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The Stem Family in Eastern Europe: Cross-cultural and Trans-temporal Perspectives¹

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While for the Western and Central European stem family much research has been conducted, the situation in Eastern Europe is significantly different. Excepting Joel M. Halpern's and Richard A. Wagner's work on the Serbian village of Orašac,² almost no specific research has been done on this phenomenon. Most researchers, both historians and ethnologists, have been attracted by the large and complex families in the past, very often summarized under the label *zadruga*. Its structures and history were well investigated, as was also the case with its accompanying ideologies. This complex family structure has also been seen to be opposed to the nuclear family structure. This dualism has not yet allowed us to analyze accurately the processes of transition from complex to simple structures.

This paper aims to shed more light on this inadequately investigated subject, a subject that has become increasingly relevant over the course of the 20th century, during which, due to economic and social modernization processes, the family structures of Eastern European peoples were forced to adapt to rapidly altering conditions. Unfortunately, comparable data for

Eastern Europe as a whole is not available, and we will therefore focus on those Balkan countries for which we have analogous social structural data. Only future research can determine the extent to which we will be able to generalize our findings.

1. The historical setting

What is embodied in the geographic concept of “Eastern Europe”? I suggest a practical, and for our purposes, adequate definition. A generally accepted geographic definition of Eastern Europe has never been agreed upon in the past. As this paper deals primarily with historic as well as contemporary family forms, we need a definition that is valid over time. In this context we simply cannot overlook the so-called Hajnal line.³ This line marks a transitional zone reaching from Trieste to St. Petersburg. This is particularly interesting for us due to varying marriage patterns, customs of inheritance and household formation patterns it shows. This area, which divides Western and Eastern Europe, only lost its significance in the 20th century. This line should not be considered in a very strict sense, but conceptualized as a tool that helps us draw comparisons within Europe. Plakans and Wetherell⁴ argue that “Eastern Europe” – whatever we consider it to be – was never a culturally monolithic bloc but rather a plurality of regions and cultures. In approximate terms it stretches along today’s border between Slovenia and Croatia, as well as between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and crosses Poland and the Baltic States. Mitterauer argues that due to the so-called Eastern Colonization, a migratory movement from West and Central Europe to Eastern Europe, which began in the 11th century, matches the division in marriage and household formation patterns.⁵ While Hajnal’s observations focus on the 19th and 20th centuries, Mitterauer’s

findings give this transitional zone more historical depth.⁶ Thus our geographical frame of observation is defined in a sufficiently precise way.

The border area of this Eastern Colonization also marks the border between various systems of inheritance, property transmission and feudal systems. In the regions west of the border area, the impartible inheritance became prevalent – befitting the logic of individual property. In many cases this was not a real inheritance system but property transmission to the next generation by purchasing, especially in regions where stem family systems dominated. The feudal systems of these regions, the *Grundherrschaft*, were characterized by a strong penetration of the feudal lords into the household economies of their servants. There are, however, regions to the west of the European transitional zone that practiced partible inheritance well into the 20th century. They are not relics dating back to remote history but rather they developed much later from a unitary or impartible inheritance system. To the east of the line the earlier systems of inheritance, supported by concepts of the collective, endured. In this system property could remain undivided over generations or could be distributed equally among all lawful heirs. Legally, property was considered to be tied as a whole to the family or to blood-relations and was not subject to the will of the person leaving the inheritance. Thus it was the whole household community that inherited, and only people without family could appoint heirs at will. Legally, this meant that several heirs were joined to one inheritance group. All male heirs – women were excluded – inherited the property as a group and all were considered the successors to the inheritable property.⁷ This was embedded into a feudal system that did not penetrate strongly into the household economies but rather stressed its tributary character. One of the results of

this tributary feudalism was the conservation of traditional elements like the equally partible inheritance system of men.

