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FOUR LESS-KNOWN CASES OF PERSONAL UNION PROJECTS IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

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Abstract: *The paper discussed four episodes from the medieval Serbian past when personal unions' concept formed the basis for resolving complex regional diplomatic relations. The first two dates in King Milutin's (1282–1321) and Stephen Dečanski's (1321–1331) reigns. In both instances, the unification proposals came from Bulgaria. Furthermore, Sigismund von Luxembourg (1387–1437) acquired in 1394 the right to receive the Bosnian royal crown. With the decline of Hungarian influence in Bosnia, the prospects of realizing this bold plan lost momentum. The last case examines the prevailing circumstances that led to establishing a short-lived personal union between Bosnia and the Serbian Despotate 1458/1459.*

Keywords: *Personal Union, Milutin Nemanjić, Stephen Dečanski, Sigismund of Luxemburg, Stephen Tomaš, Stephen Tomašević, Bulgaria, Byzantine Empire, 15th-century Ottoman Conquest.*

To holistically comprehend the Serbian past's various aspects in the Middle ages, it is crucial to understand its state development better. The most essential precondition for the further studies of social, economic, or cultural processes is the increase of knowledge of the numerous political shifts, as well as the collapse of old and establishment of the new dynasties or frequent territorial changes which took place between early 7th and second half of the 15th century. This fact is even more critical considering contemporary scholars' constant and enlarged interest in the new aspects of social history and everyday life history. It is worth mentioning that their efforts significantly contribute to the diversification of topics and research methods. However, the Serbian medieval post-war studies created the investigation unbalance because the Serbian middle ages' studies did not prioritize the topic of medieval Serbian statehood. By taking a brief and informal overview of the historiography after 1945, it is evident that only a small number of papers and even fewer books emerged on that subject. For example, the short phase of research conducted in the seventies focused on the political achievements of Duke Lazar (1371–1389). He became the most prominent figure among other noblemen after the collapse of the Serbian Empire in 1371. As the result of that investigation, it became apparent that he was not just a belligerent feudal territorial lord, as he has been previously incorrectly presented. His primary political goal was to consolidate shattered Serbian statehood and put the recently created political configuration under the new dynasty's control [Божих, И. 1975]. This approach to political history was the result of the dogmatic situation and lack of freedom of speech. The ideological pressure of the communist regime was why the post-war generations of historians did not have proper general knowledge of the ever-changing idea of statehood, influenced by domestic or foreign social, economic and political influences or what type of institution existed during different stages of the state evolution [Алексић, В. 2009, p. 69, n. 332].

The modern and comprehensive study of the creation and evolution of Serbia's state idea is available only recently. It covers the whole territory which was settled by the Serbs or where the Ser-

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bian political units existed. However, a range of other vital questions remains entirely or partially unanswered. Due to the state of the research shortly elaborated in the introduction section, the existence of personal union in Serbia at that time remains a less known fact, not to mention the lack of adequate efforts to evaluate its significance for Serbian history.

On the other hand, the studies of the history of the Kingdom of Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Scandinavian kingdoms, to mention only a few examples, are not possible without many references to the numerous personal unions, which these states created among themselves [Kiaupiene, J. 1997, pp. 57–71; Haug, E. 2019, pp. 11–36]. Most domestic experts are mostly unaware of several personal union attempts to be created or when the project had succeeded temporarily. Finally, medieval Serbia's personal union subject has attracted slightly more attention in the last few years, as described in this paper's final paragraphs. This paper offers a general overview of all known personal union cases involving Serbian states in the late Middle Ages. This survey may help us better comprehend the significance of this clustering concept for general state development and promote further research on this topic.

It is necessary, however, to first define the term personal union. According to law and international affairs experts, personal union describes an alliance between two or more states unified only by the same ruler. The fusion is not regulated by the international contract, determining the member states' mutual relationships, obligations, or duties, but by the person, hence the name personal union, who becomes the nominal ruler of the state units involved in the affair. Therefore, all participating states remain entirely independent concerning internal or foreign affairs. For example, each political unit's local constitution and legal system tended to be preserved and respected by the personal union leaders. It refers to the territorial and administrative division, economic or social privileges given to the members of different social communities and groups (secular and church nobility, mainly) or organizations (church units, city communes). The same rule applies to the state management structures, like the state assemblies' composition, court organization, and central administrative structure. Unlike the real union, in the case of a personal union, all member countries remain independent international subjects, i. e. they do not form the third, unified superstate [Prélot, M. 2002, pp. 260–261].

