

**Another most serene republic: reflections on the social and political stability of
Renaissance Ragusa**

(Very much work in progress)

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The question: a remarkable serenity

This essay addresses one of the most puzzling facts regarding Ragusan history. For roughly four hundred years – from the mid-14th until the mid-18th century – the Ragusan republic enjoyed remarkable social and political stability. In this extremely long period the city itself did not experience a single episode of social unrest or rebellion. The Ragusan district, consisting of a stretch of the Adriatic coast and several islands, enjoyed similar peace, with only one rebellion against Ragusan rule on the remote island of Lastovo in the early 1600s.¹ This social stability was accompanied by extraordinary political stability as well. The institutional structure of the republic remained largely unchanged from the early 14th century until the mid-18th when a number of reforms were introduced. In sum, in the long period separating Dante from Voltaire, Ragusan political system and social hierarchies remained largely unchanged, even unchallenged.²

Of course, such remarkable social and political stability represents a serious provocation to a historian. This paper seeks to point out some of the reasons behind it by adopting what seems to be the most plausible approach – comparing Ragusa with other medieval and Renaissance city-republics. The first and most obvious comparison is Venice, the mythical “most serene” Republic (*la Serenissima*) which is the only republican regime to have enjoyed similar stability

1 It was the rebellion of the island of Lastovo 1602-1606. For a good English summary, see: Nenad Vekarić, “The Lastovo rebels of 1602” *Dubrovnik Annals* 10 (2006): 59-86.

2 Besides the Lastovo rebellion, the only other challenge to political authority were several conspiracies. They were usually organized by few marginal noblemen and always discovered by the government before put into action; most importantly, none of them seems to have had constitutional change as its goal. It was usually about ceding part of the Ragusan territory to a neighboring state or supporting Christian reconquest of the Balkans against the strict neutrality professed by the government. A short overview with further bibliography is given in: Nenad Vekarić, *Vlastela grada Dubrovnika* (The Patricians of Ragusa) (Dubrovnik: HAZU, 2011), 197. On the most serious among the patrician conspiracies see: Zdenko Zlatar, *Our Kingdom Come: The Counter-Reformation, the Republic of Dubrovnik, and the Liberation of the Balkan Slavs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992)

and which, moreover, had massive influence on Ragusan society and politics.³ However, to a lesser degree this essay also takes into account other republican polities with more turbulent histories of social upheaval and institutional change. In the first place it is Florence, with its numerous constitutional experiments, and Genoa, the least serene republic of them all.

After a short description of Ragusan social and political structures, this essay addresses four major issues which contributed to the stability of the city. The first subchapter shows how the mercantile and maritime nature of its economy produced a society less prone to strife than the more industrial economies of many other city-states. The second subchapter stresses the remarkable cohesion and social discipline of the ruling group, trying to explain them through a peculiar way in which the Ragusan patriciate had established its political hegemony. The third subchapter deals with the secondary elite, the rich and influential *popolani*, investigating the reasons for their strongly deferential and cooperative relationship towards the patrician regime. Finally, the last subchapter investigates the various checks and balances typical of Ragusan institutions, stressing that while most of these mechanisms belonged to traditional republican repertoire in Ragusa they were often employed more radically than elsewhere.

The protagonist: Ragusa, its patricians and the rest

Late medieval and early modern Ragusa (modern Dubrovnik) was an aristocratic republic, situated at the Adriatic borderlands of the Ottoman, Venetian and Habsburg empires. For centuries it used this precarious position on the frontier, turning itself into a mediator – of trade goods, technologies and information – between the Ottoman Empire and Christian Europe. Despite its small size and military impotence, Ragusa managed to survive as a *de facto* independent state for almost five hundred years, from the mid-fourteenth to the early nineteenth century, when it was conquered by Napoleon. This remarkable survival was due not only to internal stability, but also skilful diplomatic balancing between the great powers which protected the small republic and granted it extensive trading privileges. Thus, from the mid-fourteenth until the early sixteenth century – until the fateful battle of Mohács in 1526 – the city relied on the

³ For analyses of the Venetian stability see: Brian Pullan, “The Significance of Venice” *Bulletin of John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 56 (1973-74): 443-462; Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani the Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987).

protection of its nominal sovereign, the Hungarian king.⁴ The most important and long-lasting political patron of Ragusa was an even more impressive ruler, however – the Ottoman sultan. In the mid-fifteenth century, after the Ottoman conquest of most of its Balkan hinterland, Ragusa became a tribute-payer of the Sublime Porte, committing itself to “fidelity” and an annual tribute, in return gaining Ottoman protection and immense trading privileges in the empire.⁵ Yet the close ties with the Ottoman court did not prevent the small Republic from cherishing excellent relations with the major Christian powers as well, primarily the Spanish Habsburgs and the papacy.⁶

Similarly to Venice, its great competitor and former master, the Ragusan city-state was governed by councils elected from a clearly defined circle of patrician families, established by the *serrata* of 1332, with the majority of the population excluded from governing. Again as in Venice, the government had a roughly pyramidal structure in which every smaller council was a part of the broader one. On the very top was the rector, the official head of the republic, who presided over all the councils and played a prominent ceremonious role, but in fact had very little real power. The daily business of government was conducted by the Minor council, composed of the rector and eleven senior patricians. The crucial affairs of the republic, such as foreign policy and legislative activity, were conducted by the Senate, an even broader council which encompassed the minor council plus roughly 30-40 more of the most influential patricians. Finally, at the bottom of the governmental pyramid was the Great council which included all the adult male patricians – usually some 300-400 individuals – serving primarily as a voting machine; it elected all the officials and voted on the laws proposed by the senate.⁷

