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# Late medieval Southeast Europe between Latin Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Ottoman Islam

Kurseinheit 2

Fakultät für  
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## I SOUTHEAST EUROPE AS A POLITICAL SPACE ON THE EVE OF THE OTTOMAN CONQUEST

### 1. The Byzantine Empire, Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia in the fourteenth century

The first *Kurseinheit* of this *Studienbrief* has hopefully made it plainly clear why it is extremely difficult to write a cohesive, harmonized and all-encompassing general history of Southeast Europe in the late Middle Ages. Nonetheless, irrespective of the problems that make the task so challenging, one of the stated goals of this course was to provide a fundamental survey of key events, personalities and processes, with a heavy focus on the political, military and diplomatic aspects that defined the region in the struggle for supremacy over territory and resources between the various competing forces of the time. The actual challenge is to successfully reconcile all the diverse historical experiences of the various communities of Southeast Europe and to deliver a balanced narrative that would on one hand equally include all of these distinct stories, and on the other provide an organized framework which treats the region as one entity. Merely ignoring all the individualities of the fragmented political space is not an option as the author runs the risk of presenting a superficial and artificially homogenized image that does little to explain the complex relationships and interconnections, and does not clarify the similarities and differences between the various states in the region. Just writing about the history of each specific country instead, and then trying to synthetically join them into an overarching story of Southeast Europe would also result with an inconsistent and inadequate account. As has already been stated, the region was not a composite unit that can be observed through the prism of its various smaller components, but has to be described via a complex set of networks that connected the noble elites of each state. Certainly, despite of their separate and distinct political, linguistic, religious and cultural developments, the peoples and states of Southeast Europe still had some qualities that united them, such as their underlying Slavic identity, their predominant Orthodoxy, particularly in Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, and these connections were subsequently affirmed and strengthened through marriage and political alliances.

All of this entails a greater knowledge of intricate prosopographic details and information on the relationships between the various influential families or dynasties in the region, as well as of the rapidly changing political constellations that sometimes depended on the sincerity of those interactions. So, the complexity of a greater number of names, surnames, titles, dates, battles or marriages should not always be sacrificed in favour of an abridged and simplified approach to the topic. In fact, complicated things are the ones that are most worthy of dedicating more attention to, and this first segment of the course unit will attempt to provide a standard historical overview that could serve as an introduction to the later period of the Ottoman conquest. In order to be able to fully comprehend that process, one must be acquainted at least with the basics of the situation that the Ottomans encountered in Southeast Europe, especially since these circumstances can be considered as contributing factors to the ultimate military successes of the Ottoman Turks. Therefore, the idea here is not to be overly extensive, but to present the political landscape of the region on the eve of the con-

quest, and to provide a summary of the key events, names of individuals, topography, crucial battles, etc.

Sometimes it will be worthwhile or even necessary for students to “untangle” these “entangled” histories, to pick up the various individual strands independently of each other and delve deep into the history of the respective political subjects, beyond their mutual contacts or their common interactions with the Ottomans. Accepting this challenge would be beneficial on several levels, as it would not only provide a broader context and necessary background to all the various events that will be discussed, but would also help in rationalizing the complicated existence of multiple perspectives. This will be reflected in the abundance of cited and suggested literature for further study, which will hopefully make this task a little bit easier as it will direct the reader towards more exhaustive investigations of particular topics.

Some knowledge of the region’s earlier history should also facilitate a better understanding of the various developments that took place there in the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Of certain interest for our subject matter are those key events that occurred a hundred or two hundred years previously and initiated processes which had direct, immediate and far-reaching consequences on the later history of the region. Such events, for example, are the arrival and settlement of the Hungarians in the plains of Pannonia, the subsequent rise of the Kingdom of Hungary that resulted with the clash between the Hungarians and Byzantines in the twelfth century, the breakdown of imperial power in Anatolia at the hands of the Seljuks, the fall of Constantinople to the crusaders in 1204, and the Mongol attacks in the mid-thirteenth century that weakened the Byzantine political hold over the region. These will not be discussed here at any length, but they should be kept in mind while trying to make sense of the political map of Southeast Europe in the 1300’s. The same goes for the earlier history of Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia that can help to explain many of the traits in their later development and may reveal answers to some tough questions that could arise from studying the period of the Ottoman conquest.

