

Theme 4: Troubled Waters: Reclaiming a Common Space?

Presentation: History and Political Ecology of the Adriatic Sea

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A full exposition of the history and political ecology of the Adriatic Sea would require more than a short presentation. So instead of a long boring speech full of data and dates, I will sketch some of the salient features of the region, the main events in its turbulent and complex demographic and political history, and hope to illuminate certain periods when the unity of the Adriatic society and economy was probably at its zenith.

Let me start with some basic geography. The Adriatic, while sharing the main characteristics of the Mediterranean Sea, is somewhat atypical. Longer than it is wide, it is in effect a relatively narrow north-south passage. To the north it is bordered by the flat stretch of coastline from Pesaro and Rimini to the Gulf of Trieste, where the plain of the Po meets the Mediterranean. To the west it is bounded by the Italian coast, often low and marshy, although the ridge of the Apennines runs only a short way inland. To the east it is fringed with a string of rocky islands, the Dalmatian Islands; immediately behind rise the barren mountains of the Balkan landmass, the unending white wall of the Dinaric Alps, forming the edge of the great karst plateau behind the Dalmatian coast. To the south, the Adriatic opens into the Ionian Sea through the narrow (72 km) Strait of Otranto. As early as the 3rd century BC ships could cross it in a day, under full sail with a favourable wind.

It was not always like this. The Mediterranean Sea is a remnant of the vast sea called Tethys that was squeezed, about 30 million years ago, between the crustal plates that carried Africa and Eurasia. The collision of these plates is still in progress, causing the eruption of volcanoes such as Etna, Vesuvius and Stromboli, and triggers frequent earthquakes occurring in parts of Italy, Greece and Turkey. The most devastating of these happened in about the middle of the 2nd millennium BC when Thera (the modern Santorini is what was left of it) exploded, contributing decisively to the decline and extinction of the high Minoan civilisation in Crete. The ash from the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 that buried Pompeii and Herculaneum, the earthquake that devastated Dubrovnik in the 17th century and Kotor in a more recent time, and the occasional rumbling of Etna are reminders of these destructive forces of nature.

Man probably first saw the shores of the Adriatic several hundreds of thousands years ago. But it is only from after the last glacial period (about 8,000 years BC), when the shores of the Adriatic Sea took their present shape, that we find material remnants of bands of hunter-fisher-gatherers who roamed the region and lived in its caves and other natural shelters. The first known farming communities appeared around 6,200 BC in Southern Italy, probably as a result of immigration from the Balkans and across the Adriatic Sea.

Classical authors refer to Celts, an ancient ethnic group, as occupying most of temperate Europe (including what is now the northernmost corner of the Adriatic) during the 1st millennium BC, although they had probably already been there for

hundreds if not thousands of years. They seem to have been the "fathers" of iron metallurgy and fierce warriors - they sacked Rome in 390 BC and Delphi in 272 BC.

At about the same time as the Celts dominated western and central Europe, the northern and eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea was inhabited by another ancient group, the Illyrians,¹ a people of Indo-European stock, who are considered to be ancestors of present-day Albanians. The arrival of the Illyrians predated the establishment of Hellenic colonies along the Adriatic coast (between the 7th and the 3rd century BC), most on the eastern shores and many of them the nuclei of modern cities².

From their modest beginnings, the Romans gradually developed into a formidable imperial power spreading in all directions from the Italian peninsula. The Illyrians were among their first victims. By the close of the millennium, the Romans became the undisputed masters of the eastern shores of the Adriatic and its hinterland. After the Roman conquest of Illyria, the Greek colonies along the eastern shores of the Adriatic became gradually Romanised and new Roman settlements sprang up. The Illyrians, though defeated militarily, seem to have been able people, as attested by several Roman emperors who came from Illyrian stock. Diocletian, the founder of modern Split, is the most famous.

With the Roman military conquest of the Mediterranean world and the expansion of Hellenic and Roman settlements, the way was open for cultural exchanges leading to a single cultural and economic area. This left a lasting imprint on the Adriatic region. The civilisation fostered and promoted by the Romans provided a vehicle not only for the transmission of ideas, technology and institutions, but above all for the diffusion of Christianity which became a powerful unifying bond in the Adriatic region.