2. Traditional rural household formation systems in the Balkans and the stem family

This East European historical setting did not leave very much room for establishing stem family systems or even stem family phases within household formation systems. At this point we know only the general rules of Eastern European household formation systems. Detailed research will bring out regional variations. There is as yet too little research material for the area of the Eastern European plains and lowlands to determine regional trends. For the Balkans, however, the research is more encouraging. Here we can attempt to draw a map of the systems of household formation. With the exception of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea and the coastal areas of the mainland and the Peloponnesus, the household forms can be considered as a variation of general Eastern European family formation systems. These exceptions are not surprising since the Mediterranean societies in general were characterized by distinctive household forms, shaped by a high degree of urbanity, nuclear families as a general rule and neolocal residential rules. We can speak of three basic types of formation systems in the Balkans: the neolocal system, based on nuclear and stem families; the patrilocal system based on life cycle complexity; and the patrilocal system based on household cycle complexity. In both the cases 2 and 3 demographic constellations could accidentally evolve a stem family (only one son was born and/or survived), but these are not stem family systems.

The neolocal nuclear and stem family formation system was dominant in Romanian colonized areas (which reached into Eastern Serbia), but we must not think that this was a national characteristic. The system worked like a stem family, though with equally partible inheritance (which means a significant difference to the Central European stem family system): when sons were of marital age they were given equal parts of the property; they would then leave the parental home and set up their own holding before marriage; the youngest (rarely the eldest) son would remain with his parents. This neolocal form prevailed, although sometimes an uxori-local solution was chosen and sons-in-law made up for the lack of biological sons. Thus the Romanian household went through different phases: first a couple without children, then with unmarried children, then two couples of different generations with unmarried children (stage of stem family) which could have been finalized with one couple of the third generation.⁸

Generally there was a sincere effort to share land between sons equally and justly. Each household was to have the same access to all land categories. There was strong pressure to divide the property while the father was still alive. This system of transfer of property was embedded in a rural communal system: village territory would be divided among the households and each family branch in the village had a right to equal shares of the various land categories. The early transfer of property and neolocality was obvious in this communal system because it was the village community and not the individual owner that took charge of distributing the land.⁹ Thus we see that the context of this Romanian nuclear and stem family system has little in common with the Central European one (especially in terms of equal inheritance portions and the role of the village community).

3. Modernization of the traditional peasant society

But there was also another type, one which became more and more important in the 20th century. It came about as the result of the social, administrative and economic processes of modernization, especially after World War II and the adaptation of traditional family structures to a new form of industrial society. This type represents one of various transitional stages from a complex to a nuclear household and family system.¹⁰ Both the stem and the nuclear household constellations were not completely new experiences, for they had been part of traditional household cycles.

The infrastructural, social and political transformations that took place after World War II and up to the present in the Balkan countries, as well as generally in Eastern Europe, have been enormous. They involved a shift from a predominantly rural to an industrial economy, a change of political organization, and a radical transformation of economic and social ideology.¹¹ Thus, in the former Yugoslavia in 1948, i.e. after the war and after some rebuilding had begun, 79 percent of the economically active population still worked in agriculture. By 1953 this had dropped to 75 percent, by 1961 to 64 percent, and by the late 1980s the figure had fallen below 20 percent in most of the republics.¹² All the Balkan countries were pushed into these half-industrialized societies after World War II, which was responsible for a rapid social transition.

Another important process was the demographic transition that began in most Balkan countries at the end of the 19th century, ending usually in the 1960s with a significant drop in natality rates. This process of demographic transition in its first phase saw populations increase rapidly with a higher percentage of family fissions as a result. This tendency continued after World War II.¹³

Modernization processes, of course, had already begun in the first decades of the 20th century, but they were not very extensive and consequently could have not affected family structures very much. Vera Erlich's classic study¹⁴ on the transition of the Yugoslav family in the 1930s indicates that a transformation process did in fact take place, though traditional elements predominated in most parts of the country. The number of one married son or daughter living with parents was low, but seemed to be increasing.¹⁵

The modernizing measures taken after World War II were much more effective. The collectivization of land led to a rapid decrease in large families because the minimum of land a household was allowed to hold was in most cases not sufficient to provide a large family with enough property to survive. The nuclear household as an ideal became increasingly universal, but extended kin ties remained important. Laws giving equal rights to women came into force and customary inheritance laws which before acknowledged only the male right of inheritance now provided equal inheritance rights.

