



**Gjorgje Ivanov**

## Re(calling) the future

Gjorgje Ivanov looks at examples of multiethnic, multireligious political units in the Balkans: Ivanov demonstrates that the rule of the Ottoman empire before the birth of the nation state in the 19th century ensured a system of relative peace and stability, that was later surpassed by liberal European concepts of the freedom of the individual.

Today, at the very beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are witnessing unprecedented dynamics: Dynamics with a planetary acceleration of the wealth and military power of a country *leader*. Indeed, we can witness a worldwide process that, in reality, amounts to a technological – information revolution, thus creating global economics and shaping of a new world order. In such a world, the processes of global interdependencies and subnational fragmentation, by and by, seem to transform the structures of national sovereignty and create new supernational political, economical, cultural and criminal structures. With every aspect of the cited process, the state loses a significant part of its sovereignty.

Theory and practice are still adjusting very slowly to this evolving globalization. Authorities of the highest rank in science and politics are obstinately clinging to the dominant western paradigm of a centralized territorial state. The fear of losing the already attained status discards the idea of looking for other alternatives.

This is now in the hands of the alterglobalists, who are still "fermenting", without the possibility of coming to some kind of self–notion, at least for now. Those that are inquisitive in the sphere of science discover an – unfortunately almost forgotten – political tradition and theory that treats these problems of power and legality in a world increasingly characterized by fragmentation and interdependency, in a more appropriate manner.

To be able to conceive all of this, as well as to explain it, we need to go back to that moment in history when nation states were born. During these times, the centripetal socio–economic dynamics could be exposed to criticism without the powerful limitations of the territorial stateliness as an irrefutable and irrevocable reality.

Simply put, we should think of the *postmodern* crisis of the state and society as a character in the mirror of its twin – the early modernism. In this mirror we discover the society of the early modernism that falls apart due to religious wars, socio–economic fragmentation and territorial conquests. The answer of the early modernism of this fall of the *ability to govern* is the absolute concentration of power against all fractions and mediators' forces, in order to

achieve internal stability and external safety (in theory known as the Boduen Model). And as the *state cause* became a theoretical and practical answer to the crisis of the state policy of the early modernism, thus, today, the neoconservatives defend the notion of "more authoritative and more efficient model of government's decision making" (George W Bush's administration being one example) as opposed to the *overstated democracy* in the fragmented postindustrial societies. *More state for more society*: this is the tradition that prevails in the western political stream, and the neoconservatives are convinced that precisely this is the real thing. As opposed to the theory stated above there is a model for a political stabilization via societal self-governing. This is the alternative tradition that opposes the centralized territorial state; it begins with Altuzius and its loyalties but is completely missing in the discussions regarding the future of society and politics in a very complex, globally interdependent and increasingly fragmented world. It is also the alternative political idea that is missing from the projections of the new EU constitution. Due to limitations of space, a more profound elaboration is not possible here. It is worth mentioning however that today, the territory we exist on is reliving a kind of *Ottoman Empire* known as the *milet system*. Let us try and perceive this notion.

Societies in Southeastern Europe are multiethnic as the result of a long period of staying power of the empires on this ground. Antique Macedonia for example stayed in power for centuries; Byzantium stayed in power for a whole millennium; the Ottoman Empire for 500 years. Within the frames of these empires co-existed different ethnic, religious and language groups. These multiethnic empires built complex non-territorial mechanisms thus regulating what nowadays represents a complex interethnic- religious- and language relationship.

So far, the Balkan scholar elite has not expressed any interest in the study of these specific models of accomplishing collective identities in a form of personal autonomies. This is especially true for the *milet system* in the Ottoman Empire. With this study, if nothing more, they would be able to perceive the quint-essence of multiethnicity, the creation of nations and national states on this territory, as well as the problems they are still creating. Here, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards the desire for and the significance of a territorial nation state of a western kind started to solidify. This led to tendencies towards politically and culturally homogeneous societies that marked the beginning not only of the empires' fall but permanent conflicts, wars and sufferings, uprooting and assimilation of people settling this territory, and they are lasting until today.