Nothing lasts forever. Under pressure from the peoples who moved into the European space (Vandals, Huns, Visigoths, Ostrogoths and others), and due to internal weaknesses of the ageing system, the Roman Empire started to crumble. The decay was gradual, punctuated with temporary successes and various administrative reforms, including its division into the Eastern and Western Empires in 395. After the fall of the Western Roman Empire (in 476) to the Visigoths, the former Illyrian provinces became part of the Eastern Roman Empire based on Constantinople. The Eastern Empire, known also as the Byzantine Empire, proved more resilient. It lasted until 1453, when its capital fell to the Ottoman Turks - but not before it was sacked by Crusaders (in 1204).

Developments on the western shores were relatively uneventful: the invading peoples gradually became Romanised and became modern day Italians. Not so on the eastern shores.

A key event that deeply and permanently marked further developments on the eastern shores was the arrival of Slav tribes on the Balkan Peninsula between the 6th and the 8th century. They gradually overwhelmed and at least partly absorbed the native non-Slav population of their new homeland and coalesced into what became several distinct national groups: the Slovenes at the northernmost corner of the Adriatic;

¹ Dalmatia derived its name from the Dalmatians, one of the more important Illyrian tribes..

² For instance: Adria, Egida (Koper), Crex (Cres), Diadora (Zadar), Tragurium (Trogir), Issa (Vis), Melita (Mljet), Buthoe (Budva), Epidamnus (Durrës), Apollonia (Požanj), Butrint.

Croats, Muslims³ and Serbs in the central Balkans (with Croats settling most of the eastern shoreline and the adjacent islands); and the Montenegrins in the south, next to the Albanians. The romanised and helenised inhabitants of coastal cities, which were, at that time, mainly under Byzantine influence or dominion, also fell under the sway of the newcomers.

For several centuries native princes and kings ruled the Slavs, independently or under various forms of association with powers of those days - the Byzantine Empire, the Kings of Hungary, the Holy Roman Emperor, the Republic of Venice. Gradually most lost their independence, particularly after the advances of the Ottoman Empire on the Balkans. The only Slav territory that could be considered to have retained its independence was the Republic of Dubrovnik.⁴

Of course, the situation was more complex than this. The eastern shores of the Adriatic were also exposed to the power play of every imaginable political and military force: the Tatars, the Normans, Frankish knights, Genoese corsairs, marauding Vikings, haughty Spaniards, Crusaders⁵, Saracens and other pirates from Barbary, French "liberators"⁶, etc. And as if this were not enough, doctrinal differences and the rivalry between the Catholic and Orthodox churches - which led, in 1054, to a formal breach between Rome and Constantinople that has lasted until the present day - complicated life on the eastern shores of the Adriatic.

The emergence of Venice deserves special attention. However, we have to take a wider look at world affairs to understand the circumstances which made it possible for a seemingly unimportant settlement in the marshy lagoons, established by desperate refugees after their town (Aquileia) was sacked by Huns in 452, to become "masters" of the Adriatic region. At the beginning, they must have had a hard life, although the lagoons and the surrounding marshes provided adequate protection from their enemies and sufficient food for their survival at a subsistence level. But circumstances had radically changed by the turn of the millennium.

Between the 10th and the 13th century, Western Europe underwent a series of profound material and social changes on a scale not seen again until the industrial revolution. These coincided with the onset of a drier and colder climate, which favoured the growth of cereals. The rise in production was dramatic, mainly thanks to an increase in the area under arable. This in turn sustained rapid demographic growth. It is estimated that over three centuries the population of Europe doubled, reaching about 60 million people. Food surplus and increased population spurred the growth of existing towns and establishment of numerous new settlements with new forms of organisation of trade and new political structures. The urban economy was increasingly tied up with lucrative long-distance trade. In particular, the entire European economy was stimulated by trade between two complementary economic

³ The Muslims of the present-day state of Bosnia and Herzegovina are a Slav ethnic group, which accepted Islam.

⁴ Until the Napoleonic wars and the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815) which radically changed the political map of the eastern shores of the Adriatic by abolishing the Venetian Republic and granting the Habsburgs control over the eastern shores of the Adriatic (with the exception of the present-day Albania).