The decrease in the agricultural population was the result of the increasing migration of peasants to the towns and cities as well as to other countries in Europe and overseas (the latter being especially the case in the former Yugoslavia and Greece), a process which began in the 1880s and became even more prominent as of the 1960s. This labor migration affected the traditional family systems fundamentally. Money as a basis for wealth and wellbeing increasingly became a substitute for immobile land. This was another reason for changing the inheritance system. Male equally partible inheritance was abandoned: migrating brothers or sons were no longer interested in what was very often not very fertile land and small inheritance shares and often left everything to the one brother

who remained at home. Egalitarian inheritance changed into a non egalitarian one.

4. Relevance of the stem family in the transitional processes from traditional to nuclear family: 3 case studies

Families in the Balkans were exposed to high rates of family fissions, migration processes and social transformations in which the stem family gained importance. In this transitional stage the family kept its complex forms but altered the tendency of horizontal into vertical stem family extension. It should be stressed that this represents only one of several ways households change into a nuclear family system, which does not represent the final phase of the individualization process.

Case study 1: Serbia

Joel M. Halpern and Richard A. Wagner made some very important observations of these transitional processes based on the village of Orašac in Central Serbia and its surrounding region. Although a micro-study such as this can hardly be generalized, it is nonetheless clear that the value of their findings goes far beyond this village. All the former Yugoslav republics, except Slovenia in the north, were exposed to the trends Halpern and Wagner observe in their micro study:¹⁶

(1) With 20th century modernization the complex *zadruga* structure was replaced by a contemporary pattern of stem and nuclear households in both rural and urban areas. This household change represents a process of continuous adaptation and not abrupt termination. Nuclear families had become prominent in urban areas such as Belgrade by the 18th century¹⁷ and in towns in rural surroundings by the 19th century.¹⁸

(2) There was a tendency to move from lateral extension – married brothers or surviving spouse of one of them – to vertical ties across generations, such as between father, son and grandson.

(3) We can observe different general types of household cycles, one of which is very important: a four or three generation lineally extended household goes through a complete cyclical development: the oldest generation – consisting of a married couple – dies off one by one (usually the father first), the granddaughter marries out, the grandson marries and his bride resides in the household and they have two children. In the case of two grandsons, this means only one remains at home while the other may set up his own household. Today, however, he usually migrates to town. There appears to be a tendency for the youngest son to remain at home (ultimogeniture). Theoretically, all of them can inherit but daughters have had a de facto tendency not to insist on their claims in terms of inheritance of land. The other sons may also give up their claims. This is particularly true if a son has received some help in getting an education, learning a trade or services and/or materials for help in building a house in town.

(4) Underlying these structural patterns are a number of changes, including new values for limitation of family size,¹⁹ increasing longevity in terms of survival of the eldest generation into the sixties and seventies, and a continuing value for maintaining an extended household structure involving the coexistence and cooperation of diverse age groups.

(5) Increased longevity, decreased mortality, and limitations placed on childbearing have combined with an existing ideology of agnatic affiliation²⁰ to produce new kinds of household groupings. Any simplistic assumption about the evolution of family households from extended family groups

to a nuclear family basis ignore the range of possible diversity, even given the overall decrease in average household size. The brother-brother bond as part of the agnatic ideology on which the *zadruga* is based is no longer of primary importance.

Halpern's and Wagner's findings for Orašac do not reflect a unique situation. We have data for 1863 for ten more villages and towns not far from Orašac. The data show a similar situation for the rural villages, but a very low percentage of complex and stem family households for the towns of Arandjelovac and Kruševac. In most cases the percentage of the stem family type is higher than those of the multiple type. Usually these two categories are not separated and simply considered as multiple family.