The Ottoman Turks were Muslims who conquered the greater part of the Near East, North Africa, Greece and Eastern Europe during the XIV and XV century, thus gaining a large number of Jewish and Christian subjects. The empire of the Osmanlies was not a Turkish national state but an Islamic all-inclusive caliphate, which, in accordance with the Sheriate state-legal theory, functioned according to the concept of a religious empire with an absolute lack of a national idea. Hence, all subjects were treated exclusively as members of religious groups but not as members of ethnic communities as well. The Muslims represented equal, unified, and constitutional people, regardless of their ethnic origin.

Today's people from Southeastern Europe, were known as the *milets* during the Ottoman Empire. The term *milet* has a Persian origin, and during its time marked what now, in the Western civilization, is known as *nation* or *people*. It

referred to Christians and Jews as religious communities. A few months after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Osmanlies' Sultan Mehmed II the Conqueror granted large authorizations to the religious leaders in the Christian and the Jewish *milet* in the leadership of their religious communities. It is assumed that the sultan did this to secure the humility of the subjugated who were "people from the book", i.e. those mentioned in the Koran. Other theological and strategic reasons led the Ottomans to allow these minorities not only the freedom to practise their own religion but a broader freedom to self-government regarding the purely internal affairs by special legislatives and courts. For approximately five centuries, between 1456 and the collapse of the Empire in the course of World War I, three nonmuslim minorities had been officially recognized as self-governing communities: the Greek orthodox church, the Armenian orthodox church and the Jews, each of them further subdivided into different local administrative units, usually based on their ethnicity and language. Each *milet* was led by the highest in rank church leader (the two orthodox patriarchs and the chief rabbi respectively). Some other authors like Stephen K. Batalden mention the existence of five *milets*. Apart from the already listed, there was the Roman-Catholic *milet* and the Protestant *milet*.

The most significant *milet* was, of course, the orthodox one named rum or rom *milet*. The term rum *milet*, later known as Rumelia, pointed to the Eastern-Roman i.e. the Byzantine royal origin of that *milet*. The rum *milet* affected the lives of the vast majority of orthodox Christians on the Balkans, as well as of the Arabic and Greek Christians who were under the jurisdiction of the Jerusalem, the Antioch and the Alexandria Patriarchate.

The leader of the rum *milet* was the Constantinople Patriarch who, in return, was responsible before the Islamic rulers for the stability among the orthodox Christians. The patriarch was appointed by a settlement made by the Sultan (berat), whereas, in fact, it was a question of buying the title for 3000 gold coins, which the patriarch was able to retrieve later by imposing taxes on the churches and monasteries. Basically, it was a cause for the rule of corruption and bribery in Rumelia lasting even today on this territory. The various *milets* had separate churches and separate languages for communication. As religious communities the *milets* were under the protection of the Muslim supreme power. It was customary for the *milets* to be able to organize their internal relationships according to their own laws. The members of one *milet* lived in a rather closed off milieu and got married solely to other members of that *milet*.

The most typical feature was that the *milet* had no special territory and was determined only by religious belonging. The members of the *milet* were allowed the freedom to move anywhere in the empire but remained members of their religious community. This explains the vivacity of the ethnic, cultural and religious maps of Ottoman Southeastern Europe then. The lawful tradition and practice of each religious group, especially regarding family status, was respected and fortified throughout the Empire. Still, while the Christian and the Jewish *milets* were free to organize their internal affairs, their relations with the governing Muslims were precisely regulated. Thus for example, the non-Muslims were not allowed to spread their own religion and could only build new churches with the permission of the imperial power. There were limits to the mixed marriages and non-Muslims had to pay special taxes instead of military service. However, within the frames of these limits they enjoyed complete self-governance, obeying their own laws and customs. Their collective freedom to exercise their own religion was guaranteed, along with their own property of churches, monasteries and own schools. This system,

until the XIX century, was basically humane, tolerant of the groups' differences and considerably stable. For almost half a century, the Ottomans ruled an empire as diverse as any other empire in history. Oddly enough, this multireligious, multiethnic and multilanguage society functioned. The Muslims, Christians and Jews practiced their own religion side by side, enriching their separate cultures.