⁵ The fourth Crusade sacked not only Constantinople but Zadar too, at the instigation of Venice.

⁶ Napoleon briefly even resurrected Illyria, naturally without the long gone Illyrians.

zones: on the one hand the Italian ports with their Levantine trading links, and on the other the emerging north-western European trading and manufacturing centres.

The Adriatic Sea, and Venice in particular, gradually found themselves at the centre of this trade. The period between the 14th and 17th centuries is probably the most colourful and fascinating historic period for the region; and it is an excellent example of the interwoven character of a past in which Venice, Dubrovnik and Corfu all played significant roles.

Historically, control of the Straits of Otranto amounted to political, economic and military control of the Adriatic. But this gateway could not be controlled from the Italian side: it was the opposite Balkan coast, which commanded. In fact, the key position was further south, on Corfu. In the centuries when the Adriatic was one of the world's major trade routes, to enter or leave usually meant sailing past Corfu. Venice had possessed the island since 1386 and its Senate considered Corfu as the "heart" of the Republic.

For centuries Venice, the "Queen of the Adriatic", linked the traffic of goods between central Europe and the Levant as the pre-eminent mercantile and maritime power of its time. It policed the sea using a fleet of galleons with skill and brutality, depending on circumstances. It demanded that all goods carried in the Adriatic must pass through Venice, a request that would be hardly meet the approval of today's World Trade Organisation.

However, the Signoria was unable to prevent her larger neighbours from using the Adriatic: the Ottomans were in Vlore (Valona); the Spanish in Naples; the Papacy at Ancona and later in Ferrara and Urbino; the House of Austria at Trieste. Finally, there was Dubrovnik with its fleet of merchantmen. The tenacious Republic of St. Blasius played on its double status as *protégé* of the Papacy and vassal of the Sultan. This neutral position was useful; Venice could not afford to ignore it and ships under the flag of Dubrovnik almost always passed unharmed.

Venice's supremacy in the Adriatic was further challenged by a colourful band of pirates, the Uskoks from Senj and Trieste, only a stone's throw from Venice. They were Slav and Albanian adventurers, continually reinforced by various outlaws. There was little the Venetians could do against the harassment and attacks of their tiny boats rowed at high speed, so light that that they could use the shallowest channels between the Dalmatian islands where the heavy Venetian galleys dared not follow. The support of the House of Habsburg for the Uskoks (today we would call it "patronage") in its efforts to loosen Venice's grip on Adriatic trade was essential.

To protect her mercantile interests, and to meet the ever-present threat from Ottoman attack, a string of Venetian outposts and coastal watch-towers ran along the shores of Istria, Dalmatia and Albania, as far as the Ionian islands and beyond. However, these frontier positions, most based on former Hellenic and Roman colonies, were merely tiny settlements. The populations rarely exceeded a few thousand: in 1576 Zadar had just over 7000 inhabitants, Split just under 4000, Kotor only about a thousand after 1572. The "Adriatic Empire" of Venice was insignificant in demographic terms, compared with Venice and its hinterland, the *Terraferma*, the population of which was estimated at about the same time as one and a half million.

In spite of all its efforts, Venice gradually lost its place as the exclusive Adriatic trading centre. By the end of the 17th century, trade with the hinterland fell increasingly into the hands of the growing community of travelling merchants and pedlars who were in touch with the privateers and commerce that bypassed Venice.

These examples are a testimony and proof of the unity of the Adriatic region, a unity that was as much cultural and economic as it was political, and whose predominant flavour was Italian. This is not to suggest that Dalmatia, Corfu or the Albanian coast were 'Italian' in the sense that apologists of racial expansion would have understood it. The eastern coast is today inhabited by a Slav population, by Albanians and by Greeks in Corfu. And so it was in the 16th century, in spite of superficial appearances.

At Dubrovnik at that time, 'Italianism' was a commodity: Italian was the commercial language and *lingua franca* of the entire Mediterranean. But fashion and snobbery came into it as well. Not only was it considered desirable that the sons of noble families should go to study at Padua and that the secretaries of the republic should be fluent in Latin and Italian, but the ruling families unhesitatingly invented Italian genealogies for themselves. In fact, of course, these *gentes* were descended from mountain Slavs. The Italianized names betray their Slav origins, and the coastal population continued to be drawn from the Slav hinterland. The familiar and spoken languages of the ordinary people and even the elite were Slavic. The registers of the republic frequently record strict orders to speak only Italian at the assemblies; if such orders were necessary, clearly Slav languages were spoken.