In the beginning and first half of the fourteenth century, Southeast Europe was dominated by three major power players – Byzantium, Bulgaria and Serbia. Their peripheries came to play a more prominent role only later on, such as Bosnia to the west, the Ottomans to the East, the Kingdom of Hungary to the north, while the coastal areas of the Adriatic and the Aegean in the south remained well within the interest sphere of the Venetian Republic ever since the Fourth Crusade. These peripheries will be discussed within this *Kurseinheit* in due course, but for now we should direct our attention to the interplay of the three main political factors as their relations left such an indelible mark on the period. All three were connected by Orthodoxy and both Bulgaria and Serbia modelled themselves on the imperial traditions of Byzantium, seeking to expand over the territories of the shrinking Empire, thus creating a kind of a triangle of empires that would constitute the most remarkable aspect of the regional politics – the so called “Byzantine Commonwealth”. Despite their apparent uniformity, relative size and strength, all three were in fact very unstable political structures based on a growing number of local dominions, ruled by smaller princes with increasing power and influence, united only by loose bonds to the head of the state. These domains and their lords grew out of the need of central authorities to cooperate and rely on local players in achieving their expansionist goals. Having achieved expansion, they were then essen-

tially reimbursed by the ruler with new estates and privileges, further contributing to their rise. This dissolution of power from the top to the lower levels resulted with the ruler conceding his sovereign rights to regional or local rulers whose position was additionally strengthened by the spatial fragmentation and disjointed geography of South-east Europe. Thus Byzantium, Bulgaria and Serbia, as well as Bosnia later on, ultimately dissolved into several aristocratic domains, each pursuing its own political agenda. In the subsequent development of this process, the local lords began imitating the administrative and ruling practices of their suzerains, behaving as kings and emperors, establishing a close following, creating vassals of their own, and instituting a defence system based around fortifications erected on the location of old imperial castles. In essence, this was an emerging small-scale political world that was made possible by the collapse of greater state structures as a direct result of various geopolitical shifts both in Europe and in Asia. To an extent, this lack of political unity contributed to the initial Ottoman successes, since they were not confronted by one strong state and its military, but rather had to deal with a greater number of various smaller principalities, which made their expansion much easier as they could pursue a divide and conquer policy by playing different nobles off of each other.

The development of Byzantium corresponds to these general regional trends. By the beginning of the fourteenth century the Byzantine Empire was restored and reconstituted but substantially weakened. It was only a shadow of its former imperial greatness, forced to accept a diminished political role as only one of a number of relevant factors in Southeast Europe. It then encompassed only mainland Greece, coastal Thrace, as well as some of the Aegean and Ionian islands that were contested between the Byzantine emperor and the various successor states of the Latin Empire, such as the Republic of Venice or the Kingdom of Naples, as well as a large number of semi-autonomous Greek principalities that arose on its territory, for instance in Epirus and Thessaly. By the end of the fourteenth century, the Ottoman conquest would essentially reduce the Empire to a small vassal state that retained its significance only due to the strategic importance of Constantinople and its symbolic former imperial glory.

Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos (r. 1261-1282) presided over the restoration of the Greek Empire in Constantinople in 1261 and founded a new imperial dynasty that would rule over Byzantium until 1453. His lengthy reign was a period of stabilization, consolidation and recovery of Byzantine power that was also closely followed by the increase of the imperial military potential. However, in this time the attention of the emperor and his successors, Andronikos II (r. 1282-1328) and Andronikos III (r. 1328-1341), was shifted towards the west and focused on preserving the imperial legacy in the face of threats and attempts to re-establish the Latin Empire. They were also forced to deal with the expansionist policies of Bulgaria and Serbia from the north, meaning that they neglected pressing issues in Anatolia. In due course, the eastern frontier gradually collapsed and this was a major contributing factor to the appearance, emergence and rise of the Ottoman principality in the immediate vicinity of Constantinople which endangered the very existence of the Empire as early as the second half of the fourteenth century.



Image 1. The Byzantine Empire in 1265.

(William R. Shepherd, *The Historical Atlas*, New York, 1911, 89.)

Eventually, the western borders of the Empire broke down along with the eastern ones. The emperor had lost all influence over Epirus and Thessaly, while both Bulgaria and Serbia exploited the situation and pushed back the edges of Byzantium further towards the sea. The situation was exacerbated by internal conflicts that drained the strength, economy and resources of the Empire, finally culminating in two long and protracted civil wars. The first one lasted from 1321 to 1328 and was fought between Emperor Andronikos II and his grandson Andronikos III who would later become Emperor himself, while the second one lasted from 1341 to 1347 and was waged over the guardianship of Andronikos III's nine-year old son, Emperor John V. A regent was appointed for the underage ruler, his father's close friend, confidante and chief minister, John Kantakouzenos. However, the emperor's mother, Anna of Savoy, opposed this and gathered a following of her own, attempting to oust Kantakouzenos from power. In 1346 he responded by proclaiming himself Emperor as John VI in Adrianople and brokered an alliance with Stefan Dušan of Serbia (r. 1331-1355) and Emir Umur of Aydin (r. 1334-1348). In the following year an agreement was reached according to which John V and John VI would rule together as co-emperors for ten years, until the young John V came of age, but political circumstances forced John VI to abdicate in 1354 and retreat to a monastery. The consequences of this rift were disastrous for the Empire that was severely weakened by the rise of Serbia, Bulgaria and the Ottomans.