Table 1: Household typology of 11 Serbian villages and towns 1863 (%)

	Orašac	Arandjelovac	Bukovik	Topola	Vrbica	Banja	Kopljare	Stojnik	Vranovo	Kruševac	Lazarica
solitaries	0.8	41.6	11.1	4.4	9.8	12.9	3.3	8.8	4.3	31.0	8.6
no family	0.8	2.3	7.4	3.6	2.4	3.8	2.2	2.9	5.2	2.3	2.2
simple	35.9	45.2	38.9	46.4	39.0	30.6	44.0	37.6	48.3	56.2	63.4
extended	13.7	9.0	20.4	11.6	14.6	15.6	13.2	16.5	15.5	8.2	10.8
multiple*	22.2	1.3	16.6	15.6	17.5	17.2	20.9	17.0	11.2	0.4	5.0
stem	26.7	0.5	5.6	18.4	16.6	19.9	16.5	17.1	15.5	1.8	10.1

Towns: Arandjelovac, Topola and Kruševac

* this category does not include stem family constellations

Source: Balkan family data bank: Balkan family project at the University of Graz

Case study 2: Croatia

In Croatia an analogous development can be observed. The “binuclear” stem family was also a result of the fission of the traditional large and complex household – a process that began in the middle of the 19th century and was caused by changing economic and legal institutions.²¹ In different regions, as in the Northern area, the stem family has prevailed. It is characterized here by two conjugal units in two subsequent generations. The dominant pattern since the 1950s and 1960s is that the father holds the whole property as such, while the young couple is also allowed to have private property; most of the men in the young couples earn money abroad. It is the father who selects his successor among his sons. The holding is not divided among them. The out migrating sons do not insist on their inheritance rights, thus the resident son is able to use the entire landed inheritance. Several times a year he symbolically transfers goods to his brother’s families who live in town. The popular term for this form of family is *zajednica*/community. This term reflects the reality well. This community of the resident stem family and those who have left the house – symbolically expressed by the exchange of goods and money – continues at least until the death of the parents but may also be also continued by the following generation. However, increasing numbers of son-in-laws had to be integrated into the households due to the drop in fertility and the decreasing chance of having a son as the successor on the holding. At the time of marriage half of the holding is normally allotted to him, the other half stays formally under the administrative control of the father-in-law. It is expected, however, that the son-in-law will not insist on gaining control over his portion. Overall, in Croatia the stem family appears to have been a transitional phase from the traditional household community to the nuclear

family, which by the 1970s appears as the dominant family form.²²

The two Croatian villages under investigation are the villages of Lekenik and Bobovac, both of which are situated south of the country's capital, Zagreb, not more than 40 miles from each other. The historical background and the strategic position of both villages are different. Bobovac and its surroundings used to be part of the so-called "military border system", which was established in the 16th century as a defensive zone against the conquering Ottoman Empire and dissolved in 1881. Lekenik, on the other hand, was part of feudal Croatia's domain system. Despite the different historical contexts in both villages, the system of living in large, complex households was practiced for centuries. The dissolution of these households took place more rapidly in Lekenik than in Bobovac: Lekenik was located near the capital and connected to it by railway; modernization processes consequently had an earlier impact there than in Bobovac.

In 1857, Lekenik had about 800 inhabitants, a figure which grew to 1,633 by 1961. During this period the average household size decreased from 11.8 in 1857 to 7.2 in 1880, and then to 3.3 in 1961. This process was accompanied by the reduction of complex to simple household structures:

Table 2: Lekenik: Household typologies, 1948 and 1961, %

Type	Year	
	1948	1961
Solitaries	8.8	13.2
no family	3.3	3.1
nuclear	49.3	54.2
Extended	16.9	18.9
multiple*	5.4	0.6
Stem	16.1	10.0

* this category does not include stem family constellations

Source: Grandits (1996, 357-361); Balkan family data bank; Croatian bureau of statistics.

In 1948, horizontally complex households were, at 5.4%, already very rare, and by 1961 this figure had fallen to 0.6%. But the percentage of stem families also fell, while at the same time we observe a process of increasing nuclear families (from 49.3% to 54.2 %). Thus, by the 1960s, modernization processes in Lekenik had already resulted in the nuclearization of the households.