Leaving the clergy aside, Renaissance Ragusans traditionally divided their society into three main groups: nobility (*nobili, nobiles*), citizens (*cittadini, cives de popolo, popolani grandi*) and

4 A good English overview is: Robin Harris, *Dubrovnik. A History* (London: Saqi, 2003), 62-76.

5 Basic overviews of Ottoman-Ragusan relationship are: Ivan Božić, *Dubrovnik i Turska u XIV i XV veku* (Ragusa and Turkey in the 14th and 15th Centuries) (Belgrade: SAN, 1952); Toma Popović, *Turska i Dubrovnik u XVI veku* (Turkey and Ragusa in the 16th Century) (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1973). For a summary in English: Harris, *Dubrovnik*, 77-100; 105-110.

6 The standard overviews are still: Jorjo Tadić, *Španija i Dubrovnik u XVI veku* (Spain and Ragusa in the 16th Century) (Belgrade: SKA, 1932); Đuro Körbler, “Dubrovačka republika i zapadne evropske države: veze Dubrovnika s Napulem, Sicilijom, Francuskom i Špañolskom” (The Ragusan Republic and the States of Western Europe: the Relations of Ragusa with Naples, Sicily, France and Spain) *Rad JAZU* 93 (1916): 165-252. See also: Harris, *Dubrovnik*, 101-105; 110-117.

7 Good overview of Ragusan institutional structure is: Zdenka Janeković Römer *Okvir slobode. Dubrovačka vlastela između srednjovjekovlja i humanizma* (The Frame of Freedom: Patricians of Dubrovnik between the Middle Ages and Humanism). Zagreb and Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 1999, 91–182.

the plebeians (*plebei, popolani minuti, popolo*).⁸ The nobility, which consisted of some 30 families in the 15th century, was distinguished by the right of its legitimate male members to enter the Great council and thus to elect and be elected for public office. Ragusan patriciate was, beyond any doubt, one of the most rigid and closed aristocratic systems in European history. This fact was recognized already by well-informed contemporary thinkers: thus, Jean Bodin called Ragusa the “purest aristocracy, furthest removed from any popular influence.”⁹ For more than three hundred years – from the mid-14th until the mid-17th century – access to public office was completely monopolized by a clearly defined group of patrician families. Throughout this long period, despite wealth or merit, not a single non-noble individual managed to enter the ranks of the patriciate and thus participate in the governance of the republic. The extreme closeness of the elite was further strengthened by the fact that the patricians practised one of the strictest endogamies in early modern Europe. While the law forbade them to marry plebeians, in theory they were allowed to marry with the neighbouring aristocracies; however, in practice almost all the patricians married inside the narrow circle of the Ragusan patriciate itself. Naturally, this drastically reduced the availability of suitable partners – it is no overstatement to say that everybody was everybody's cousin – gradually leading the patriciate towards extinction; indeed, by the early 19th century only few noble families remained.

The non-noble majority of the population was traditionally separated into citizens (*cittadini*) and plebeians (*plebei*). Although there was no clear legal distinction between these two types of *popolo*, they were distinguished by wealth and social status. The citizens – in fact, the secondary elite of the city – consisted of rich merchants, notaries, chancellors, teachers, physicians, and the illegitimate descendants of the patricians. They were organized into two confraternities, St. Anthony and St. Lazarus, and tended to imitate the nobility in their way of life. By the seventeenth century the differences between the *cittadini* and the rest of the *popolo* became even clearer. The *cittadini* developed an endogamy of their own; the confraternity of St. Anthony conducted its own *serrata*, limiting its membership to a defined group of the families in a manoeuvre reminiscent of the “closing” of the patriciate; finally, the members of St. Anthony

8 On this tripartite division of the society see: Zrinka Pešorda, “Pučka vlastela: Socijalna struktura barovstine sv. Antiuna u srednjem vijeku,” (The Plebeian Patricians: The social structure of the confraternity of St. Anthony in the Middle ages) *Povijesni prilozi* 23 (2006): 216, 223-224.

9 purissimam & ab omni populari temperatione remotissimam Aristocratiam. (Jean Bodin, *De republica libri sex* (Paris: Apud Iacobvm Dv-pvys, 1586), 222.)

monopolized key posts in the administration, especially the place of Republic's secretaries.¹⁰ The rest of the population, the plebeians, consisted of artisans, sailors, shopkeepers, servants and unskilled labourers. Many of them recent immigrants, especially from the hinterland, these people were members of the non-elite confraternities and guilds, none of which enjoyed any political influence in the city. Their political marginality was further exacerbated by the fact that they often did not own their homes, but rented them from the state or the upper classes, and that they lived in small nuclear families, very different from the broad kindred networks of the powerful.¹¹

The socio-economic reasons for stability

The first group of factors contributing to the stability of Renaissance Ragusa was related to the peculiar nature of the city's economy. The fact that Ragusa was an overwhelmingly mercantile society seems to have contributed in a number of ways to the lack of social strife. The predominance of mercantile activity meant that the economic interests of the entire elite, but also the middle class, were similar and that Ragusa avoided tensions which might have followed from the discrepancy between the mercantile and industrial or agricultural interest. In Ragusa, but also Venice, such primacy of mercantile interest was visible in the remarkable fact that these cities had no merchant's guild. Such an institution was not necessary since its function was performed by the state itself, which thereby became a principal promoter of the economic interest of the higher echelons of the society, noble and non-noble alike.¹² Equally importantly, the mercantile character of society produced a social structure which lacked significant industrial sector – that is, a population which was proverbially politically problematic. Ragusan society mostly consisted of sailors, traders and servants who were much easier to control than the mass of craftsmen and laborers inhabiting the tightly packed neighborhoods of the more industrial cities.

