

DISCUSSION

Michał Wasiucionek, *Înalta Poartă și Țările Române. Rivalități și alianțe în secolul al XVII-lea* [**The Sublime Porte and the Romanian Principalities. Rivalries and Alliances in the 17th Century**], transl. Lia Decei (București: Humanitas, 2024), **360 pages**

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Despite having been largely overlooked in Romanian historiography, this book¹ attempts to rethink “the political dynamics between the Sublime Porte, Poland–Lithuania and the Danubian principalities during the seventeenth century” (p. 8). The book's core tenet is that cross-border patron-client networks, rather than states and their formal institutions, were the main actors in the political life of seventeenth-century Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Accordingly, various episodes and processes are better understood through the lens of factional politics, rather than as relations – peaceful or conflictual – between states. Moreover, the author's argument amounts to a paradigm shift in how we conceptualize the relationship between the

¹ Original edition: *The Ottomans and Eastern Europe: Borders and Political Patronage in the Early Modern World*, (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2019). Although this is a review of the Romanian edition of the book, I use the English original when quoting directly or referring to the author's technical terms.

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principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, on the one hand, and the Ottoman Empire, on the other.

From a theoretical point of view, Wasiucionek claims that “the concept of the states as cohesive, unitary actors, led by ‘collective mind of the government’ and pursuing their own geopolitical interests” (p. 4), informed by the organization and function of the modern state, is unfit to explain early modern politics, especially in Central and Southeastern Europe. In line with the decentring of the state, he advocates the paramount role of “patronage ties and factional networks that bound together individuals of different creeds, identities and political allegiances in pursuit of their own political interests” and generated “an alternative, network-based geography of power” (p. 8). Instead of the state, Wasiucionek borrows the anthropological notion of *political arena*, which “constitutes a social space, in which political actors compete for resources” (p. 14), as more suitable for the context he is studying. Sensing, nevertheless, that the emphasis on factions is an overstatement, the author cautiously admits that states were not entirely irrelevant, as they provided political actors with legitimacy, financial and military resources, and set limits on the political arenas. Despite the stated goal of putting “formal institutions and patronage networks on an equal footing” (p. 12), the latter are privileged throughout the book.

Chapter 1 traces the geopolitical evolution of Eastern and Southeastern Europe from the 14th century onward, focusing on the rise of Ottoman power in the region. The second part of this chapter lays out the structure of the political arenas relevant to the book – Ottoman, Polish-Lithuanian, and Wallachian-Moldavian – that is, the organization of the elites. Despite marked institutional differences, the common trait is the growing importance of patron-client relations and the ensuing privatization of economic and military resources. Instead of a well-defined centre that would guide domestic and foreign policy, these factions competed for political power and resources, a behaviour that “did not necessarily align with what we would call state interest (p. 40).” The outline of the geopolitical dynamics prior to the 17th century is obviously useful as a historical introduction to the problem examined in the book. However, it is worth noting at this point that Wasiucionek “temporarily” (p. 20) employs the state-centred approach he criticizes throughout the book. It is hard to reconcile this solution with the main argument. If seventeenth-century politics cannot be understood as relations among coherent states pursuing

geopolitical goals, why can this be so for earlier periods? How can the statement about “Polish [...] expansion towards the Black Sea” in the 14th century, in competition with Hungary and Lithuania” (p. 21), be consistent with the conclusion that Zamoyski’s intervention in Moldavia in the late 16th century “was driven by factional concerns, and state resources were deployed to keep the chancellor’s faction together rather than pursuit geopolitical goals” (p. 171)? It seems to me that either the historical outline is incorrect, given the book’s theoretical position, or the overall argument must be relativized.