The Adriatic region of the 16th century was attracted by the sophisticated civilisation of the nearby Apennine peninsula, and drawn into its orbit. Dubrovnik was a town of Italian art. Michelozzo and others worked there, along with artists and architects born in Dalmatia. And yet it was the one least influenced by Venice, since except for a very brief period it had always been an independent republic.

But the Adriatic was not exclusively Italian. It was open to influences from many sides and its civilisation was profoundly complex. Eastern, particularly Byzantine, artistic and architectural influences were felt everywhere, even in the very heart of Venice. If Dalmatia remained loyal to Venice, it was because its loyalty lay basically beyond the *Signoria*, with Rome and the Catholic Church. Even a town like Dubrovnik, so aware of its own interests, and firmly surrounded by the Orthodox and Ottoman world, was remarkable for its fervent Catholicism.

The eastern shores of the Adriatic mean more than idyllic landscapes of vines and olive trees and urbanised villages, overlooked by high mountain ranges in the hinterland. In contrast with the situation in the hinterland, only a modest living could be made on the rocky land of these shores. People always had to turn to the sea to make their living as fishermen, or as seamen, traders and temporary or permanent economic emigrants. This made them familiar with the affairs of the world and open to wider cultural and other influences. Wide-ranging contacts with other civilisations made them curious, sensitive and perceptive; in turn, they became more understanding and tolerant towards other nations, other religious feelings, and other customs. They did not strive to build territorial empires, as did their kindred tribes in the hinterland. They wanted to live in peace and to be allowed to go about their

business. These traits in the mentality of the coastal population are very much in evidence until our days.

Against this historic background it is difficult to understand the motives and forces behind the darker episodes of recent history and the tragic, destructive events that shook the Balkans, including the eastern Adriatic coast, a decade ago. Towns of no military significance, such as Dubrovnik, were savagely attacked. People who for the first time in their history had lived almost fifty years in undisturbed peace are today separated by state borders. Did it make them happier, emotionally richer or more prosperous? I doubt it.

Until now, I have focused on the political and economic history of the Adriatic region. But this history was always closely linked with environmental problems. Let me give you a few examples.

Fish was, of course, an important source of food for all coastal people, but to secure sufficient supply of agricultural products was always one of the main preoccupations in the coastal cities. Only strong trading centres, such as Venice and Dubrovnik could have been reliably imported grain from far away. The granaries built in these cities, and the care taken by rulers to keep them well stocked, illustrate the importance of maintaining sufficient food reserves. Other cities were not so lucky and tried to get their food supply from the nearby land. However, land that could be cultivated is very limited along the coast. The coastal plains are mostly associated with estuaries, prone to frequent flooding and covered with extensive swamps and marshes unsuitable for agriculture without expensive hydraulic works.

To conquer the coastal plains has been the dream of Mediterranean Man since the dawn of history. But taming swamps proved far more demanding than turning forests and scrublands into arable land. Even Venice realised that it could not rely on the grain trade alone, and the search for new arable land became an early public concern. The low-lying regions of the Venetian countryside, which are also the richest and most populated, were the objects of frequent improvements beginning before the end of the 15th century. These costly schemes were, however, marred by serious setbacks and even real human, ecological and economic catastrophes: massive floods due to burst dykes; drowning of people and property; destruction of crops. Obviously, it was not easy: Montaigne, writing in 1581, described Venice and the adjacent river valleys as "an infinite expanse of muddy sterile country covered with reeds".

In the case of Venice the fight for arable land was combined with the fight against siltation of the lagoons on which Venice is built. The lagoons were created in estuaries of rivers flowing from the Alps by deposits carried by these rivers (Piave, Sila, Brenta). However, continuous inflow of deposits threatened the lagoons and the riverbeds had to be diverted to prevent the lagoons from filling up. While the Venetian hinterland appears today as a well managed and protected arable land, and the lagoons are free from excessive siltation, disastrous floods can still occur, as in the early 1970s.