Thanks to many military victories achieved in previous decades, King Milutin (1282–1321) became the most influential ruler in South-East Europe at the end of the 13th century. His troops captured the Byzantine Empire's vast territories, and the government in Constantinople was forced to sign the unfavorable peace treaty with the Serbs. The marriage between the aged monarch and six-year-old Simonis Palaiologina (Simonida in Serbian), Emperor Andronicus II's daughter (1282–1328), was arranged after long negotiation in 1299. This event marked a shift in the mutual political relationship between the two states. The previous fearsome hostility turned into long-lasting cooperation in the spheres of politics, culture, and diplomacy [Максимовић, Љ. 2007, pp. 13–17]. Two neighboring powers have given their best to prevent the establishment of a new alliance at any cost. The emissaries of Thessaly Despotate's rulers were frequent visitors of the Serbian court during the complicated negotiation with Constantinople's government at the end of the 13th century. Bulgaria was especially interested in cooperation with Serbia too. The Mongols from the Black Sea region heavily oppressed Bulgaria at that time. They interfered in the internal and dynastic questions and caused the political decentralization of Bulgaria. There was no strong ruler capable of defending this Balkan country or controlling powerful local barons. Consequently, several peripheral regions' overlords monopolized political power and administrative duties and fought for supremacy over the central government. Together with the Mongol warlord, they installed on the Bulgarian throne Emperor Smilets (1292–1298). He suddenly died without an adult male heir in 1298. Although his widow was related to the Byzantine ruling family, she could not rule alone. Besides that, a marriage with her was very politically desirable to all contenders to the throne who desperately sought political legitimacy. She got the much-needed support from Eltimir Terter, the brother of previous Tsar George Terter (1280–1292). He ended his exile in Byzantine Empire and got married to Smilets's daughter Marina [Узелац, А. 2015].

However, this arrangement was not strong enough to restore central power's authority and even less oppose the foreign governments. That was the political background of Bulgarian emissaries' offer to the Serbian King during his negotiation with Constantinople in 1298. The idea was to persuade King Milutin to marry the widow of the late Emperor Smilets. The motivation for this uncommon act came not only due to the Mongol military pressure, advanced political disintegration of the state, but for Bulgaria's currently unfavorable diplomatic position among regional powers, which the developing Serbian-Byzantine coalition could even worsen (Кръстев, К. 2011, pp. 156–164). To make their proposal more tempting, he was offered and lured with the “power over the Mysian people, of whom she is a ruler” - τὰ τῆς τῶν Μυσῶν ἀρχῆς, ἧς δεσπότις αὐτῆ [Ђурић, И. 1986, pp. 139–141]. Historiographical report of Byzantine hi-ranked court dignitary and skilled diplomat Theodor Metochites conveys his interpretation of this diplomatic episode. He personally and very actively represented his government's position during the negotiation with King Milutin as aforesaid. One may imagine that he was very well informed and that his report on this topic is generally accurate. Although the treaty has been comprehended differently in the contemporary historiography, the above-cited words leave little space for doubt that he intended to point out the specific political agreement between the two countries, which essentially would go beyond the usual political marriage agreements so standard in the past [Узелац, А. 2015, p. 228; Ангелов, П. 2004, p. 15].

