicum*) rose to prominence within public universities, concentrating on matters of jurisdiction, the justification of sovereignty, and the organisation of power. It delineated the relationship between rulers and estates, thus laying the groundwork for proto-modern states. Alongside public law, the education of public servants stressed the teaching of political and cameral sciences, which encompassed essential administrative techniques. These sciences amalgamated insights from public law, administrative sciences, economics, and social policies.⁶

The reforming endeavours of Habsburg rulers in the field of education began with the establishment of noble academies. In 1746, Maria Theresa established the inaugural institution of this kind, known as the *Theresianum*, which subsequently served as a model for comparable institutions as the Emmanuel (Savoy) Academy, Löwenburgisches Konvikt, and the *Collegium Theresianum* in Vác).⁷ The Law Faculty in Vienna also underwent reform, serving

⁴ On the significance of this learning for the development of proto-modern states cf. Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State. Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1983); Andrea Iseli, *Gute Polizey. Öffentliche Ordnung in der Frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Eugen Ulmer, 2009), 115-131; Andre Wakefield, *The Disordered Police State: German Cameralism as Science and Practice* (Chicago University Press, 2009).

⁵ Olga Khavanova, “Official Policies and Parental Strategies of Educating Hungarian Noblemen in the Age of Maria Theresa”, in *Adelige Ausbildung. Die Herausforderung der Aufklärung und die Folgen*, ed. Ivo Cerman and Lubos Velek (München: Martin Meidenbauer, 2006), 95-116.

⁶ Cf. Ivana Horbec, “Lessons in “Good Policy” for the King’s Servants: Political and Cameral Studies in Croatia (1769-1776)”, *Povijesni prilozi* 54, no. 54 (2018), 239-256 and the literature cited there.

⁷ On early modern noble academies cf. Norbert Conrads, *Ritterakademien der frühen Neuzeit. Bildung als Standesprivileg im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982). On *Theresianum* and other noble academies in the Habsburg Monarchy cf.

as a prototype for analogous faculties across the Monarchy. Teaching centred on the concept of *Majestätsrecht*, educating students about the advantages of state power and the inviolability of sovereign authority.⁸ Alongside these reforms, the Court in Vienna sought to stimulate the nobility's pursuit of education by awarding scholarships. These scholarships were chiefly directed at the nobility in the Hungarian part of the Monarchy, encompassing the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia. The rationale was that educating future public servants within the Hungarian Kingdom would sensitize the Hungarian nobility – historically critical of Vienna's policies – to the enlightened reforms advocated by Habsburg rulers.⁹ Hence, education in line with the reform model represented a strategic success for the court, constituting a pivotal investment in enforcing the ruler's decrees.

Among the Croatian-Slavonian nobility, the prospect of education was initially embraced more readily by the magnates. Magnate families possessed both the financial means to pursue extended studies in university towns and moved within social and political circles where such an education was deemed essential for the maintenance of status within the Monarchy. In the latter half of the 18th century, members of prominent magnate families, including the Draškovićeš, Erdödys, and Sermages, attended the noble academy *Theresianum* in Vienna.¹⁰ Nevertheless, available data suggests that very few individuals from the lower or middle Croatian-Slavonian nobility opted for education at the Monarchy's higher educational institutions. Legal education within the Hungarian Kingdom could be pursued at the University of Trnava (later Buda and Pest) as well as at two higher educational institutions established solely through private initiatives: the Legal Academy in Eger (*Institutum Foglarianum*, founded in 1740) and the Law School in Pest

Khavanova, "Official Policies", 95-116 and *Zaslugi otcov i talanty synovej: vengerskie dvorjane v učebnyh zavedenijah monarhii Gabsburgov. 1746-1784* (Sankt-Peterburg: Aleteja, 2006), as well as Zsolt Kökényesi, "A nemesi ifjak minden szükséges tudományra és exercitiumra neveltessenek – Mária Terézia uralkodói imázsa a bécsi nemesi iskolák túkrébe", in *Helytállás. Tanulmányok a XII. Eötvös Konferencia történeti üléséről*, ed. Gábor László and Alexandra Torony (Budapest, 2012), 291-322.

⁸ Karl-Heinz Osterloh, *Joseph von Sonnenfels und die österreichische Reformbewegung im Zeitalter des aufgeklärten Absolutismus. Eine Studie zum Zusammenhang von Kameralwissenschaft und Verwaltungspraxis* (Lübeck – Hamburg: Matthiesen Verlag, 1970), 22.

⁹ Cf. Ivana Horbec, "The 'Quiet Force': the role of legal education in the disciplining of the Hungarian and Croatian nobility in the 1760s", *Povijesni prilozi* 53, no. 53 (2017), 81-108.

¹⁰ The names of the students of the *Theresianum* are published in Max von Gemmel-Flischbach, *Album der K. K. Theresianischen Akademie (1746-1880): Verzeichnis sämmtlicher Angehöriger der K. K. Theresianischen Akademie [...]* (Wien, 1913).