10 Most recent studies of the *cittadini* are: Pešorda, "Pucka vlastela," 211-243; idem, "Bratimska elita: o počecima dubrovačke bratovštine sv. Antuna" in: *Med Srednjo Evropo in Sredozemljem: Vojetov zbornik*, ed. Sašo Jerše (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC SAZU, 2006), 427-442; Stjepan Cosic, "Prilog poznavanju arhiva Dubrovačke republike," *Arhivist* 20 (1997): 129-130.

11 For a detailed analysis of Ragusan social structure, see: Harris, *Dubrovnik*, chapters 7 and 9.

12 For *predominio del commercio* in Venice, see: Gino Luzzatto, *Storia economica di Venezia dall'XI al XVI secolo*. (Venice: Centro internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, 1961), 65-80; Roberto Cessi, *Politica ed economia di Venezia nel Trecento: saggi* (Rome, 1952), 8; Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, 1973), 104.

Besides the common economic interests and the peculiar social structure, there was another, simpler reason why mercantile and maritime societies such as Ragusa tended to be more stable. A significant percentage of the adult male population – the main political troublemakers – was absent from the city for extended periods of time. Whether engaged in sea or land trade, most of the elite and non-elite members of the society normally spent only several months a year at home. In Ragusa the numbers are highly revealing: for instance, in the mid-sixteenth century the entire Republic had roughly 53,000 inhabitants, while its fleet consisted of some 4,000-5,000 men.¹³ This already stunning number – almost 10 % of the entire population, including women, children and elders – becomes even more remarkable once one takes into account also the significant part of the population engaged in land trade, the extensive network of Ragusan merchants and colonies in the Balkans and Europe. The number of land traders has never been estimated, but they surely amounted to several thousand. Assuming that roughly one third of every population is made of able-bodied males, this means that at least a third or even half of the entire male population of Ragusa spent extended periods of time, sometimes literally years, away from home. Doubtlessly, this dispersed population was less prone to revolt and easier to control than the industrial neighborhoods or feudal networks in the district, which were characteristic of many other city-states. Moreover, one could apply to Ragusa the argument which Frederick Lane made about Venice regarding the connection between social deference and maritime tradition. Lane argued that the rigid discipline necessary for seafaring – the experience of the captain's almost absolute power or the fact that the fastest ship in the convoy needed to accommodate to the slowest – created habits of collective obedience which were transposed to the political behavior of the population.¹⁴

In sum, the mercantile and maritime economy of Ragusa seems to have contributed to social peace through several main factors: the similarity of economic interests between the classes, the comparative lack of industrial population, the absence of males and the discipline engendered by seafaring. However, although these factors certainly contributed to the social stability, they were not sufficient to ensure it by themselves. One striking example proves that beyond any doubt –

¹³ Nenad Vekarić, "The population of the Dubrovnik republic in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries," *Dubrovnik Annals* 2 (1998): 26. For the numbers of the fleet see: Josip Luetić, "Dubrovačko pomorstvo" *Historijski zbornik* 8 (1955): 204.

¹⁴ Lane, *Venice*, 91-95.

that of Genoa. Although Genoa shared the aforementioned characteristics, nonetheless it was among the most socially turbulent urban communities of the late medieval Europe.¹⁵

A “tamed” elite: the patriciate

Another major reason for the stability of Ragusa lay in the peculiar character of its patriciate. It differed quite sharply from the elites of most city-states in several important segments such as its origin, economic background, legal status, numerosness and the type of influence it enjoyed. In order to understand the character of such elite – comparable only to that of Venice – one should make a short digression into medieval history.

The peculiar character of the Ragusan patriciate was visible already in the medieval period (12th-14th centuries) and significantly affected the political development of the city. Most importantly, the patricians of Ragusa – but also those of Venice – differed sharply from the elites of other city-states when it came to their political culture and the basis of their power. The ruling groups of Italian cities, often descended from the neighboring feudal aristocracy, possessed a political culture dominated by notions of family honor, vendetta and a proclivity to violence.¹⁶ Moreover, many of them still held extensive estates and fortresses in the city’s district and thus had extra-urban bases of power from which they could raise private armies and significant income.¹⁷ Such social profile of the elite significantly contributed to the endemic civil strife of the medieval Italian cities, creating what is usually referred to as the “tower societies,” an urban landscape characterized by fortifications of family clans in a latent state of civil war. On the other hand, the nobilities of Ragusa and Venice – and this is what distinguishes them from the Genoese elite – were thoroughly mercantile city-dwellers without feudal background and thus less influenced by the martial and chivalric ethos. Equally so, due to the lack of extensive *contado*, they did not possess power bases in the countryside, instead building their power on investments in trade, which decreased their autonomy, making them more dependent on

¹⁵ Muir makes this point regarding Lane’s argument about seafaring and discipline in Venice (Edward Muir, “Sources of Civil Society in Italy,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 29 (1999): 384.)

¹⁶ For the Florentine example: D. De Rosa, *Alle origini della repubblica fiorentina: dai consoli al “primo popolo” (1172–1260)* (Florence, 1995), 9–31; Carol Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton: PUP, 1991).