The rest of the book analyses cross-border patronage in the region at both the micro and macro levels. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss the tools used by the three elites to build cross-border factions: family, ethnic and regional solidarities, and military service and how these resources circulated. The analysis of conversions to Islam as a means of building factions is rather inconclusive, mainly due to the scarcity of evidence, a point the author himself concedes. The sections dedicated to marriage as a tool for faction-building are better documented and more convincing. The Movilă family used marriage to consolidate their alliance with Polish-Lithuanian factions, while Prince Vasile Lupu of Moldavia (1634-1653) secured powerful allies among Ottoman dignitaries through his marriage to Caterina Cercheza (“the Circassian”). The ethnic and regional solidarities played an equally important role in the construction of patron-client networks. This is suggested by the success and longevity of the Albanian faction led by Köprülü Mehmed Pasha and, later, by his son Köprülü Ahmed Pasha; its clients included Princes Vasile Lupu, Gheorghe Ghica (Moldavia: 1658-1659, Wallachia: 1658-1659), Grigore Ghica (Wallachia: 1660-1664, 1672-1673).

The rise of regional warlords (*celali*) towards the end of the 16th century explains the role of military services in the formation of factions. Such services were converted into political capital through the patronage of grand Ottoman dignitaries, as illustrated by the example of Ștefan Tomșa, Prince of Moldavia (1611-1615, 1621-1623), shows. The other example is slightly different: Prince of Wallachia, Matei Basarab (r. 1632-1654) did not fight as a mercenary in the armies of the Ottoman warlords, but instead benefited from the patronage of one of them, Abaza Mehmet Pasha. Combining patronage and armed resistance against the centre, both Matei Basarab and Abaza Mehmet Pasha “pursued a new pattern of politics that emerged during the *celali* rebellions” (p. 77).

Chapter 3 offers several revealing examples of how resources were mobilized, converted into capital and deployed to “oil” the factional mechanism. Again, the case of Matei Basarab is illustrative of the phenomenon. The increased tribute he assumed to pay did not go, as was customary, to the external treasury but to the internal one, controlled by the Wallachian prince’s patron, İbrahim Efendi, whose own patron Sultan Murad IV. This economic resource was converted into political capital by İbrahim Efendi, allowing him to maintain his position around the sultan and to protect his client, Prince Matei Basarab. When İbrahim Efendi died, Prince Matei Basarab was forced to seek a new patron at the Ottoman court and found one, in the new Sultan’s favourite, Silahdar Mustafa Pasha. Wasiucionek rightly emphasizes that the money circulating through these factions was not necessarily corruption, as later historians interpreted it, but a means of building trust and forging alliances in a highly competitive world. The stability of the tribute (*haraç*) during the 17th century, despite the persistence of the conditions that determined its steep increase in the second half of the 16th century, is explained by the rise of the factions. The most important circuit of financial transfer between the principalities and the Ottoman Porte became the gift (*pişkeş*) used by the Wallachian and Moldavian elites to curry favour with the Ottoman dignitaries. The large sums transferred to the Ottoman elites stand in contrast to the modest and occasional payments to elites in Poland-Lithuania. While the Polish-Lithuanian arena was also structured by rival factions, these elites were more interested in acquiring landed property. This was due to the Polish-Lithuanian economy’s reduced level of monetization based on serf labour, and to the culture of the nobility, which prized landowning as a status marker.

The third part of the book discusses the impact of patron-client networks on the region’s political life. Chapter 4, the most interesting and the most convincing part of the book, presents three conflicts which, according to the author, are to be understood within the logic of cross-border factionalism, and not as conflicts between coherent states vying for geopolitical supremacy: the rivalry between Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu, the success and failure of the faction including Polish-Lithuanian and Moldavian elites from the late 16th and early 17th centuries, and the conflicts within the Köprülü patronage network. Perhaps the best illustration of the book’s overall argument is the conflict between Matei Basarab and Vasile Lupu: far from being a conflict between pro-Christian and pro-Ottoman parties, it was in fact a struggle

between factions stretching from Constantinople to north of the Danube, involving the two princes and high Ottoman dignitaries. The conflict reverberated beyond the territories of Wallachia and Moldavia, sending shockwaves to Constantinople. Two important Ottoman grandees from each faction, Tabaniyassı Mehmed Pasha and Silahdar Mustafa Pasha, were removed from power and, eventually, executed.