(founded in 1756). However, these schools enrolled only a few students annually.¹¹ Young nobles from Croatia-Slavonia predominantly pursued studies in Graz or Vienna, where only three to four students from Croatia were enrolled annually, primarily in philosophy – a preparatory stage for other studies in theology, medicine, or law.¹² Those aspiring to public service typically attended specific courses at the Faculty of Philosophy. For instance, out of 768 registered students from Croatia at the University of Vienna between 1526 and 1750, only one successfully completed the Law Faculty.¹³ A similar pattern emerged at the Law Faculty of the University of Trnava, where the majority of secular students only completed philosophy studies, and only four students from Croatia were recorded as studying law there until 1777.¹⁴ The scarcity of educated nobles led to any noble with even a modicum of Latin education being regarded as sufficiently learned and qualified for public service.¹⁵

Within this framework, how did Škrlec adapt?

Škrlec hailed from a noteworthy middle-ranking noble family that possessed minor estates near Zagreb, Croatia. His father, Žigmund, and older brother, Petar, held well-regarded positions within the public administration of the Kingdom. Through marriage ties, he was closely connected to the local political elite in Croatia. Although he belonged to the moderately affluent part of the nobility, his family's wealth could not rival that of the magnate families. Notably, Škrlec's educational trajectory significantly diverged from the educational norms observed among the Croatian lower and middle nobility, as previously highlighted. Škrlec's educational journey commenced with his completion of gymnasium education under the guidance of the Jesuits in the

¹¹ Cf. Alajos Degré "Die Einführung der Advokatenprüfung und deren Einfluss auf die Juristenbildung in Ungarn", in *Die Juristische Bildung in der Slowakei und Ungarn bis zum Jahre 1848. Materialien der IX. tschechoslowakisch-ungarischen Rechtshistorikerkonferenz, Smolenice 10.-12. XI. 1966*, ed. Martin Vietor (Bratislava: Slov. ped. nakl., 1968), 218-219.

¹² The data on the students in Vienna were published by Krisztina Kissné Bognár, *Magyarországi diákok a Bécsi tanintézetekben 1526-1789* (Budapest: ELTE Lvt., 2004) and Júlia Varga, *Magyarországi diákok a Habsburg birodalom kisebb egyetemein és akadémiáin 1560-1789* (Budapest: ELTE Lvt., 2004).

¹³ Kissné Bognár, *Magyarországi diákok*.

¹⁴ The list of the students available in Krisztina Bognár, József Mihály Kiss and Júlia Varga, *A Nagyszombati Egyetem fokozatot szerzett hallgatói 1635-1777* (Budapest: ELTE Lvt., 2002).

¹⁵ For the Hungarian nobility in general cf. István György Tóth, "Der wechselnde Spielraum des ungarischen Adels im 17/18 Jahrhundert", in *Ständefreiheit und Staatsgestaltung in Ostmitteleuropa. Übernationale Gemeinsamkeiten in der politischen Kultur vom 16.-18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Joachim Bahlcke et al. (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 1996), 154. Cf. also the account of Hungarian Court Chancellery on the state of the public service in the Croatian cities in the State Archives of the Hungarian National Archives in Budapest (thereinafter: MNL OL), A1, 1768/610.

Hungarian town of Kőszeg, and later, under the Piarists in Pest. Subsequently, he successfully concluded his philosophy studies at the University of Vienna in 1749. Over the subsequent two years, he pursued law studies in Bologna, and then from 1751 to 1753, he studied Hungarian *ius patriae* at the Legal Academy in Eger. Throughout his education, he excelled in Latin, Hungarian, German, French, and Italian languages. In this regard, Škrlec greatly surpassed his fellow nobles in the Croatian public administration. He was among the few individuals who meticulously prepared for his future career, a decade or two before the higher education reforms relevant to the local administration of the Monarchy were even instituted. This educational divergence can be attributed not only to his father, Žigmund, who designated a significant portion of his estate for his children's education, but also to the pivotal influence of Škrlec's mentor, Baltazar Adam Krčelić (1715 – 1778). A priest and polymath, Krčelić was among the preeminent intellectuals of that period in Croatia, and tailored Škrlec's education with the explicit aim of equipping him with knowledge and skills befitting a future enlightened official.¹⁶ This educational strategy was rooted in Krčelić's profound critique of the state of public administration prevalent in Croatia at that time. On one occasion, Krčelić wrote:

We have nourished ourselves with metaphysical trivia, while even thinking about sciences of state, politics, military affairs, economics, and public law was forbidden. It was said that these were heretical matters. This holds true for our times as well. Knowing ordinary grammar was sufficient to speak, argue, and yell about matters we did not comprehend. Moreover, many believed that the essence and value of virtue lay in cunning, such that they would not hesitate to openly boast about deceiving others, taking pride in their malicious and shameful deeds. This is the fruit of scholastic sophistry. We should not appoint as a horseman someone who does not know horses, nor as a shepherd someone who does not know sheep, nor as a vineyard keeper someone who has never seen a vine, yet we expect that we appoint the best rulers from those who have never engaged in those sciences that alone teach us how to govern people and carry out public services.¹⁷