There was a significant difference between the two spousal projects, which King Milutin could choose from at that time. As it is well known, he decided to get married to six years old Simonis. The marriage was nothing more than one more typical political alliance among many others, even though it successfully enhanced cooperation between the two courts. On the one hand, Bulgaria's unusual marriage proposal aimed for a stronger mutual relationship with Serbia. One may presume that it was some personal union. In this case, Milutin had to be the head of two states: the Empire of Bulgaria and Serbia's Kingdom. Being a very skilled politician, he refused this idea without hesitation, escaping to be involved in numerous political external, and internal problems of his eastern neighbor. The prestigious title of the Emperor of Bulgaria would bring him only a few formal significant rights. On the other hand, his possible wife and local court company would benefit the most from his political, military, and financial support finding much-needed political authority to give vitality to their weak rule. There was even a danger of King Milutin evoking the Mongol range for interfering in their influence zone. One should remember how he put much effort into avoiding the conflict with the Euro-Asian power in the aftermath of the 1292/3 conflict with Shishman of Vidin. However, considering Bulgaria's political situation, this alliance would cause many problems to the King of Serbia. For example, the Byzantine Empire and other South and East European powers would become his fearsome opponents. Furthermore, the long-lasting dispute with his overthrown brother King Dragutin (1276–1282), about whose sons would inherit Serbia's sovereignty after Milutin's death, could not be resolved by this marriage adventure [Ангелов, П. 2004, pp. 14–17; Мишић, С. 2003, pp. 13–14; Мишић, С. 2009, pp. 337–338; Узелац, А. 2015, pp. 228–230].

There is more definitive evidence that South-East Europe's policymakers were very well informed about the personal union concept during the Middle Ages. Like in the previous case, the same two countries were involved again. However, Serbia and Bulgaria's relationship was not as friendly at this time as it was at the turn of two centuries. In the aftermath of the Battle of Velbužd, which took place on 28. July 1330, the Serbs and their King Stephen Dečanski (1321–1331) could entirely politically exploit the results of their great triumph (Aleksić, V., Stoiljković N. 2020, pp. 21–27). As the enemy army leader, he was killed in the open field battle. Therefore, defenseless Bulgaria did not have a ruler anymore. It could not protect itself from the Serbian threat and simultaneous Byzantine attacks on its eastern borders in Thrace. The struggle for supreme power among the Bulgarian nobleman made the situation even worst. The state was confronted by the total collapse both internally and externally. The authorized representatives of the barons met urgently with the Serbian King. The topic of conversation has been preserved by one contemporary historical source. The author of the *Vita of Stephen Dečanski* briefly reports about the tempting offer proposed by the Bulgarians: “The

Kingdom of Serbia and the Bulgarian Empire shall be merged (into one state - comment V. A.), and it shall be the peace (between them - comment V. A). We are ready to sign such contract, and we shall obey your commands.” [Богдановић, Д. 1989, pp. 149–151].¹ The short and rhetorically depicted description of the negotiations indicates that it was, most probably, a case of a personal union proposal. All other possible types of political unification that were at disposal to King Stephen at that time, such as the state’s partial or complete occupation, cannot be applied to explain this unusual political project. Consequently, the Bulgarian side hoped to use Serbian military power and newly established partnerships to prevent massive territorial losses. Still, this plan was not realistic, and King Stephen refused it all together [Ангелов, П. 2004, pp. 17–18; Коряков, Д. 2018]. He was satisfied with the annexation of the almost whole Nišava valley region. This way, the Kingdom of Serbia took over the strategic border area between the two countries [Алексић, В., Стаменовић, И. 2015, pp. 99–117]. He strongly supported his nephew John (Ivan) Stephen’s (1330–1331) rise to Bulgarian Empire’s throne. This political move should have provided him with active political control over Bulgaria, without unfavorable effects on him and his kingdom. Like his father 30 years ago, he and his influential dignitaries, who advised him, did not want to be involved in the constant political problems that shuttered the very structure of Bulgaria’s political system.

The third case refers to the political action of Sigismund of Luxemburg (1386–1437) in South-East Europe. Namely, Stephen Dabiša (1391–1394) was presumably an older person when he replaced his more successful cousin Tvrtko I (1353–1391) on Bosnia’s throne. As all rulers of this state before, Dabiša was elected by the State Assembly, which consisted of the most powerful noblemen in the land. One may presume that his limited physical capability influenced the aristocrats’ choice, whose hidden agenda was to install on power a person with less significant political accomplishment. During his short reign, major political disputes started, and he could not deal with the early stage of political defragmentation. Simultaneously, the people suffered because of the Hungarian attacks. Sigismund of Luxemburg won the great battle against rebelling nobility from Slavonia near the city of Dobor in Northern Bosnia in June 1394. Consequently, King Stephen Dabiša, being previously his fearsome opponent, rashly decided to end the hostility. He directed himself to King’s camp near Dobor, where he agreed to his new senior’s unpleasant concessions. The most striking provision of a contract stipulates King Sigismund’s right to become the King of Bosnia after the death or dethronement of Stephen Dabiša. The latter was in his old age, which must be taken into account on this occasion [Ћирковић, С. 1964, pp. 172–174]. To be exact, Sigismund hoped to get his right soon, which indicates that this political project was a vital part of his political strategy in South-East Europe [Bak, J. 2006, pp. 89–94; Veszprémy, L. 2006, pp. 442–451; Schwedler, G. 2012, pp. 415–416]. According to us, this must have been a typical case of personal union. If this theory proves correct, it would be one more piece of evidence that this political concept was well known in this part of Europe.