Chapter 5 addresses a question that has been much debated in Romanian historiography: the survival of the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia as distinct political entities in a region dominated by much more powerful states. The prevailing thesis in Romanian historiography is that Wallachia and Moldavia were never conquered by the Ottomans. This has been explained by the military resistance of the two principalities and by the prevailing balance of power in the region. Contrary to this, Wasiucionek argues that the factional struggles within the Ottoman elite prevented it from concentrating its efforts and thus undermined any effort to transform Wallachia and Moldavia into fully fledged Ottoman provinces. The Ottoman elites made no systematic attempt to annex the Danubian Principalities; the only such attempt, in 1595, foundered amid the factional struggle between Koca Sinan Pasha and Ferhad Pasha. Wasiucionek also mentions Michael the Brave's military success in 1595, but it is rather clear that for him this was of secondary importance. Moreover, during the 17th century, the extraction of resources through the cross-border patronage networks was efficient enough to be preferred over the introduction of direct administration.

Poland-Lithuania's failure to annex Moldavia is similarly explained in terms of factional struggles. The factional arrangements entailed a form of integration of the Moldavian principality into the Polish-Lithuanian Crown. According to Wasiucionek, annexation was never a state project but rather an attempt by Zamoyski to accumulate more resources to reward members of his faction. Ultimately, tensions within the faction hindered such attempts. This plan, which would have involved distributing landed property to Zamoyski's Polish-Lithuanian clients, conflicted with the interests of the Moldavian members of the faction, who feared competition from foreign aristocrats. Unable to satisfy the expectations of both parties, Zamoyski alienated members of both factions within his network – both Polish and Moldavian.

Wasiucionek's approach is innovative and his arguments are seductive, but they raise several issues that the book fails to address. Given that cross-border factions, and not states, were the main actors in the region, one question worth asking is why contemporary Moldavian and Wallachian chroniclers did not conceive of international relations in terms of factions. Why was the alternative geography of power delineated by factions invisible to them? Let us take, for example, the Battle of Khotyn (1621). Chronicler Miron Costin shows that, prior to it, the Polish king had summoned the parliament (*sejm*) and sent envoys to "Christian countries" (*țări creștine*) to ask for help against the Ottomans. Only the Dutch delivered some weapons, whereas other "Christian kingdoms" (*crăii creștinești*) refused to help and "left the Poles to confront the Ottoman Empire utterly alone" (*lăsasă toți pre Leși, numai singuri să răspundze Împărăției Turcești*).² It is true that the same chronicles are replete with references to the Ottoman protectors of the Wallachian and Moldavian princes, but they fail to convey the impression that states were less important than these patron-client links.

Explaining the failure to annex the principalities through factionalism seems, at times, too simplistic and the author himself provides counterarguments. In the case of Moldavia, he concedes that Prince Jeremia Movilă and the boyars "considered themselves rightful masters of the country and its resources, which they did not want to relinquish in order to satisfy Zamoyski's Polish clients" (p. 170). We can assume that not only the Moldavian members of Zamoyski's network felt that way, but the entire Moldavian elite did as well. Wasiucionek confirms this when he describes the reaction to the renewed annexation plans during the reign of John Sobieski (r. 1674–96): "[t]he Moldavian elite were ready to give up on the institution of the voivode, but they were clearly unwilling to relinquish monopoly on landholding" (p. 174). Finally, in the section titled "Why did Moldavia and Wallachia Survive," Wasiucionek writes that "Moldavian–Wallachian boyars had no qualms about involving Polish–Lithuanian magnates or Ottoman grandees into internal power struggles, but they dissociated themselves from any annexation attempts" (p. 180–181). This solidarity of the Wallachian and Moldavian elites, which "obstructed the attempts to merge the political arenas" (p. 179), is difficult to

² Miron Costin, *Letopisețul Țării Moldovei de la Aron Vodă încoace*, ed. P.P. Panaitescu (București: Ed. Fundațiilor Regale, 1944), 51–52.

reconcile with the explanation that privileges the role of the factions. The boyars' opposition to the annexation plans suggests a reaction stemming from class consciousness, or from a coherent political identity (or a combination of both). In other words, a class- or state-oriented reading would better explain this attitude.