¹⁷ As Lansing argued in this regard the Florentine magnates centuries were somewhat exceptional: although many of them were recent immigrants to the city, their “sources of power and identity were fundamentally urban” (Lansing, *The Florentine magnates*, 5).

cooperation and state.¹⁸ Such difference in character of the ruling group is certainly one of the key reasons for the striking contrast between the social turbulences of most Italian cities in later medieval period and the remarkable social peace characteristic of contemporary Venice and Ragusa.¹⁹

The relatively non-violent ethos of the Ragusan patriciate contributed to one remarkable historical fact: the city never experienced a *popolo* movement. That is, Ragusa avoided the dramatic rise of a popular movement which profoundly transformed the elites, constitutions and political cultures of most Italian city-states during the thirteenth and fourteenth century. In many urban communities the constant feuding of the old elite represented a crucial impetus for the rise of the *popolo*, which took an active political role in self-defense, trying to “tame” the magnate families and develop a “counter culture” of civic duty, cooperation and self-control.²⁰ Another reason why Ragusa avoided the *popolo* lies in the mercantile and maritime nature of its economy emphasized above. As in other thalassocratic city-states – Venice and Pisa – the predominance of trade produced a social structure which was less conducive to the popular movement, weakening its traditional social base. Such societies of merchants and sailors contained much smaller numbers of industrial entrepreneurs, craftsmen and unskilled workers who could organize themselves in aggressive guilds and neighborhood associations, typical of the mainland cities of North-central Italy.²¹

¹⁸ For similar remarks regarding the Venetian patriciate see: Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 171.

¹⁹ Admittedly, it seems that originally Venice shared some of the violence characteristic of other communes largely since its oldest elite shared the martial feudal ethos (with somewhat Byzantine bent, of course). However, as Muir pointed out in the thirteenth century new elite – “decidedly mercantile” - took over the key positions and pacified the city, creating recognizable republican ethos (Muir, “The Sources of Civil Society,” 384; on this *commune di capitalisti* see also: Cracco Giorgio, *Società e stato nel medioevo veneziano (secoli XII-XIV)* (Florence, 1967), 1-28). Of course, another important reason for the absence of socio-political conflict in Venice and Ragusa was certainly the absence of Guelphs and Ghibellines, two parties and ideological outlooks that divided most other city-states.

²⁰ Najemy, *History of Florence*, 11-20, 28, 57-62.

²¹ Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 60. The mercantile nature of society, especially the lack of textile industry, as the reason for the absence of political engagement of the guilds is also pointed out by Richard Mackenney. Mackenney also stresses the fact that Venetian guilds were closely supervised by the state and that was an extremely big number of them which led to fragmentation and political marginality (Richard Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders. The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe, C. 1250- c. 1650* (Routledge, 1987) 1-43, especially 3-4, 8-12, 23-30; Richard Mackenney, “The Guilds of Venice: State and Society in the *longue durée*,” *Studi Veneziani*, n.s.34 (1997), 21). This trend continued also in the later period: in the sixteenth century Venice there were roughly 100 guilds, compared to the traditional 21 guilds of Florence (Brian Pullan, “Three Orders of Inhabitants’,” 164-165). For a similar situation in Ragusa, see: Josip Lučić, *Obrti i usluge u Dubrovniku do početka XIV stoljeća*, (Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu – Institut za hrvatsku povijest, 1979), *passim*, for the guilds and authorities, 219-222.

Thus, while the relative scarcity of industrial sector in Ragusa undermined the social base of the popular movement, the peacefulness of the elite took away one of the most important motives for its formation. This conspicuous lack of a popular movement profoundly affected the subsequent development of Ragusan society and political institutions. Most importantly, late medieval Ragusa never developed a politically assertive secondary elite which contended for power and thereby destabilized the extant social and political order. In other cities such a struggle between the old elite and the new men leading the *popolo* caused chronic civil strife, and usually resulted with *signoria*, or, as in Florence and Genoa, with constant reshuffling of ruling groups and institutions. In contrast, Ragusa developed along a different socio-political trajectory, similar to that of Venice: the old elite remained unchallenged, establishing a remarkable political, cultural and economic hegemony.

In both Venice and Ragusa a crucial step towards that hegemony was the so-called *serrata* or the “closing” of the Great Council. At a certain point – 1297 in Venice and 1332 in Ragusa – the authorities composed a list of families whose male members hence had the exclusive and hereditary right to enter the basic governmental body, the Great council. This meant that access to public office and political decision-making was reserved for a clearly defined circle of patrician families, totally excluding the rest of the population from politics. How peculiar such constitutional act was in the heyday of the *popolo* becomes apparent when one recalls that the Florentine “ordinances of justice” and the Venetian *serrata* – two political arrangements with drastically different outcomes – happened with only a few years interval, in 1293 and 1297 respectively. Importantly, this comparison is representative of the broader trends: while in other city-states new men entered governing bodies and the elite was opened to an unprecedented scale, in Venice and Ragusa the lines between the rulers and the ruled were fixed for centuries to come.