The reclamation of coastal areas for agriculture, estuaries in particular, was also practised elsewhere, although the swamps of Istrian rivers and the estuary of the

Neretva were brought under control only in the 20s and 60s of the last century. The reclamation of swampy coastal areas had an important side effect, which was not initially understood and appreciated. Reducing swampy areas led to a marked drop in malaria, as they provided fertile breeding ground for mosquitoes.⁷

The reduction of estuarine areas and elimination of swamps and other wetlands may seem to be man's victory over nature. But it has a high environmental price tag. Estuaries and wetlands are the home of a rich variety of plant and animal life. Moreover, wetlands on the fringes of the Adriatic Sea served, from time immemorial, as the natural wintering grounds for many migratory birds from continental Europe and as places of stopover for many species migrating between Northern Europe and Africa. The reduction of the Adriatic wetlands has disrupted the normal life cycle of these birds with far reaching consequences for the European migratory birds.

Swamps and wetlands were not the only natural environments that suffered from "development". The vegetation cover of the Dinaric Alps became the victim of man's need for timber. These Alps, and the islands along the coast, were once covered with considerable forests, which were exploited to provide fuel-wood and building material. Natural growth would easily have met the needs of the small local communities but it is believed that demand for the wooden poles on which Venetian houses are built and for timber used in the construction of the Republic's galleys led to almost total destruction of the forest. Once the protective forest cover was gone, the rains and winds removed the topsoil and the mountains and many of the islands look quite barren.

Water was always a scarce and therefore precious commodity along the eastern shores, particularly on the islands. In previous centuries rainwater collected during the rainy season was the only water available for drinking⁸ and cooking in many places. Naturally, most communities today are served by networks of piped water, but the legacy of the recent hostilities and politics created some bizarre problems. For instance, Hercegnovi, a lovely coastal resort, was traditionally supplied with water from sources near Trebinje by a pipeline passing through Konavle. Today the source of the water, a segment of the pipeline and the end-user are in three different sovereign states: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Montenegro. The borders between these three newly-created states cut across the previously well-integrated water supply system and often hinder the smooth delivery of water to Hercegnovi.

Problems with fishing and navigation rights are additional examples of the linkages between politics and the environment. The problem with fisheries is an old one. For political reasons the coastal states of the Adriatic did not determine the extent of their Exclusive Economic Zones, as envisaged by the Convention on the Law of the Sea. Everybody and nobody is responsible for safeguarding fish stocks and regulating their exploitation. The net result is that most stocks are overexploited. Moreover, there are frequent quarrels between fishing boats from Italy, Croatia and Slovenia, as well as the police and legal authorities of these countries. The fining and confiscation of

⁷Malaria in the Adriatic region was brought under full control only after World War II, with the help of chemical pesticides.

⁸ The lack of adequate drinking water is said to have been compensated by the excellent quality of Dalmatian wines.

Italian boats by Croatian authorities due to illegal fishing in Croatian waters is a common event.

With the creation of the new states of Croatia and Slovenia, their maritime boundary became a hotly disputed controversial political issue, unresolved for 10 years. Aside from its bearing on fishing rights, the dispute revolves around Slovenia's insistence on direct access (navigation rights) to the high seas of the Adriatic.

In spite of these examples of poor cooperation, there are also some encouraging signs. Common environmental problems that cannot be solved by individual countries alone are fertile ground for cooperation. One example is a joint initiative between Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Albania for municipal solid waste management in the Eastern Adriatic region.

This presentation was not intended as an exhaustive or detailed account of the historic events that shaped the Adriatic region. Nor was it intended to review the environmental problems of more recent origin, such as the massive destruction of coastal areas by unplanned or ill-planned development schemes, pollution from land based sources threatening the sea, frequent forest fires, or the threat from the predicted impact of global climate change.

What I wanted to convey is that since antiquity the Adriatic region has been a crossroads of civilisations and home to a unique multicultural and multiethnic community that shared a multitude of common problems but also a common destiny. Today, this destiny seems inspired by a widespread desire for the whole region to be integrated into a wider European cultural and economic space, where borders between countries will cease to be borders between people.