Finally, the problem of Wallachia's and Moldavia's status vis-à-vis the Ottoman Empire is ambiguously treated. Wasiucionek criticizes the Romanian historiography for claiming that the Ottomans never conquered Wallachia and Moldavia. This thesis has two major components: the "capitulations," that is, the treaties by which sultans granted autonomy to the principalities and the absence of direct Imperial administration, kadi courts and mosques. The first component is swiftly and rightly dispensed as the so-called capitulations were 18th-century forgeries. Wasiucionek does not outrightly reject the second component, but he downplays it. Following Viorel Panaite, he argues that by the mid-16th century, the Ottomans had conquered the principalities and that:

The Ottoman sultans considered both principalities an integral part of the 'well-protected domains,' and insisted that the voivodes were their officials just like any other governor. The status of the Danubian principalities relied on customary arrangements and evolved along with the balance of power between the voivodes and the Sublime Porte. No privileges or treaties fixed the juridical status of Moldavia and Wallachia in the long term, and the inhabitants of both principalities enjoyed a status similar to other zimmi inhabiting the Ottoman domains (p. 149-150).

Yet even in the absence of a treaty or a diploma defining the juridical status of Wallachia and Moldavia, there was a fixed set of rights that the two principalities enjoyed in their relations with the Ottoman Porte, which can safely be considered a form of autonomy. Wasiucionek himself reiterates the elements of this "autonomy" in his description of the Wallachian and Moldavian political arenas:

Ottoman officials trying to establish their factional presence in the Danubian principalities found their traditional toolkit inapplicable. The absence of provincial administration similar to that in the core provinces of the empire and the Christian creed of the local elite meant that they could not simply recruit mamluks, find prospective clients in the Janissary corps or dispatch members of their households. As was the case with many political arenas across the empire, there were also significant obstacles in the form of

the collective identity of the peripheral elite, which limited access for outsiders, forcing households from the imperial centre to seek alliances with local powerholders and play according to local rules (p. 79).

The collective identity of the elite, the Christian creed, and the maintenance of control over local administration, the absence of *kadi* courts, are the core elements of the so-called autonomy and of the idea that the principalities were never conquered. Moreover, the collective identity of the Wallachian and Moldavian elite, which jealously guarded its position against intruders, implies a degree of agency which Wasiucionek plays down. This cohesive elite, undermined annexation plans of Zamoyski or Sobieski and clung to its prominence inside Wallachia and Moldavia, admittedly at a high financial cost.

Impressive for the wide range of primary and secondary sources it employs, Wasiucionek's book accomplishes one of the main tasks of any intellectual endeavour: it challenges long-held assumptions and interpretations. It prompts us to look at political events and processes in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in new ways. His reconstruction of the formation, operation, and dissolution of cross-border factions, and their role in the region's political life, is compelling. By reading the sources through this concept, he casts fresh light on how states in the region functioned and interacted, how resources were extracted, transferred, and converted into political capital, and why annexation or integration into larger polities succeeded or failed. Along the way, he offers fresh interpretations of the stability of the tribute during the 17th century and of the survival of the Danubian Principalities as distinct political entities. The demonstration is convincing, and the role of patron-client networks in Central and Southeastern Europe during the 17th century, though sometimes exaggerated, cannot be downplayed by future research. In sum, it is hard for researchers of early-modern politics not to find something of value in this book.