The Ragusan *serrata* was a radical constitutional act which had a profound impact on the city’s society and politics, significantly contributing to its stability. In 1332 the Minor council entrusted three “good men” with making a list of all the current members of the Great council and those men who were presently not in the council, but were “worthy” to belong to it. The result was the definition of a group of families which monopolized political power for more than three hundred years: from 1332 until after the disastrous earthquake of 1667, which brought the nobility to the verge of biological extinction, no new family gained access to the ranks of the

patriciate. Such extreme closeness of the ruling group was further accentuated by the strict endogamy which the patricians practiced. Already from the fourteenth century they married almost exclusively among themselves and from 1462 it was legally prescribed that nobles who married plebeian spouses automatically lost their noble status together with their offspring. All in all, by the fifteenth century the Ragusan patriciate had effectively turned itself into a caste.²²

Although the Ragusan *serrata* eventually resulted in an exclusivist and oligarchic regime, originally its consequences were exactly the opposite. Recent demographic research has revealed a striking fact: at the time of the Council's "closing" the families listed among the patriciate numbered more than 1700 people in the urban population of some 4000. In other words, roughly 40 % of the population in 1332 entered the newly established patriciate.²³ How exceptionally high this percentage was becomes clear once Ragusa is compared with the contemporary, post-*serrata* Venice in which nobility made only some 5% of the population.²⁴ The huge size of the ruling group in Ragusa suggests that the *serrata* encompassed not only the old elite and the important new men, but also the ordinary citizens of modest wealth – in sum, the *serrata* drastically *broadened* the elite circle. The ones left behind were probably recent immigrants in the city, employed as petty artisans such as bakers, butchers, tailors, shoemakers and the numerous servants and slaves who worked in the noble households. The immediate result of the Ragusan *serrata* was a highly participatory republican regime which bears comparison with the most "democratic" constitutions of other city-states. For instance, in the Florentine guild republic of 1293 some 8% of the entire population was eligible for public office, while in Ragusa of 1332 that number was higher than 10%.²⁵

²² On the "closing" of the Ragusan councils and the patrician monopoly of power, see: Nenad Vekarić, "The Proportion of the Ragusan Nobility at the Closing of the Major Council in 1332," *Dubrovnik Annals* 16 (2012): 7-22. Janeković, *Okvir*, 48-73; For a comparative analysis, see Bariša Krekić, "Developed Autonomy: the Patricians in Dubrovnik and Dalmatian Cities," in *Dubrovnik: A Mediterranean Urban Society, 1300-1600*, II, 185-215; Tomislav Raukar, *Hrvatsko Srednjovjekovlje. Prostor, ljudi, ideje* (Croatian Middle Ages. Space, People, Ideas) (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, Zavod za hrvatsku povijest Filozofskog Fakulteta u Zagrebu, 1997), 188-190; 196-201. On the patrician endogamy see also: Ana Marinković, "Social and Territorial Endogamy in the Ragusan Republic: Matrimonial Dispenses during the Pontificates of Paul II and Sixtus IV (1464-1484)," in *The Long Arm of Papal Authority: Late Medieval Christian Peripheries and Their Communication with the Holy See*, ed. Gerhard Jaritz, Torsten Bo Jørgensen and Kirsi Salonen (Bergen-Budapest-Krems: CEU Press & Medium Aevum Quotidianum, 2005), 135-156.

²³ Nenad Vekarić, "The Proportion of the Ragusan Nobility," 14.

²⁴ Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*, 28-29.

²⁵ Of course this comparison has to be made keeping in mind the drastic difference in size between the two cities: at that time Florence was a megalopolis of roughly 100 000 while Ragusa was a petty town of some 4000 inhabitants. In Florence some 8000 men were eligible for public office, while in Ragusa some 425 males entered the major

Needless to say, such enormous elite contributed to the stability of the regime by providing it with a broad social base. Although its closeness and rigid endogamy gradually led to demographic decline, the patriciate remained extraordinarily large also in the later period. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it amounted to roughly 20% of the city's population, which was again far more than most urban elites which normally amounted to some 5%.²⁶ Speaking of the regime's social base one should also bear in mind that a big portion of non-noble population lived in the patrician households as servants and slaves. Thus, in the moment of *serrata* the noble households encompassed the striking 2/3 of the entire population, while in mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth century this percentage amounted to roughly 1/3 of the city.²⁷ Moreover, the fact that *serrata* included almost everyone worthy of note ensured something vital for social stability: the group of new and successful men – always politically dangerous – began forming from zero. It took roughly a century for the noticeable secondary elite of *cittadini* to emerge at all, organized in the confraternity of St. Anthony, discussed below. Even then the *cittadini* group remained numerically inferior to the patriciate, encompassing some 10-15% of the population. In sum, the *serrata* produced a social structure which was favourable to patrician dominance. Besides the mass of urban *popolo minuto*, Ragusan society consisted of an unusually big ruling group, a significant non-noble population closely dependent upon it, and a smaller group of successful but politically disenfranchised new men.

Importantly, the *serrata* also led to the political transformation of the elite, changing the relationship of patrician families towards one another and the state. When public office and political decision-making were turned into a hereditary prerogative of a closed circle of families, the state became something reminiscent of a private company owned by patricians as shareholders. Such a sense of private property over public institutions is revealed by the standard vocabulary of the governing bodies which constantly referred to “our” city, republic or *signoria*, “inherited” and “bequeathed” from the ancestors.²⁸ In other words, the *serrata* contributed to the cohesion and cooperation of the patrician families by intertwining their interests and tying them

council in 1332. For the Florentine numbers: Najemy, *History*, 43. For Ragusa, see: Vekarić, *Vlastela grada Dubrovnika*, 141, 145.

²⁶ Vekarić, *Vlastela*, 145; Stjepan Krivosic, *Stanovništvo Dubrovnika i demografske promjene u prošlosti*, (Dubrovnik: Zavod zapovijesne znanosti JAZU u Dubrovniku, 1990.) 29, 59-63)

²⁷ For the estimates of the numbers in patrician households see: Vekarić, *Vlastela*, 147.