This was not a liberal society because it did not acknowledge all principles of the *individual* freedom of mind. Since every religious community was self-governing, there were no external impediments in establishing self-governing religious principles together with the fortification of their own true faith. From here, there was only very little space, or none at all, for individual subjugation within the frames of one's religious community, and very little freedom to change one's religion. The Muslims however did not attempt to subjugate the Jews and vice versa, they subjugated the heretics within the frames of their own community. Heresy and apostasy were punishable, criminal acts in the Muslim community. Those who did not believe in the church as a mediator between themselves and God were islamised. On this territory these were the Bogumils and the Roma in addition to limitations to the individual freedom of mind in the Jewish and Christian community.

The *millet system* was in fact a federation of theocracies. It was a profoundly conservative and patriarchal society, contrary to the ideas of individual freedom that the European liberals stood in favour of. The different *milets* differed in regards to their religious beliefs. There were long periods during the 500 year history of the *milets* when many liberal reformers in each of the communities put pressure in order to limit the constitutional powers of the leader of the *milet*. During the second half of the XIX century, some of the *milets* accepted the liberal constitutions, basically turning the religious theocracy into a system of liberal-democratic self-governing for the various national groups in the Empire. The liberal reformers wanted the *milets* to be used as basis for a system of federal institutions that provided external protection for the national minorities – limiting the power of the other group over them – while the constitutional citizen and political rights of the individual members were still in power.

In the Ottoman Empire however, significant limitations on the freedom of the individual to doubt or reject the learning of its own religion, existed. The Ottomans accepted the principle of religious tolerance, which amounted to a proof of their willingness for the dominant religion to co-exist with others but neglected the principle of individual freedom of mind.

The Ottoman *milet system* is perhaps the most sophisticated model of non-liberal religious tolerance and variations of this model can be found in many other times and on many other places. It is the kind of system that even today is desired by some non-liberal minorities. This system is usually claimed in the name of tolerance.

And yet, the tolerance that the liberals historically pursued was not such, since these groups do not want the state to respect the individual rights of freedom of speech, freedom to express doubt and reconsideration of its own religious views; what they actually want is power so that they can limit the religious freedom of their members.

It is then insufficient to say that liberals believe in tolerance. What kind of tolerance is that, we are asking. Historically, the liberals believed in a rather

specifically determined tolerance – one that includes the individual freedom of mind and not only the collective conscience. The liberal tolerance protects the rights of the individuals to abandon their group, as well as the right of the groups not to be persecuted by the state. It limits the power of the non-liberal groups to limit the freedom of their own members, as well as the power of the non-liberal states to limit the freedom of collective religious practice.

In the XIX century, the *milets* of the Ottoman Empire, under the influence of the liberal ideas in Europe, started to transform into nations i.e. national states. Serbians started the first uprising in 1815 which proved unsuccessful but got them a small autonomous part two years later, in 1817.

European countries started to show interest only after the Greek uprising in 1821 along with the beginning of the wave of solidarity in Europe. The creation of a Greek national state was a relatively simple matter considering the fact that the territory was almost marked. The situation was completely different in the other parts of Southeastern Europe, where people lived mixed one with another. Moreover, it brought about visions and aspirations on the side of the intellectual elites of the Balkan people that included the annex of bigger territories where the members of the former *milets* lived. Thus, we come to the creation of projects for Greater Serbia, Greater Bulgaria, Greater Greece, Greater Romania etc.. The European forces were interfering intensively, using ethno-nationalistic ideas of the local elites to satisfy their own needs. From geopolitical, religious or other motifs, Russia supported Great Bulgaria, France – Great Serbia and Great Britain – Great Greece.

Peace in Southeastern Europe, it can be concluded, was possible solely if a great imperial power acted as an arbitrator between people and religions, establishing some kind of intercultural order. For centuries, the empires, particularly the Ottoman Empire with its *milets* possessed that role. Later in the XIX and the XX century, Austro-Hungarians and the powerful European forces, together with their allies, were in the position to decide what definitions for a *nation* were valid on which territory, in a way causing the wars fought on these territories in history. With the communist Yugoslavia, a certain equilibrium was achieved lasting almost half a century. But after the fall of Yugoslavia and the onset of the bloody wars, the USA in 1995, took the role of a *neutral force* that would regain that equilibrium. However, this will not come to pass, above all because of its bias in the Bosnian- and in the Kosovo conflict. Everything we have survived so far represents a proof that the people in Southeastern Europe are not allowed to work out their own internal equilibrium. The study of the *milet system* could be a good lesson of how to achieve that condition even in an era of global interdependency and subnational fragmentation.

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