

Urbanization in Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule in the 19th century: Pan-European dimensions and specifics

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Abstract. The article aims to establish what the trend was in the dynamics of urbanization in the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule during the period from the beginning of the 19th century to the Liberation of Bulgaria in 1878, revealing the Balkan and pan-European dimensions of the studied process. This makes it possible to correct the thesis imposed in Bulgarian science that, in relation to Bulgaria, urbanization is a process characteristic of the post-liberation era and especially of the period after the World War Two. The present study proves that for the modern territory of the country, urbanization is a process that started to emerge even before the Liberation under the influence of a complex of factors of political-administrative, socio-economic, demographic, etc., character. This is how the Bulgarian lands gradually came into sync with the general European trend for a significant increase in the levels of urbanization in the 19th century, as a result of which the modern urban system of the European countries was formed.

Keywords: Bulgarian lands, Ottoman Empire, urbanization, modernization

The term *urbanization* in the specialized literature is understood as the process of increasing the number and size of cities and increasing their role in all spheres of public life. This process is characterized by the concentration of an ever-increasing share of the population in cities (especially in large urban centres) and, at the same time, the inclusion of an ever-increasing part of people in the urban way of life, thinking and behaviour (Vezenkov 1999, 56; Nikolov, Kolev (ed.) 2011, 266-267; Shterionov 2012b, 335-336)¹. The nineteenth century is important to the development of the urbanization process all over the European countries and US as this is the century when a significant growth of urbanization levels took place, as a result of the economic growth. By 1800, a

¹ For more details about the theoretical considerations in the process of studying urbanization, refer to Slaveykov, Yankov 1995, 197 et seq.

mere 10.7% of the population in Europe and North America lived in cities of over 5,000 inhabitants; in contrast by the end of the 19th century, the share of population inhabiting such cities was already above 30%. In fact, it was precisely over the period starting at the beginning of the 19th century and through to World War One when the modern urban system started to take its shape both in the European countries and in the USA through expansion of existing urban centres and the emergence of a great number of new cities (Bairoch, Goertz 1986, 285-305).

For the growth of the urban population in developed countries, an important role was played by the measures taken in the second half of the 19th century to improve the sanitary and hygienic infrastructure of cities (especially large urban centres) through the construction of modern systems for public water supply and sewage, which represent an important element of urban development and play a crucial role in reducing mortality in urban areas, especially the extremely high rates of child mortality (Zinkina, Ilyin, Korotayev 2017, 164-172).

The question of how much the urbanization process, which was typically associated with the developed European countries in the 19th century, affected the Balkan provinces of the Ottoman Empire, populated by Bulgarians, is of interest, since the dominant thesis in Bulgarian historiography is that, in relation to Bulgaria, urbanization is a process that developed in the post-liberation era and especially in the period after World War Two (Marcheva 1997, 119-130; Vezenkov 1999, 56-69; Vezenkov 2001, 17 et seq.; Peykovska 2019, 259 et seq.). To a large extent, this finding may be derived from the fact that, unlike in Western countries, where the study of urbanization and related modernization during the 'long 19th century' is among the priority problems, in Bulgaria until recently this topic was considered peripherally, as a number of aspects of the problem remained poorly studied and unspecified².

This situation in the Bulgarian scientific space has changed as a result of the implementation in 2019-2023 of the project entitled "Urbanization in Bulgarian lands in the 19th century (until 1878)" managed by Assoc. Prof. Ventsislav Muchinov from the Institute for Population and Human Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Given the purpose to trace the 19th century dynamics of the development of urbanization in today's Bulgarian lands within the framework of the project, processing and comparative analysis of various source materials of Ottoman Turkish, Bulgarian, Greek, Russian, Western European, etc. origin were conducted. Table 1 presents the calculated data on the changes occurring in the relative share of the urban population in the territories that, after 1878, were part of the formed two Bulgarian state entities, videlicet, the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia. The indicated value for the beginning of the studied period is approximate and is consistent with the information published by P. Bairoch and G. Goertz on the degree of urbanization in Europe's countries at the beginning of the "long 19th century"³.

² See for more details: Muchinov 2015, 86-98.

³ Bairoch, Goertz 1986, 289. In Table 4, the authors present data on the levels of urbanization in individual countries by adopting a different criterion for urban population, i.e., taking

When calculating the urban population for 1837, the data presented by Ami Boué in his works on the population of individual cities within the present-day Bulgaria's⁴ borders were used, supplemented and corrected with the information provided by other foreign and Ottoman sources. Regarding the year 1873, the data from the Ottoman statistical yearbooks (*salnames*) of the Danube vilayet and Edirne vilayet⁵; they were used and compared with the information from the Bulgarian and Greek literature and periodicals, with the information contained in various consular reports, in the works of the foreign travellers and explorers, who visited the Bulgarian lands during this period such as F. Kanitz, R. More, etc. (Mihov 1915-1971; More 1992; Kanitz 1995; etc.). For the purposes of comparison, the table also includes information on the relative share of the urban population in 1880 according to the data from the first post-liberation censuses in the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia⁶.