The village of Bobovac was comparatively isolated. But this geographic isolation did not mean a lack of intense contact with the industrial world. Thus, prior to World War II, people from Bobovac went to work in Western Europe. Nevertheless the situation was quite different to Lekenik. In 1857 this village had 624 inhabitants and by 1961 this had risen to 1,213; the average household size dropped during this period, from 11.8 to 3.8. The following table shows that the transformation from complex to simple household structures was not faster than in Lekenik as well as the increasing importance of the stem family.

Table 3: Bobovac: Household typologies, 1948 and 1961, %

Type	Year	
	1948	1961
Solitaires	4.2	9.4
no family	1.9	2.5
nuclear	35.4	34.0
Extended	24.8	26.4
multiple*	13.2	4.1
Stem	19.5	23.6

* This category does not include stem family constellations

Source: Grandits 1996, 363-367.

In contrast to the village of Lekenik, in Bobovac the transformation of the complex household structure into a stem family system accelerated during the 1950s. In 1948 there were still 27 complex house holdings with more than one married brother; this figure decreased to 6 in 1961. In 1948, of 318 households (104 of which were complex) 62 constituted stem family households, a figure that increased to 77 by 1961 (the number of complex households remaining almost unchanged at 103).²³ This data can be interpreted in terms of lower modernization processes when compared to Lekenik, where the dissolution of the horizontal complex household structure results in an increasing percentage of stem family households while the percentage of nuclear families remains stable.

Thus we see that the transitional phase that temporarily stressed a stem family system could occur at different times, even in villages not very distant from each other. The household constellation of Bobovac, in terms of the proportion of stem

families, was closer to the central Serbian town of Orašac than to the almost neighboring village of Lekenik. This cross-cultural comparison shows that the temporary formation of stem families was based neither on ethnicity nor religious affiliation. The proportion of stem families indicates a point of several potential transitional stages from a complex household structure to a nuclear one. This is underlined by the Albanian data.

Case Study 3: Albania

Albanian data can be added to this cross-cultural comparison for 1930 and 1950. The villages in the first census of the Albanian state represent the diverse regions and religious confessions of the country: Guri i Zi (Northern Albania, mixed Muslim-Catholic), Hot (Northern Albania, Catholic), Shkallnuer (Central Albania, Muslim), Terove (Southeast Albania, Orthodox), Zhej (Southern Albania, Orthodox). The three villages in the year 1950 represent the Catholic population of the mountainous regions of Northern Albania.

Table 4: Bobovac and Orašac in comparison with Albanian villages in 1930 and 1950, %

	1961		1930					1950		
	Bobovac	Orašac	Gur i Zi	Hot	Shkallnuer	Terove	Zhej	Plan-Gjuraaj	Pepsumaj	Abat
solitaries	9.4	5.1	1.1	16.0	7.8	-	11.8	-	4.3	6.1
no family	2.5	1.3	1.1	8.0	3.1	-	3.9	6.7	-	2.0
simple	34.0	36.9	34.8	30.0	43.8	40.0	26.3	20.0	31.9	30.6
extended	26.4	24.4	20.2	22.0	15.6	16.7	31.6	40.0	21.3	24.5
multiple	4.1	2.4	1.1	10.0	14.1	13.3	16.3	6.6	13.5	20.4
stem	23.6	29.8	19.1	14.0	15.6	30.0	10.5	26.7	19.1	16.3

On analyzing the data we see that percentage of complex structured households in Albania is significantly higher than for the Croatian and Serbian villages, while the percentage of Albanian stem families is lower and the percentage of the nuclear families similar to that for Bobovac and Orašac. Overall, we can say that the figures for Albania for 1930 and 1950 are much more comparable with those of the Serbian villages in 1863. These findings fit our hypothesis that the stem family in the Balkans represents a transitional stage in the change from predominantly complex structured households to predominantly nuclear oriented households. Household-cycles are affected by regional variations and the speed of modernization and they adapt by changing from horizontal to vertical extension.²⁴

We can verify these quantitative findings with the help of a series of structured interviews that were conducted in 1961 at the same locations used to derive the quantitative data on Yugoslavia.²⁵ One of the questions asked in the interviews

concerned the preference for a stem family constellation, i.e. “Would you prefer your son and his wife to live with you in the same household?” We have summarized the answers given in the following table.