²⁸ For some intriguing Venetian analogies see: Alberto Tenenti, “Il senso dello Stato,” in: *Storia di Venezia dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima, vol. IV. Il Rinascimento. Politica e cultura*, ed. Alberto Tenenti and Ugo Tucci (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1996), 311-44.

to the state. All the members of the patriciate shared the same basic interest of maintaining their privileged position, or, formulated negatively, of excluding the rest of the population from access to the limited amount of offices and privileges provided by the state. This already points towards another change induced by this major constitutional event: the *serrata* was certainly one of the key steps in the creation of a state-centred mentality typical of the Ragusan nobility. The state was seen as the principal source of benefits and therefore personal and familial gain was normally sought *through* it, not outside or against it. Besides being a source of much-craved public offices, the state functioned as a combination of a shareholder firm and a social policy agency specialized for the elite: it granted various privileges, divided newly acquired state lands among the patricians, and provided pensions and dowries for the poor members of the nobility. All in all, the *serrata* was not only a means of excluding the majority of population from governance, but, equally importantly, of pacifying the elite itself by binding its interests closely to the state. When the cohesion and state-centred mentality, induced by the *serrata*, combined with the aforementioned peacefulness of the Ragusan non-feudal, mercantile elite, the result was a highly cooperative and disciplined ruling group.

This group was further disciplined, even “tamed,” by the fact that Ragusan context offered few possibilities of forming private power bases. Unlike many other urban elites Ragusan patricians did not build their influence through extensive networks of patronage, usually with firm territorial base in a certain neighbourhood, as was the case with the Florentine *grandi* or the Genoese *alberghi*.²⁹ Similarly to Venice, where Romano stressed the “noblemen's lack of interest in the neighbourhood,” Ragusan patricians lived scattered through the city and showed no tendency to entrench their influence in certain areas. The organization of urban administration in Venice and Ragusa also took away the opportunity for the elite to form local bases of power within the city. Thus, while in Florence the parishes were important administrative units, the *foci* of fiscal and electoral politics, in Venice they had only minor responsibility for mundane

²⁹ A good summary of forms of patronage in medieval and renaissance Florence is: Francis W. Kent, "Patron-Client Networks in Renaissance Florence and the Emergence of Lorenzo as 'Maestro della Bottega,'" in Bernard Toscani (ed.), *Lorenzo de' Medici: New Perspectives* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 279-313, especially 283-290. For Genoa see: Diane Owen Hughes, "Kinsmen and Neighbors in Medieval Genoa." in: *The Medieval City: Essays written in honor of Robert S. Lopez.*, eds Harry A. Miskimin, David Herlihy, Abraham L. Udovitch and Robert Sabatino Lopez. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 95-111. It should be kept in mind, however, that such networks of patron-client relationships often went beyond the city itself, ensuring the elite with the power bases in the district. A valuable study of Florentine patronage network in a provincial town of Pistoia in the fifteenth century is: William Connell, *La città dei crucci: fazioni e clientele in uno stato repubblicano del '400* (Firenze: Nuova Toscana editrice, 2000), especially 81-147.

administration. In Ragusa, remarkably, there was *only one parish* encompassing the entire city. Probably aware of the political danger they might represent, the government consistently resisted the attempts of ecclesiastical authorities to divide the city into parishes, even in the late fifteenth century when Ragusa reached some 10,000 inhabitants.³⁰ Another phenomenon, closely related to the absence of noble territorial power, is that in Ragusa there were no extensive patronage networks, structures of private power that ran parallel to the institutions of state. Documents do not mention patronage at all; however, to the small extent to which it must have existed, patronage probably functioned similarly to the way in which it did in Venice. Again it was strongly state-centred: it took the form of patricians working through the state apparatus, trying to negotiate privileges, pensions and pardons for their non-noble “clients.”³¹ In sum, although the patrician families in Venice and Ragusa enjoyed significant prestige and support of extensive kin-networks, they had far less private power and were more dependent upon the state than their Florentine or Genoese counterparts. One could say that Ragusan and Venetian patriciates were not only cohesive, disciplined and state-centred, but also politically “disarmed” – in the sense that they lacked many of the tools, forms of private power, available to other urban elites in undermining the social and political order.

The remarkable cohesion and discipline of Ragusan nobility is revealed when one turns to one of the chronic causes of urban instability – noble factionalism. It is symptomatic that only recently, after more than a century of research on patriciate, have the historians finally detected vague traces of factions within the ruling group. It seems that the patriciate was divided into two, sometimes three, groups of families with pronounced tendency to intermarry and occasionally one of these groups would be overrepresented in public office. The causes of their conflict are not clear and their political programmes were far from fixed, but these factions were relatively stable through time, lasting at least from the sixteenth until the early nineteenth century. What is

³⁰ For Venice see: Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*, 120-121, 123,130. For the absence of parishes in Ragusa: Vojnović, Kosta. “Crkva i država u dubrovačkoj republici” (The Church and State in Ragusan Republic). Rad JAZU 119 (1894): 38-39. Moreover, in Ragusa there was nothing similar to the Florentine *gonfaloni*, sixteen administrative units dividing the city, which had their own banner, small bureaucracy and often engendered strong loyalties among its members. In Ragusa their closest equivalent, the *sestieri*, had no autonomy nor specific institutions of their own, serving merely as conventional divisions of urban space for the central administration (On the *gonfaloni*, see: D. V. Kent and F. W. Kent, *Neighbours and Neighborhood in Renaissance Florence: the District of the Red Lion in the Fifteenth Century* (New York, 1982): Francis W. Kent, "Un paradiso habitato da diavoli": Ties of Loyalty and Patronage in the Society of Medicean Florence," in: Anna Benvenuti (ed.), *Le radici cristiane di Firenze* (Florence: Alinea, 1994), 188-191.

