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***The European Commission of the Danube, 1856–1948:
An Experiment in International Administration***

Balkan Studies Library: Volume: 27

Leiden, Boston 2020

ISBN 978-90-04-41253-8 (hardback), 394 pp.

Constantin Ardeleanu, a professor at the university in Galati, Romania, is an expert on the international relations and trade in the Danube and the Black Sea regions in the 19th and the 20th centuries. He also worked at the university in Utrecht and the New Europe College in Bucharest. Currently, he is the Vice President of the International Maritime History Association.

Ardeleanu's latest book is about the European Commission of the Danube, the world's second international organisation established in 1856, transformed in the inter-war period to be later dissolved in 1948 when the Soviet Union eliminated "western imperialism" from the largest European river. Recently, the interest in this organisation has considerably grown among historians. It focussed on various political, economic and hydraulic aspects, and the cooperation inside and outside the Commission. The growth in geographic and geological knowledge in the early stage of the Commission's work and the development in the Danube delta environment were investigated too. The historical legal studies

appraised the Commission's activities in the context of the international fluvial and maritime law. The outcomes of all of these studies were reflected in the Ardeleanu's synthesis that appraises how all these factors added to the Commission's formation and operation from the beginning until World War I. It is only one chapter that is devoted to the post-1918 period, which reflects both the project aim that had been in the background of the book, and the fact that the organisation's character and its role in the inter-war period markedly differed. The Commission became rather a tool for ensuring interests of victorious states, which kept conflicting with Romanian claims for enforcing the state sovereignty.

The book is framed in three analytic levels. The first deals with the international relations and the role of the Commission as an object, later on as an actor of the great power's politics. The second concentrates on the Commission as an experimental organisation that developed interior mechanisms and corporate culture that would be-

come the basis of trust in this body as a viable entity of the international system. The third line deals with science, technology and issues of the environment as part of the “river history”, and the Commission’s role as a technical manager ensuring navigation on the largest European river. The book points out the mutual influence of these factors and their impact on the Danube navigation “safety.”

The Commission establishment resulted from the great powers’ decision that was part of the Treaty of Paris, 1856. It aimed to limit the existing dominant influence of Russia in the Danube mouth region, and to eliminate insecurity that had prevailed in navigation and trade in the pre-war period. The aim was to include this region into the international trade and to enable food export from the Balkans to Western Europe. The position of the whole region in the periphery where international interests of several great powers had been clashing resulted in the emphasis on the navigation freedom, and the establishment of the Commission as a technical and political collective tool to ensure this aim. It was the Central Commission for the Navigation of the Rhine that had become the model.

The Commission dealt with making the Danube navigable, first of all, the river’s three main mouths. It had the right to set fees used for financing these works. Although it had been originally proposed for two years it outlasted another 82 years. After completing the complex hydraulic works, delegates from single great powers

would gradually transform the Commission into an actor of the regional and international politics, which virtually worked independently on Romanian administration after 1878; from 1883 it acted as a stable international body. As one separate and independent body, the Commission used a complicated multinational bureaucracy, and regulated navigation on the Danube through a complex package of internationally accepted rules and methods. Therefore, the Commission is depicted in the book as an effective, precedent, experimental organisation, which became the model for cooperation in the international system. Although the Commission intervened in the sovereign rights of the independent Romanian state, it was the international guarantor of the country’s safety as to the power claims of both Russia and Austria-Hungary. So for Romania, the Commission was a sphere where the national interests were asserted easier than elsewhere.

The findings gathered within the second and the third lines show that the solution of technical questions linked with improvement in navigation on the Danube turned up to be more difficult than it had been expected, so they could not be put into effect during those two years as had been planned. The solution was a new, markedly bureaucratized commission, the establishment of extensive international apparatus, and a package of regulatory measures adjusting everything from maritime pilot service, gauge unification and methods of gauging, to lighthouses construction. Experience

gained from the success in making the Danube navigable was used by project engineer, Charles Augustus Hartley, for adjustments on other rivers worldwide.

The Commission acted against the sovereign rights of the Ottoman Empire, e.g. through the public act of 1865, as well as it would assume a range of functions of the state, whose real power in the region had been falling apart. It usurped extensive powers, police and legal in character, in the sphere of trade and navigation. The success

was conditioned by its financial independence, which increased after 1860 as a result of the right to impose the customs duty on the river. Due to this measure, the town of Sulina in Northern Dobruja changed into a sort of a small international "Suez."

The book by Ardeleanu is a precedent work in many ways, both by the work concept and the complexity of approach. It is a significant piece that deserves attention.

Michal Wanner