¹⁶ On Škrlec's education and Krčelić's role in the education of Croatian nobility cf. the works of Teodora Šek Brnardić, "Formiranje učenih državnih činovnika: braća Petar (1727-1763) i Nikola Škrlec (1729-1799)", in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. III, 61-76, and *Svijet Baltazara Adama Krčelića. Obrazovanje na razmeđu tridentskoga katolicizma i katoličkoga prosvjetiteljstva* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2009).

¹⁷ Quoted according to the Croatian translation of the Latin original in Milivoj Maurović, "Notitia de praecipuis officiis regnorum Croatiae, Slavoniae et Dalmatiae. Kritičke skice iz XVIII. stoljeća o hrvatskoj upravi", u *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički 1729-1799*, vol. III, 829.

Precisely these profound thoughts, which resonated strongly with enlightened thinking prevalent among Habsburg rulers, constitute the bedrock upon which Škrlec embarked on his education. This foundation would go on to significantly mould his trajectory as a dedicated and enlightened public servant.

Career of an Enlightened Public Servant

Initially, Škrlec's education abroad did not necessarily provide an immediate boost to his career. Instead, it seems his career gained momentum through his origins, notably his father's prior military and civil service, and his family's marriage ties.¹⁸ In the mid-18th century, higher education was not a prerequisite for those pursuing public service in Croatia. A limited number of extant petitions from Croatian nobility during this period reveal that securing public office was primarily dependent on descent from ancient noble families and their loyal service to the Habsburg dynasty. Personal experience and education were considered secondary considerations.¹⁹ This practice likely originated from the intrinsic bond between noble status and public duty: the nobility regarded it as both their obligation and honour to serve the king and homeland through both sword and quill, thereby asserting their entitlement to political participation.

However, commencing from the 1750s, possibly correlated with educational reforms across the Monarchy, a growing number of individuals began to underscore their own practical experience and knowledge in matters of public administration. Škrlec emerged as a trailblazer in his generation of public servants. Reflecting on his own experiences, documented during his years as a student in Vienna, Škrlec found this transition to be challenging: "Indeed, it is difficult due to the risks and expenses; education abroad has a bad reputation, including the potentially corrupting influence on youngsters". Notwithstanding these difficulties, Škrlec advocated for young individuals to tread this path, as he believed "wisdom could counterbalance risks and negative influences".²⁰ In strong accordance with the aforementioned criticisms of

¹⁸ Škrlec's sisters Ana Marija and Cecilija were married to Josip Raffay, a high official in the Zagreb County, and Antun Bedeković, an assessor of the Royal Judicial Court. Škrlec himself married Cecilija, a daughter of the deputy ban of Croatia Ivan Rauch.

¹⁹ Cf. the propositions of the Hungarian Court, MNL OL, A1, 1731/32, 1740/4, 1740/15 and 1745/46.

²⁰ Nikola Škrlec, "Četvrti dijalog. Za politiku, a potom o domovinskoj politici ili Kako se živi u Hrvatskoj". Translated by Neven Jovanović and published in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički 1729-1799*, vol. I, 37.

the Croatian public service expressed by his mentor Krčelić, Škrlec conveyed to his fellow students:

We are met with challenges and exertion when it comes to those who have decided to engage in state affairs, yet do not wish to adhere to the moral principles that guide everyone else. Dissatisfied glances from our compatriots have led us to stand out by being [i. e. studying] abroad, in a place so distinct, perhaps even unprecedented, where we spent our youth. Let us add to this our love for culture and science, which is uncommon for our people, and our deviation from the unhealthy attitudes of the masses. [...] Becoming detested by our compatriots for this reason, we nevertheless aspire to enter the governmental structure, to gain honour, and to lead a life free from restlessness. Thus, considering all of this, such an undertaking might surpass human capabilities, and it is ambitious merely to desire it. However, let us not falter, we must endeavour in all possible ways to achieve, in part at least, what we cannot achieve in whole. Common people, driven by blind instincts and the whims of fate, enter state affairs and defend themselves with their flaws and the unwholesomeness of the masses. Will we, who reach our destination through a different path, guided by the most honest intentions, not be able to defend ourselves with rationality and timely planning?²¹

Seeking a career as a public servant within the Kingdom of Hungary, for whose laws and constitution he was particularly educated, Škrlec, unlike the generation of his father who immediately gained high positions in the civil service according to their social status, had to start his career with an apprenticeship, a practice that only became common for members of the middle and higher nobility from the 1770s onwards. Škrlec's experience in administration began with private engagement as an estate manager in Gödölő near Budapest, on the estate of the then President of the Hungarian Chamber, Count Antal Grassalkovich, who was very influential at the Viennese court as an advisor on Hungarian politics. With this experience, Škrlec began his career in the administration of the Croatian-Slavonian Kingdom. From 1754 to 1758, he held the position of secretary of the Royal Judicial Court, and from 1758 to 1763, he was the president of that Court. From 1755 to 1761, Škrlec served as the secretary of the Kingdom's Conferences – a council that met under the presidency of the Croatian-Slavonian Ban and took care of the political affairs in the Kingdom while Croatian Parliament was not in session. During that time, he transitioned to higher positions in the Croatian administration: from

²¹ Idem, 19, 23.