³¹ Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*, 120-131.

crucial is that their struggle, however fierce at moments, was conducted almost exclusively through institutions. It mostly consisted of battling for key offices and outvoting in the councils of the republic. There were only few isolated occasions – like the public murder of a prominent partisan of one faction in 1589 – that the factional conflict spilled beyond the council halls and even then it failed to start a chain of violence. All in all, as the leading scholar of faction has aptly put it, in Renaissance Ragusa the political cleavages indeed were “invisible.”³²

A well-behaved *popolo*

Besides the cooperative and non-violent ruling group, another issue of vital importance for the stability of an urban society was that the secondary elite consented with extant socio-political order. These men, distinguished from the mass of *popolo* by their influence, wealth or education, often presented main threat to the regime, primarily by becoming leaders of the broader popular fronts. A good example are the non-elite members of major guilds in late medieval Florence, whose consent was crucial for any government to function and who at moment cooperated with the *grandi*, while at others they entered coalitions with minor guildsmen, even artisans and manual workers.³³ It is intriguing that absolutely the most cooperative and deferential secondary elites are to be found in the most exclusivist regimes with closed ruling groups – that is, in renaissance Venice and Ragusa. This implies that the rigid closeness of the elite, which superficially might seem as a good reason for social strife, in fact promoted stability or, at least, did not hinder it significantly. It is indeed possible to argue that, if certain preconditions were met, the fact that the secondary elite was unambiguously excluded from governance made its members renounce political ambition and develop deferential attitude towards the regime.

Most obviously, what helped Ragusan *cittadini* acquiesce was that the Republic was usually economically well-off and that higher social echelons had excellent opportunities to earn fortunes through trade. Moreover, Ragusan state was unusually sound in the financial sense, generally avoiding financial crises and thereby not imposing loans and taxes on the population,

32 The title of the crucial book on noble factions is “Invisible cleavages.” On Ragusan patrician faction see: Nenad Vekarić, *Nevidljive pukotine: dubrovački vlasteoski klanovi* [Invisible Cleavages: The Clans of Ragusan Patriciate] (Zagreb-Dubrovnik: HAZU, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2009); Stjepan Ćosić and Nenad Vekarić, *Dubrovačka vlastela između roda i države: Salamankezi i Sorbonezi* [The Ragusan Patriciate between the Kindred and the State: the Salamankezi and Sorbonezi] (Zagreb-Dubrovnik: HAZU, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku), 2005.

33 Najemy, *History*, passim, especially 63.

measures which led to serious crises in other cities. Another reason for the deference of the *cittadini* elite probably was that their political disenfranchisement was partially compensated by reserving for them some important places in the state administration. Thus, from the sixteenth century members of the *cittadini* families had exclusive right to posts of notaries and state chancellors, influential administrative specialists. Equally so, the patrician monopoly on public office was somewhat loosened in diplomacy: members of *cittadini* families were often used as secretaries of patrician envoys, but also as ambassadors of the republic in affairs of minor importance.³⁴ This arrangement was similar to the political role which *cittadini* group enjoyed in Venice where it also monopolized posts in the chancellery and a number of other positions in the administration.³⁵

Although economic growth and political compensations certainly contributed to the deference of *cittadini*, the most important reason is probably to be sought in their close relationship with the patriciate. It is important to keep in mind that besides one, albeit serious, legal difference – the right to participate in politics – there was little that distinguished patricians from the *cittadini*. In most aspects of life – such as family structure, living standards, wealth or education – the two highest layers of Ragusan society were hard to distinguish. Even more importantly, their members created strong and lasting mutual ties: they entered business ventures together, belonged to the same confraternities, lived in same neighbourhoods, participated in same literary academies and theatre companies.³⁶ In sum, the two groups were connected by a thick web of social relations which established strong vertical solidarities between them (thus weakening the horizontal solidarities of the *cittadini* themselves). The difference between the two elite groups was further obfuscated by the fact that the *cittadini* copied the patricians in many regards. They imitated patrician lifestyle, but also group behaviour, for instance establishing an endogamy of their own and even “closing” their confraternity of St. Anthony in an act reminiscent of the patrician *serrata*. The connection between these groups was further strengthened by family ties since the illegitimate offspring of patricians – often acknowledged and raised with their legitimate siblings – usually entered the *cittadini* ranks. While the illegitimate daughters of

³⁴ Pešorda, "Pucka vlastela," 230; Ćosić, "Prilog poznavanju," 129-130.

³⁵ For a good summary of the specific administrative posts reserved for *cittadini* originari in Renaissance Venice, see: Brian Pullan, "'Three Orders of Inhabitants': Social Hierarchies in the Republic of Venice," 161-163, in: Denton, Jeffrey, ed. *Orders and Hierarchies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Europe*. (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

³⁶ Janeković Römer, *Okvir slobode*, 338-339. In Venice the situation was similar, see: Romano, *Patricians and Popolani*, 145, 149.

nobles married into respected popular families, their sons started the *popolo* branches of the noble houses, often keeping the prestigious last name.³⁷ Similar lifestyles, social and familial ties, even the conscious imitation of patricians by the *cittadini*, led to one fact crucial for the stability of the Renaissance Ragusa. The real gap was perceived to exist less between the two elite groups, but more between them and the rest of the population, the craftsmen, servants and sailors of the urban *popolo minuto*.