Nevertheless, the creators of this ambitious arrangement forgot the simple fact that the ruler’s rights in Bosnia (Ban, King after 1377) were not hereditary at that time. That is the reason why Bosnian nobility did not elect a new king after Dabiša’s death. Instead, they let his widow Hellen (Jelena in Serbian) Gruba rule during the three-year-long interregnum (1395–1398). This way, the groups that controlled the power structure in Bosnia nominally did not deny Sigismund’s claims to the Bosnian crown. However, they did not urge him to come to their kingdom and be their new ruler, either. They preferred a woman with a restricted ruling potential to a strong monarch who could use the resources from two other realms to actively support his political action in Bosnia, leading to the local aristocracy’s authority diminishing. Sigismund accepted Hellen Gruba’s nomination for Bosnia’s provisory ruler because he simultaneously got the task to keep the prestigious title within his family. Coincidentally, Stephen Dabiša died in the same year in which the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire’s seat became empty. Sigismund negotiated intensively with his allies across Europe about the coronation of his relative in Rome [Ћирковић, С. 1964, pp. 174–175].

¹ Translated by the author. The 16-century book, which describes the Ottoman Empire and its history, incorrectly depicts this episode. See [Живановић, Ђ. 1986, p. 95].

However, he never forgot the right guaranteed to him by the Treaty of Dobor in 1394. Sigismund publicly proclaimed his intention to become the ruler of Bosnia and fought for this right in years 1398, 1408, 1409, 1410 [Тиркович, С. 1964, p. 193, 210–213]. Usually, it was when he wanted to put more political pressure on his numerous opponents in Bosnia. He even arranged the deal with King Tvrtko II Tvrtković (1404–1408 and 1421–1443) in 1427. According to this plan, Hermann II Count of Celje, Sigismund's father-in-law had to inherit the Bosnian crown after Tvrtko II's death [Тиркович, С. 1964, pp. 259–260]. However, unfavorable political development in South-East Europe did not allow him to realize his rights. The Ottoman Turks heavily defeated Sigismund and his crusaders in the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396 and his Hungarian troops in the Battle of Lašva in central Bosnia. The latter took place in 1415, marking the end of the Hungarian political supremacy in the Kingdom of Bosnia [Тиркович, С. 1964, pp. 242–243]. Before the last-mentioned military clash, the Kingdom of Bosnia was already divided between several territorial lords; such were Duke Hrvoje Vukčić, Great Voivoda Sandalj Hranić or Duke Pavle Radenović.