1761 to 1763, he was the chief treasurer of the Kingdom, from 1763 a protonotary, and assessor of the Ban's Court.²²

In 1767, the administrative reforms of the Habsburgs resulted in the establishment of the Croatian Royal Council, the first permanent institution that took over executive tasks in the Kingdom from the Croatian Parliament.²³ By the decision of Maria Theresa, Škrlec became an advisor there and the director of the Council's Chancellery. When the Council was abolished in 1779, and all its responsibilities were transferred to the Hungarian Lieutenancy Council in Bratislava, Škrlec was chosen among a few advisors of the abolished Council to be transferred to the Hungarian Lieutenancy Council.²⁴ In 1782, he returned to Croatia as the Supreme Count of the Zagreb County, appointed by Joseph II, and he held that position until 1785, when counties were abolished due to the Josephine reforms. He resumed his role during the reigns of Leopold II and Francis II (I) from 1790 until his death in 1799.

While Škrlec's public roles indeed positioned him as one of the most diligent advocates of enlightened absolutism in 18th-century Croatia, his execution of these responsibilities transcended the role of a mere executor of Viennese court mandates. Škrlec's public engagements were profoundly anchored in his sustained involvement with the European legal, administrative and economic literature circulating among the intellectuals of his era. Acknowledging that comprehending the mechanisms of public administration mandates a profound grasp of the legal bedrock underpinning each sovereign entity, Škrlec and his brother already collected a diverse corpus of legal manuscripts during their academic years.²⁵ In this context, Škrlec ardently accepted concepts he believed could fortify his homeland's public affairs, adapting them to the specific local milieu.

²² Alongside *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički (1729-1799)* cf. also *Zaključci Hrvatskog sabora*, vol. VII, 115, 325; vol. VIII, 76; Croatian State Archives (thereinafter: HDA), HDA-1, box 49, no. 68 ex 1767.

²³ On the importance of this institution for the history of the Croatian public administration cf. Ivana Horbec, "Kroatischer königlicher Rat (1767-1779). Eine Wende in der Entwicklung des öffentlichen Dienstes in Kroatien", u *Die habsburgische Variante des aufgeklärten Absolutismus. Beiträge zur Mitregenschaft Josephs II, 1765-1780 – A felvilágosult abszolútizmus Habsburg-variánsa. Tanulmányok II. József társulalkodói időszakáról, 1765-1780.* ed. András Forgó and Krisztina Kulcsár (Wien: Institut für ungarische Geschichtsforschung, Balassi Institut, Ungarisches Nationalarchiv, 2018), 137-159.

²⁴ MNL OL, A39, 1779/3943 and 1779/4527; Austrian State Archives, Finanz- und Hofkammerarchiv (thereinafter: ÖStA, FHKA), Ungarisches Kamerale, Fasz. r. No. 148/1, 87 ex Aug 1779, fol. 442-448.

²⁵ Shek Brnardić, "Formiranje", 72; Horbec, "Javni službenici", 295.

Škrlec's ascension in influence in local politics picked up with the appointment of Count Ferenc Nádasdy as the Ban of Croatia-Slavonia in 1756. Nádasdy's investiture followed a tumultuous period in the Kingdom, prompting the Court of Vienna to send Nádasdy to Croatia with the task of redressing the perceived 'chaos' and 'oligarchy' within the Croatian administration, particularly pertaining to financial matters and the execution of royal decrees. Škrlec emerged as Nádasdy's principal counsellor, receiving the protection of his patronage. At that time, Škrlec authored the *Notitiae de praecipuis officiis Regnorum Dalmatiae, Croatiae et Sclavoniae* for his benefactor.²⁶ This work, conceived as a manual of the governance in Croatia-Slavonia, provided the history of Croatian public offices, while concurrently spotlighting the manifold inadequacies afflicting the Kingdom's administration at the time, especially regarding the financial operations and the networking of Croatian nobility.