Table 5: “Would you prefer your son and his wife to live with you in the same household?”

Answer	Former Yugoslav Republic/autonomous region									
	Serbia		Vojvodina		Montenegro		Bosnia		Slovenia	
No	17	23.74%	26	41.27%	6	40.0%	65	61.32%	14	35.9%
Yes	53	74.65%	28	44.44%	9	60.0%	41	38.68%	23	58.97%
Depends	1	1.41%	9	14.29%	-		-		2	5.12%
	71		63		15		106		39	

Unfortunately, the interviews do not cover all parts of the former Yugoslavia. Nevertheless these figures are interesting. In Serbia and Montenegro, the desire to live with the family of one of the sons was deeply rooted, but was less so in Bosnia. The figures for Slovenia are also interesting: they show almost the same positive proportion of answers as for the very traditional region of Montenegro. However, a direct comparison in this case is not possible, since Slovenia belongs to the other side of the Hajnal line, where the traditional pattern for centuries has been a mixed nuclear and stem family system different from that practiced in Central Europe. For Slovenia the high proportion of positive answers reflects a traditional pattern and a deeply rooted stem family ideology. In the other cases we see a transitional phase, via one of several routes, from a traditional pattern to modernity in the form of a stem family constellation,²⁶ but not a stem family ideology. Therefore we

need to differentiate between the stem family in the narrow and wider sense.

Conclusions

This paper has evaluated the importance and nature of the stem family in Eastern Europe, a term conceptualized for the territories spreading east of the Hajnal line. The traditional pattern found here is the joint family structure and a male equally partible inheritance system. Except for Romania, where a mixed stem and nuclear family system seems to have been practiced for centuries, we cannot speak about a comparable stem family structure for the rest of Eastern Europe. Importantly, this structure as well as that of the nuclear family has always been a potential part of the household cycle. Due to the modernization processes of the 20th century, the complexity of household structures changed from a focus on horizontal extension to vertical extension. This kind of adoption process gave the stem family structure greater importance than ever before. We should consider the stem family as one of the transitional paths taken by Eastern European complex family structures in their initial tendency towards the nuclear family household. We are dealing here with the stem family in a wider sense, which means it is restricted to a formal structure and not accompanied by a deeply rooted stem family ideology. In this respect the stem family in the Balkans, and probably generally in Eastern Europe, differs significantly from the stem family in the Pyrenees or Japan.

The empirical evidence is based on data from the former Yugoslavia and Albania and is limited to rural areas and towns. The three case studies of the Croatian villages of Lekenik and Bobovac and the Serbian village of Orađac represent three

different stages of this transformation. Cross-cultural comparison shows that these different speeds reflect regional modernization patterns and not ethnic or confessional differences. The model of this transformation is characterized demographically by a significant fragmentation of the agnatic core of co-residing married brothers and sons and an increase in the husband-wife bond. Future research on the stem family will show whether we can generalize our findings to other regions of Eastern Europe.

NOTES

- ¹ This article was conceptualized in collaboration with the research project entitled “Patriarchal social structures in the Balkans”, which was funded by the Austrian Science Fund. The author appreciates the comments by Joel M. Halpern and is grateful to Siegfried Gruber, who created the tables without which this article could not have been written.
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*Family Structures Between Tradition and Modernity /
Les structures familiales entre tradition et modernité*

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- ²² ČULINOVIĆ-KONSTANTINOVIĆ, V. "Zadružna i nuklearna porodica sjeverne Hrvatske" [The *zadruga* and the nuclear family in Northern Croatia], in *Sociologija sela* 12,43/1974, pp. 101-114.
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- ²⁴ We need this data, however, to help us think about family and household transformations in new ways.
- ²⁵ These interviews can also be found in the Halpern Collection at the Centre for Southeast European History, Graz University, and were conducted with the assistance of the Departments of Ethnology and Sociology in Belgrade, Zagreb and Sarajevo.
- ²⁶ We should be cautious in our interpretations here because of the relatively small sample sizes.