Institutional framework: the dictate of collectivism

Besides the various economic, demographic, legal and social reasons mentioned above, yet another factor ensuring the stability of Ragusa were numerous safeguards and controls built into its republican institutions. Generally speaking, Ragusans did not devise strikingly new constitutional arrangements and principles – the city's institutions were similar to those of Venice – but what they did was apply the traditional republican solutions in a far more radical way than most other cities. In short, Ragusan political system was characterized by maximal dispersion of power and an elaborate system of mutual controls between the governmental bodies. As in many other republics, all magistrates had very short terms of office, lasting one year at most, and thereby creating a quick rotation of people which prevented the concentration of power. The same purpose served the rigorously observed rules of vacancy applied for all the more important governmental posts – usually an individual could have been re-elected into his former position only after one or two years. Moreover, there were strict rules forbidding the members of one kindred to hold the same public office – the laws repeatedly insisted on *uno pro sclata*. Finally, the system was made so that no important political decision could have been made individually; literally all decisions of any importance had to be made collectively, in broad councils, especially the senate.

How important was such collective decision-making is nicely illustrated by an extreme example: even in the situations of open war, when quick decisions were absolutely necessary, Ragusans hesitated to entrust all the power to one individual. When choosing commanding officers of the army or the fleet, the custom was to appoint three patricians. In other words, even at the risk of

³⁷ Pesorda, "Pucka vlastela," 20-21. Again, Venice had the same model: For Venice see: Pullan, "Three Orders of Inhabitants," 162.

serious operational problems, the patricians opted for collective decision-making and mutual control. The same attitude can be detected in one of the most critical moments of the city's history, in 1358 when Ragusa managed to achieve its factual independence. In a vacuum of power after the last Venetian governor left - a situation of profound insecurity with the victorious Hungarian King advancing in Dalmatia - Ragusans chose, symptomatically, three rectors as the heads of government. There is a proverb, preserved in Renaissance documents, which wonderfully illustrates this kind of rigidly collectivist mentality: "the loss which has been agreed upon beforehand is better than the gain which has not been agreed upon."³⁸

However, probably the best illustrations of Ragusan fear of concentration of power are the institutional arrangements connected to the two most powerful figures in the city, the rector and the archbishop. The first striking fact about the rector, the head of Ragusan government, was the duration of his term of office – he was elected for one month only. This is probably the shortest term of office for a head of government in the whole of history of republicanism. Venice, the most obvious comparison, opted for a very different solution in the analogous situation. The Doge was elected for life and was traditionally considered to represent the monarchic element in the "mixed" constitution of the Serenissima.

Fear that the rector might abuse his position also led to other arrangements aiming to turn him into a mere figurehead. Thus, although he presided over all the councils, his vote had the same value as that of any other patrician. Moreover, the vacancy on the rector's office was among the longest – it amounted to two years. Additionally, the rector was allowed to communicate with foreign diplomats only in the presence of the minor council and could respond to diplomatic correspondence only together with the senate. Finally, during the one month of his mandate he was effectively a prisoner, forced to live in the governmental palace with his family and not allowed to leave it without the escort of governmental officials and armed guards.³⁹

³⁸ For the crucial events of 1358 in Ragusan history, see: Zdenka Janeković-Römer, *Višegradski ugovor. Temelj Dubrovačke republike* (The Treaty of Visegrad. The Foundation of Ragusan Republic) (Zagreb: Golden Marketing, 2003); Branislav M. Nedeljković, "Položaj Dubrovnika prema Ugarskoj (1358-1460)" (The Position of Ragusa towards Hungary (1358-1460)) *Godišnjak Pravnog fakulteta u Sarajevu* 15 (1967): 447-463; Vinko Foretić, "Godina 1358 u povijesti Dubrovnika" (The Year 1358 in the History of Ragusa), in: *Studije i rasprave iz hrvatske povijesti* (Split: Književnikrug Split, Matica Hrvatska Dubrovnik, 2001), 229-254; Dušanka Dinić- Knežević, *Dubrovnik i Ugarska u srednjem veku* (Ragusa and the Hungarian Kingdom in the Middle Ages) (Novi Sad: Filozofski fakultet u Novom Sadu, 1986), 16-21; Harris, *Dubrovnik*, 62-66. For the aforementioned proverb see: Gjuro Danicic, *Poslovice* (Proverbs) (Zagreb, 1871), 14.

³⁹ Nella Lonza, *Kazalište Vlasti. Ceremonijali državni blagdani Dubrovačke Republike u 17. i 18. stoljeću* [The Theatre of Power: State Ceremony and Feasts of the Dubrovnik Republic in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century] (Zagreb-Dubrovnik: HAZU), 2009), 52-75.

Another revealing example of fear of the strong individual, typical of Ragusan political culture, is the Republic's relationship towards its ecclesiastic head, the archbishop. In the middle ages this post was traditionally filled by members of the patriciate. However, it seems that the last of them, Archbishop Elias Saraca, achieved such power in the second half of the fourteenth century that after his death the patrician government opted for a drastic measure. In 1409 it made a law forbidding the natives of the city to hold office of the archbishop, asking the pope to nominate only foreigners. Politically, this seems like an odd decision, since the patriciate renounced means of control over the always problematic local Church. However, it seems that the fear that a local noble could unite the power of ecclesiastic office with that of his family surpassed all other considerations.⁴⁰

Conclusion (*To be provided in the paper*)

⁴⁰ Kosta Vojnović, “Crkva i država u dubrovačkoj republici” (The Church and State in Ragusan Republic). *Rad JAZU* 119 (1894): 32-45.