While engaged in his work, Škrlec authored numerous proposals aimed at enhancing the Croatian and Hungarian public service. Despite many of his proposals not being accepted, Škrlec can be counted among the progressive minds of the 18th century. As the chief treasurer of the Kingdom, he devised a reform to increase the salaries of public officials, which was considered necessary – in line with the thinking of the Viennese Court at the time – to attract less wealthy but educated and capable nobles to public service.²⁷ As a protonotary, and later as the Chancellery director of the Croatian Royal Council, Škrlec particularly advocated the organisation of archives and records: introducing order and clarity into the previous work was considered foundational for devising progressive changes and was greatly emphasized in the higher schools of the Monarchy. Due to his intensive engagement in public affairs, Škrlec was often referred to as the initiator and *spiritus movens* of the establishment of the Croatian Royal Council in 1767, one of the significant Habsburg reforms in Croatia that established governance in the Kingdom following the model of other provinces of the monarchy and European states. However, records of the Council's establishment do not reveal that Škrlec played a major role in it, or even that he was known to the advisors at the Court at the time.²⁸ Nonetheless, Škrlec's participation in the Council afforded him, alongside theoretical knowledge, practical understanding of a wide range of public affairs as well,

²⁶ The text of *Notitiae* was translated to Croatian and published by Zlatko Herkov, "O rukopisu 'Notitiae de praecipuis officiis Regnorum Dalmatiae, Croatiae et Sclavoniae': je li Nikola Škrlec autor toga rukopisa?", *Rad JAZU* 405 (1984), 119-193.

²⁷ Baltazar Adam Krčelić, *Annuae ili historija 1748-1767*. Translated to Croatian by Veljko Gortan (Zagreb: JAZU, 1952), 423.

²⁸ The proposition for the establishment of the Council was made by baron Ferenc Koller. Cf. MNL OL A1, 1767/182. For Škrlec's appointment as a councillor cf. MNL OL, A1, 1767/315.

in which he would particularly stand out with his proposals around 1790, as will be discussed later.

Because of his commitment and readiness to progressively influence the implementation of changes at the local level, Škrlec perfectly embodied the Habsburg 'ideal' type of public servant: he was skilled, had legal knowledge, was willing to prioritize the common good over his own, was diligent in service, and – as was believed at the time – loyal to the ruler's interests. Until the 1790s, he stood clearly in opposition to the majority of Croatian-Slavonian nobility gathered at the Parliament, which resisted almost every intervention by Habsburg kings in the internal affairs of their Kingdom.²⁹ After the educational reforms in Hungarian Kingdom (and Croatia-Slavonia) carried out in 1776 and 1777 through the *Ratio Educationis*,³⁰ Škrlec was appointed by Maria Theresa the chief superintendent of education for the Zagreb School District, as he was recommended to her "for his special zeal in improving Our exalted service and for his particularly eager commitment to the public good".³¹ Two years later, when the Croatian Royal Council was abolished, due to the same characteristics Škrlec was chosen to continue his career in administrative affairs in the Hungarian Lieutenancy Council in Bratislava.³² During the three years he served as an advisor there, Škrlec was not merely a representative of the Croatian-Slavonian estates in this institution, but also extensively dealt with general matters important for the Kingdom of Hungary as a whole: economic, public health, financial, and legal affairs.³³

Therefore, it is not surprising that soon after coming to power, Joseph II decided to reward Škrlec with the position of the Supreme Count of the Zagreb County, which was usually reserved for magnates. This position was extremely important for Habsburg authority in Croatia-Slavonia, as in this county were located the estates of the majority of politically active nobles. For Škrlec, this must have been the pinnacle of his career; however, it is precisely with the Josephine reforms that his attitude towards the legitimate scope of royal authority in Croatia during the era of enlightened absolutism began to change.

²⁹ For the standpoint of the Croatian estates regarding Habsburg reforms in Croatia cf. *Zaključci Hrvatskog sabora*, vols. VII-IX.

³⁰ *Ratio educationis totiusque rei literariae per Regnum Hungariae et provincias eidem annexas* (1777).

³¹ "Benignum mandatam regium de systemate studiorum", translated to Croatian by Neven Jovanović and published in *Pravni Fakultet u Zagrebu. Prilozi za povijest fakulteta*, ed. Željko Pavić et al., vol. I (Zagreb, 1996), 15-16.

³² Alongside Count Antal Batthyány, as the only one from the middle nobility rank. ÖStA, FHKA, Ungarisches Kamerale, Fasz. r. Nr. 148/1, 87 ex Aug 1779, fol. 442-448.

³³ Proposals Škrlec made while working in the Hungarian Lieutenancy Council are kept in MNL OL, C43, box 516.