The last episode discussed in this paper took place in 1458/1459, and it is interesting for two reasons. First: unlike all previously described cases, this project was completed; although it did not resolve the problems, it was aimed to terminate. The second: Serbia was not the most powerful state in Southeast Europe anymore, and it was forced to ask for foreign help this time. It was governing only the regions alongside the rivers Danube and Sava at the north. The court effectively controlled just the capital city of Smederevo and a few more fortresses. Even worse, in the heavily plundered land, the trade and mining activities significantly diminished. Many inhabitants escaped abroad searching for security due to many military raids conducted by different Christian or Ottoman armies in previous decades. After the death of Despot Đurađ Branković (1427–1456) in 1456, there was neither political unity nor mighty persons among the Serbian ruling family or noblemen capable of stopping or at least postponing the last stage of the Turkish offensive in Serbia any longer [Спремић, М. 1994², pp. 303–313; Спремић, М. 2011]. The country was led by Hellen, the widow of Despot Lazar Branković (1456–1458), who died in January 1458. With her influential supporters, she was confronted with a very unfavorable situation. An idea was born to unite Serbia with Bosnia, even though the neighboring state was politically disintegrated and exposed to Ottoman political pressure. A Serbian nobleman and a high-ranked court dignitary Stephen Ratković was involved in the complex negotiations. He had the prestigious title of Great Logothete. Hungary supported this alliance to consolidate its southern borders, which were exposed to the numerous raids too. Helen's daughter, a young princess, bearing the same name as her mother, married Stephen Tomašević (1461–1463), the son of the Bosnian King Stephen Tomaš (1443–1461), on 1. April 1459. Stephen banished blind Stephen Branković, the son of deceased Despot Djuradj Branković, from Smederevo only a few days after arriving in Serbia. The latter of two Stephen's was backed up by the Turks. The weak attempts to stabilize the newly established power in Smederevo were in vain because of the local population's stubborn resistance, which was utterly unaccustomed to the foreign ruler. The Ottoman military intervention was prompt and efficient. That was the reason why Stephen Tomašević surrendered the capital town on 20. June 1459. This date is generally accepted as the day of the final collapse of this state [Спремић, М. 1994², pp. 310–311; Мишић, С. 2007, pp. 8–9].

These events, due to their significance, have attracted considerable attention from domestic and foreign scholars [Ивановић, М. 2013, с. 159–160, 164, 194–196, with the short overview of previous literature]. Nonetheless, this marriage agreement has usually been conceived only as one of many similar international agreements between states. It seems that its real nature remained unidentified for a long time. However, according to the recently emerged interpretation, the supreme ruler of two states was only the King of Bosnia Stephen Tomaš, while his son was just Serbia's regent. It was the father who, for example, had the exclusive right to issue charters regarding the privileges and vast estates located in the State of Serbia. More precisely, the Bosnian King granted Stephen Ratković mentioned above on 14. October 1458. Thanks to the same historical evidence, it is apparent that both political units preserved their constitutional rights and continued to exist as two separate political units. The

charter clearly emphasizes the distinction between the *Serbian Lordship* (*Srpsko Gospodstvo*) and the *Bosnian Kingdom* (*Naš Rusag*). The Serbian court function of the Great Logothete continued to exist because it was deeply incorporated in the Serbian state tradition since its introduction from the Byzantine Empire in the 14th century. These facts and many other details testify that this was a typical personal union between two independent countries [Мишић, С. 2007, pp. 14–15].

The results demonstrate that the medieval Serbian states were involved in the neighboring countries' personal union projects more frequently than assumed. However, this type of international political clustering was not crucial for overall state development, explaining why contemporary domestic scholars do not pay enough attention to this vital issue. Domestic dynasties almost always ruled the Serbian states, and therefore the idea of introducing the sovereigns of foreign origins was not very popular among the nobility and influential persons. Simultaneously, the Serbian monarchs were not very enthusiastic about the idea of becoming the nominal leader of the surrounding countries. Both King Milutin and his son King Stephen Dečanski refused the tempting crowning proposals with the Bulgarian imperial crown. The prestigious title could not bring them any political benefits, only severe problems since Bulgaria's unstable ruling structure caused many problems for all statements attempting to establish a centralized monarchy. Not to mention that the latter of two Serbian monarchs was almost blind, and his authority was challenged a few times within his kingdom. Not surprisingly, his son overthrew him and, most probably, let him get executed in 1331. King Sigismund von Luxembourg, a ruling King of Hungary, got the opportunity to become Bosnia's ruler based on the Treaty of Dobor with King Stephen Dabiša in 1394. However, he could not claim his rights because of several political factors, such as the disintegration of Bosnia's Kingdom, local nobility resistance, and the Turks' increasing military presence. Interestingly, Serbs from both Bosnia and Serbia lived together in one state until the middle of the 10th century, to be reunited once again only through the short-leaving personal union project. More precisely, King Stephen Tomaš (1443–1461) became the Serbian Despotate's last ruler a few years before the two political units' final Ottoman conquest. Our results show that it is essential to continue with the investigation of this topic in the future.

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