Turning the Record: Critiques of Josephine Absolutism

While Škrlec greatly supported the efforts of the Habsburg rulers to implement enlightened reforms in Croatia, he also considered the uncompromising Josephinian reforms to be a regression in the necessary collaboration between the ruler and the estates in the local government. This change in his thinking is perhaps best illustrated by his two speeches given on the occasions of his inauguration as the Supreme Count of the Zagreb County. One speech was delivered in 1782, amidst a positive reformist atmosphere, and the other in 1790, following the experience with Josephinian reforms in Croatia-Slavonia (and the then Hungarian Kingdom as a whole).³⁴ In his first speech from 1782, Škrlec expressed gratitude to both the ruler and the royal commissioners who inaugurated him, as well as to the entire nobility of the Zagreb County. While praising Joseph II, Škrlec's hopes for the fulfilment his office were directed towards the nobility of the Zagreb County as a collective body, highlighting their important role in the success of his administration of the County. Škrlec, while embellishing his speech, then stated:

If I think of the most splendid ruler who governs us [i. e. Joseph II], who honoured and graced me with this office: the brilliance of his greatness overwhelms the capacities of my mind to the extent that I feel I am losing not only all my eloquence but even the words with which I could express not so much gratitude, but the absolute dedication of my strengths and abilities placed in His service [...] All the services I have carried out, as far as the insignificance of my abilities allowed, when compared with the magnificence of the award [i. e. office] bestowed on me, are so small that I must attribute this event solely to the pure benevolence of the most splendid one [...] I know that authorities are not established to rule, but to serve the betterment of those they lead".³⁵

Only three years after this speech, in 1785, Joseph II abolished all counties in the Kingdom of Hungary, including Croatia-Slavonia, and established districts headed by the royal commissioners. Škrlec was one of the many Hungarian supreme counts who refused to become a commissioner at that time,

³⁴ Both speeches could be found in the collected issue of *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, translated to Croatian by Neven Jovanović: "Govor presvjetlog gospodina Nikole Škrleca od Lomnice [...] izrečen prilikom instalacije, dana 29. rujna 1782.", in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. II, 609-619; "Obraćanje velikog župana Zagrebačke županije kad je, po ponovnom uvođenju zakonitog sustava, usklađivao magistrat sa zakonom, i poticao skup na ojačavanje ustava Ugarskog Krajevstva. 15. travnja 1790.", in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. I, 49-63.

³⁵ Škrlec, "Govor", pp. 609, 611 and 615. Translated to English from the Croatian translation by the author.

considering this function to be in conflict with Hungarian law.³⁶ His resistance to this reform is clearly evident in his speech following his re-inauguration as the Supreme Count in 1790, after the Josephinian reforms were repealed, and Škrlec was confirmed in his position by the new ruler, Leopold II:

Is there anyone who does not know that the basis of our system lies in the fact that the ruler possesses only executive power, while legislative power is shared with the estates of the Kingdom, by the very nature of things? Whoever is not aware that, by its very nature, power becomes arbitrary when executive powers are combined with legislative ones, that is, when laws can be enacted by those who interpret them as they please, who violate them at their will, who finally enforce them?³⁷

In so saying, Škrlec does not solely blame Habsburg rulers for absolutism, but also the Croatian-Slavonian estates for allowing absolutist ruling:

[...] we ourselves have abandoned the care of the state. Namely, it has become customary to seek advancements in our own honours and careers, to appear at ceremonial occasions of installations and restorations, or mostly at the very next day of the session [i. e. of the estate assemblies], leaving the burden of work to the magistrate himself, [...] who cannot fight the usurpations of executive power when lacking the support of the estates”.³⁸

In the same year, 1790, the Hungarian Diet was being prepared – the first Diet after 1764, and it marked the ‘return to constitutionalism’ in the minds of Hungarian and Croatian nobility. Judging by the preserved manuscripts, Škrlec was very active in writing proposals for this Diet, which were submitted by the Croatian-Slavonian estates.³⁹ Many of these proposals were related to economic reforms in the Kingdom of Hungary, reflecting his previous engagement in the Croatian Royal and Hungarian Lieutenancy Councils. As a member of the Trade Commission of the Hungarian Diet, Škrlec prepared the document *Status actualis oeconomiae publicae*, which essentially corresponds

³⁶ For the resistance of Hungarian and Croatian counties against Josephine reforms cf. Lajos Hajdú, *II. József igazgatási reformjai Magyarországon* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982), 103ff; Horst Haselsteiner, *Joseph II. und die Komitate Ungarns. Herrscherrecht und ständischer Konstitutionalismus* (Wien: Böhlau, 1983), Éva Balázs, *Hungary and the Habsburgs 1765-1800. An Experiment in Enlightened Absolutism* (Budapest: CEU Press, 1997), 236-246, Beales, *Joseph II. Vol. II: Against the World 1780-1790* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 480-487.

³⁷ Škrlec, “Obračanje”, 51, 53. Translated to English from the Croatian translation by the author.

³⁸ *Idem*, 55.

³⁹ Many of Škrlec’s proposals were published in collected works *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*. Cf. also *Zaključci hrvatskog sabora*, vol, IX, 33-85.

to the contemporary concepts of political science (*Staatenkunde*): it describes the climate and geographical features of Hungarian Kingdom as a whole, its raw materials, transportation characteristics, the role of legislation in trade development, population density and work habits, occupations of the people, the state of agriculture and manufactories, as well as customs of the people.⁴⁰ Škrlec also drafted his own proposal for the future economic activity of the Kingdom of Hungary as a whole.⁴¹ Consistent with his earlier views, Škrlec did not necessarily seek interventions from the Court in Vienna, but rather action from the local nobility. This stance is further emphasized in his other writings, in which he suggested a better organisation for the Hungarian Lieutenantcy Council and the Hungarian Diet in the future,⁴² and also proposed the establishment of a “Hungarian Senate” as an intermediary between royal executive power and the estates.⁴³ Such a solution was novel for the Monarchy, but not for foreign intellectual elites.⁴⁴

At the time, the Viennese court did not view Škrlec’s proposals favourably. Almost all of them were rejected, based on the propositions of Count Ferenc Balassa.⁴⁵ Balassa’s experience in the Croatian administration was based on his long-standing position as the Supreme Count of the Srijem County and the ‘Josephine’ Croatian-Slavonian Ban, and also as the Commissioner of the Zagreb District during the Josephinian reforms from 1785 to 1790 – exactly the function Škrlec had refused. With the abolishment of Joseph II’s reforms in 1790, Balassa was expelled from Zagreb.⁴⁶

Škrlec’s earlier mentioned speech given at the time of his re-inauguration as the Supreme Count of the Zagreb County in 1790 was printed and came to be circulated through the political elite in Vienna. Balassa was the one who

⁴⁰ Škrlec, “Sadašnje stanje javnog gospodarstva, obrta i manufaktura, carine, javnih zaklada i trgovine”, transl. by Neven Jovanović, in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. IV, 381ff.

⁴¹ Škrlec, “Proiectum legum motivatum in Objecto Oeconomiae Publicae et Commercii perferendarum”, in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. I, 90-417. On Škrlec’s economic thought cf. Vladimir Stipetić, “Agrarno-ekonomski pogledi Nikole Škrleca Lomničkog”, in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. II, 151-168.

⁴² Škrlec, “Ideae De organizanda Regni Diaeta” and “Ideae Circa regulandam Consilii manipulationem”, in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. II, 370-527.

⁴³ Škrlec, „Pia desideria”, in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički*, vol. III, 187-213.

⁴⁴ Montesquieu also emphasized the necessity of the ‘guarantee of laws’ in the European monarchies. Cf. Charles Louis Montesquieu, *O duhu zakona*. Translated by Marija Spajić, vol. I (Zagreb: Demetra, 2003), 24.

⁴⁵ Austrian State Archives, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchive (thereinafter: ÖStA, HHStA), Länderabteilungen, Ungarische Akten, Kart. 409, Konv. A.

⁴⁶ For the short biography of Balassa and his reception in Croatia cf. Stjepan Antoljak, “Franjo Balassa de Gyarmath”, in *Hrvatski biografski leksikon*, vol. I, 382-383.

appealed to the new ruler, Leopold II, to react. Balassa's appeal reveals his animosity to Škrlec, who during Balassa's time as Ban of Croatia-Slavonia was one of the more vocal figures in the opposition. Balassa described Škrlec and his political activities around 1790 in the following words:

Such a man, whose ancestors were elevated to nobility first under Emperor Ferdinand III, who was appointed by the highest grace from a feudal fiscal of the late Count Grassalkovich to the honour of a royal councillor, to the Supreme Count, and to the vice-president of the Appeal court, who himself proposed that Croatian Council, and became the director of the chancellery due to his proposal, now in his mentioned speech speaks so fervently and vehemently against these reforms and criticizes [them]. This man, who received the directorship of the schooling system as a reward, and was respected for it, does not shy away from speaking so ill of the educational system. This man, I say, who translated the entire Josephinian legal system from German to Latin for its implementation in the Hungarian Kingdom and adapted it to the country's laws, this man now [...] does not only speak against these ordinances, but also allows his speeches to be printed, guides through this the entire country and provides guidance on how the land and the estates should restrict His Majesty's rights, and aims to draft the Inaugural diploma.⁴⁷ Now, when I thoroughly consider these actions of a man who is the most ungrateful among those greatly rewarded by Joseph II, and who agrees with the others here [i. e. in Croatia], and when I consider the unfavourable consequences caused by such a speech directed to the Estates [...] I find it advisable and necessary to interrupt His Majesty the King with such matters, while also humbly requesting to keep my name in the greatest secrecy.⁴⁸

Škrlec's inaugural speech, then, was not well-received. Similarly, his mentioned proposals for the Hungarian Diet also failed at the Court of Vienna. On the other hand, regardless of Škrlec's stronger stance against royal authority since the late 1780s, his intermediary role between the central and local government cost him his reputation among Croatian intellectuals. This is evident, for example, in the criticism of the Škrlec's role in public administration in Croatia, as expressed by the Croatian poet Tituš Brezovački. In one of his poems that critiqued Habsburg rule in Croatia, Brezovački wrote: "It is to them that Skaliger⁴⁹ would sell us, after betraying his own homeland. Desist,

⁴⁷ The Inaugural diploma in Hungarian law represents an agreement between the king and the estates given during the coronation, through which the king promises the estates their political rights.

⁴⁸ ÖStA, HHStA, Länderabteilungen, Hungarische Akten, Comitalia, Kart. 409, Konv. A, fols 165-169. The text was translated from the original German letter.

⁴⁹ i. e. Škrlec. "Them" refers to Hungarians in the context of the poem.

mad old man, for your misdeeds are too well remembered and known by our unfortunate nation!”⁵⁰ However, regardless of the criticisms, Škrlec’s proposals for the assembly and his published treatises and speeches did indeed – just as Balassa commented – influence the perspectives of Croatian estates and subsequently the political elite.

When Škrlec passed away in 1799, the news resonated throughout the Monarchy. A necrology for Škrlec, published in the periodical *Courier aus Ungarn*⁵¹ is one of the few preserved necrologies for public figures of the 18th century in Croatia (if not only for political figures). It reads as follows:

The body of the now immortalized Supreme Count of the Zagreb County, Mr. Nikola Škrlec von Lomnica, was interred on the evening of January 31st with solemn ceremony in St. Stephen’s Church.⁵² Many thousands of people streamed to the funeral; the streets through which the funeral procession crossed over Harmica (the main square) were covered with planks due to the slippery ice. The bishop of Zagreb⁵³ conducted the funeral ceremonies, as well as the requiem mass on the following day. The entire Cathedral Chapter attended, as well as the deeply saddened widow, numerous relatives and the entire local nobility. The deceased, deserving in every aspect, served the State with glory for 46 years in various highly important offices. As a protonotary of the Kingdom, councillor and a director of the chancellery at the Croatian Council, then as a vice-president of the Royal Court and a Supreme Count, he provided numerous proofs of his eager allegiance to his sovereign, tireless activity, and exceptional skill in managing public affairs. His rare, extensive knowledge, cultivated through constant study, continued even in the last days of his life when his strength was waning. He engaged himself in preparing various manuscripts addressing important political matters. It is strongly hoped that these manuscripts will be published one day. When the physicians announced the impending moment of death to him, he received the news with unwavering courage and serenity which was particularly characteristic of him throughout his life. These excellent qualities render the name of the departed unforgettable. His memory is blessed universally, and his loss is mourned by the entire land.

⁵⁰ Darko Novaković, “Novi rukopis prigodnice *Dalmatiae, Croatiae et Slavoniae trium sororum recursus* iz Hrvatskog državnog arhiva u Zagrebu”, in *Nikola Škrlec Lomnički 1729-1799*, vol. III, 135.

⁵¹ *Courier aus Ungarn*, no. 24, February 23rd 1799, 121-122.

⁵² St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Zagreb.

⁵³ Maksimilian Vrhovac, also one of the eminent politicians who criticized Josephine rule in Croatia after the second part of the 1780s.

Conclusion

During the 18th century, until the 1770s, the majority of the Croatian-Slavonian middle nobility was generally more oriented towards local affairs and politics. They had limited regional mobility and did not invest significantly in their education, nor did they engage in matters that became essential for public service during the Enlightenment period (economy, public education, engineering, healthcare, etc.). For most of the nobility, a military was more desirable than a civilian career. Only with the advancement of reforms in the 1770s and 1780s do we find more members of the Croatian elite who were willing to invest in better education and pursue careers in public service. This is why Croatia-Slavonia was deep into the 18th century considered politically conservative and traditional within the lands of the Habsburg Monarchy.

The example of Nikola Škrlec Lomnički demonstrates that Croatian (low to middle-ranked) nobles could already devise successful educational strategies for achieving careers in the Habsburg Monarchy's public service by the mid-18th century. With his knowledge and zeal, Škrlec embodied the ideal type of public servant in the Monarchy during the era of enlightened absolutism. He was not only educated in foreign languages, political economy, and other disciplines demanded by Habsburg rulers, but also kept up with contemporary scientific knowledge. He was also willing to confront the Croatian-Slavonian estates, promote enlightened ideas he thought were beneficial to the country, and advise the Court of Vienna based on his personal and official experience. By publicly discussing his ideas and writing his works in scholarly Latin, Škrlec effectively conveyed European intellectual ideas to his compatriots working in public service and to other learned individuals.

When Škrlec occupied the pinnacle of the Croatian political elite, traditional models of authority in Croatia-Slavonia were profoundly transformed. Being a symbol of Habsburg rule in Croatia for decades, at the moment when Škrlec renounced all honours at the peak of Joseph II's rule, he also became a symbol of resistance to Habsburg absolutism. Škrlec's experience in local administration and his writings directed towards higher authorities show that beneficial changes had to come from both contemporary intellectual streaming and from "below", and had to be grounded in changes that were indeed feasible to implement in a certain local political and social environment. Resistance to change therefore emerges as valuable as alignment with enlightened ideas.

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