Table 1. Relative share of urban population in today's Bulgarian lands in 19th c. (%)

Years	1800	1837	1873	1880
Relative share of urban population	10	16	22.6	19.3

Source: calculations by the author based on: Αρχείο Μακεδονίας του ΙΜΧΑ (ΑΙΜΧΑ), Τμήμα Ζ', Φακ. 2 Α, Εγγρ. Γ-74, σ. 1-4; Dunav, year I, no. 24, 11 Aug. 1865; no. 33, 13 Oct. 1865; no. 34, 20 Oct. 1865; no. 36, 3 Nov. 1865; no. 37, 10 Nov. 1865; no. 38, 17 Nov. 1865; no. 39, 24 Nov. 1865; no. 43, 22 Dec. 1865; year II, no. 146, 29 Jan. 1867; no. 152, 19 Feb. 1867; Zornitsa, year III, no. 10, 9 March 1878; Ανατολικός Αστήρ, year XII, no. 1108, 20 Aug. 1873; Teplov 1877; Mihov 1915-1971; Попов 1916, 13; Todorov 1972, 307-311; McEvedy, Jones 1978, 113; Tsvetkova 1981, 235 et seq.; Karpat 1985, 109-121; Bairoch, Goertz 1986, 289; More 1992, 33-35; Kanitz 1995; Shterionov 2012b, 306, 337; Georgieva 2016, 136-191.

The data presented in Table 1 show the existence of a *distinct upward trend in the dynamics of urbanization* in what today's Bulgarian lands are during the period from the beginning of the 19th century and through to the 1870s, and thereby the share of the urban population in the studied territory showed a

into account the total population of cities with more than 5,000 inhabitants and, accordingly, taking into account the population of all cities with over 2,000 inhabitants. P. Bairoch and G. Goertz point out that for the beginning of the 19th century, it would be more appropriate to adopt the second criterion, according to which the share of the urban population in the present-day territory of Bulgaria in 1800 was 9.8% (vs. 5.5% when using a criterion that considers only cities with over 5,000 inhabitants).

⁴ The collection of itineraries of Ami Boué's travels in European Turkey during the period 1836-1838 is cited from: Tsvetkova (ed.) 1981, p. 235 et seq.

⁵ Information from the Ottoman *salnames* was already published in the periodicals of the era. The summarized data on *vilayets* and *sanjaks* were published by N. Todorov (Todorov 1972, 307-311), and specific data on the population of cities in today's Bulgarian lands, centres of administrative units - *kazas* and *sanjaks*, were translated in Bulgarian and systematized by G. Georgieva (Georgieva 2016, 140-189).

⁶ The census data are cited from: Попов 1916, 13.

more than twofold increase; consequently, on the eve of the National Liberation, the relative share city dwellers exceeded 22%. The above information makes it possible to correct the thesis imposed in Bulgarian historiography about the slow pace of urbanization in the Bulgarian lands during the National Revival and about the relative stationarity in the dynamics of this process during the period from the beginning of the 19th century until the Liberation of Bulgaria.

According to previous studies in Bulgarian historiography, the share of the urban population during the entire period of the nineteenth century constituted about 20% of the total population of the Bulgarian lands (Todorov 1972, 310-311; Genchev 1995, 128, 252; Shterionov 2012b, 337-347), as the value of this indicator is preserved even in the years after Liberation⁷. The data published in the overview study by P. Bairoch and G. Goertz on urbanization in European countries in the 19th century, however, support the finding that during the period from the beginning of the century to 1880, the share of the urban population in Bulgaria grew twice (Bairoch, Goertz 1986, 288). These data fit into the concept of the mentioned authors about the significant increase in the levels of urbanization in the so-called developed countries during the period from the 1830s to the World War One as a result of economic growth, especially industrialization and the increase in agricultural productivity. This period is characterized as key for the formation of the modern urban system of the developed European countries, since in the 19th century not only the existing urban centres grew, but also a large number of new cities appeared (Bairoch, Goertz 1986, 285-305).

The study carried out within the framework of the project “Urbanization in Bulgarian lands in the 19th century (until 1878)” allows us to conclude that the mentioned concept is largely applicable in relation to urbanization in the provinces of the Ottoman Empire populated by Bulgarians during the *Tanzimat period* (from the 1830s and through to the 1870s)⁸. In contrast to the first decades of the 19th century, when the significant growth of the urban population in the Bulgarian lands was mainly due to the internal political upheavals in the Empire (the so-called *Kardzhali riots*), which in a relatively short time pushed large masses of the rural population to the cities, especially to the large urban centres, the continued gradual increase in the share of urban residents in the second and third quarter of the century was stimulated by the economic boom that began after 1830 in the Balkan possessions of the Ottoman Empire. This rise not only created favourable conditions for the growth of most of the cities in the Bulgarian lands, but also led to the increasingly noticeable penetration of urban culture and the urban way of life among the population in the studied space

⁷ The publications of statisticians, economists and demographers indicate that the ratio between the urban and rural population in the Bulgarian lands, characteristic of the National Revival, was preserved in the years after the Liberation, as in 1880 the relative share of the urban population in the Principality of Bulgaria was 17.7%, and the value of this indicator is 19.3% if the combined population of the Principality of Bulgaria plus Eastern Rumelia is taken (see Popov 1916, 13).

⁸ About the *Tanzimat* (the 19th Century reform era in the Ottoman Empire) see Dumont 1999, 472-535.

towards the middle and in the third quarter of the 19th century. An essential factor for the increase in the number of the urban population in the Bulgarian lands were also the measures of the Ottoman rulers to limit the spread of epidemic diseases in the Empire (especially the plague and cholera), which led to the improvement of hygiene and health care in the cities and, accordingly, to the reduction of mortality among the population inhabiting them (Shterionov 2012b, 92-93; Muchinov 2020a, 81-112)⁹.

The measures taken by the Ottoman authorities throughout the period covering the 1850s - 1870s for the modernization and improvement of the cities and for the improvement of the transport and communication infrastructure connecting them also played an important role in the activation of urbanization in the Bulgarian lands, which were measures to improve the living conditions in any such settlements and stimulate their economic and demographic development. Of particular importance were Ottoman authorities' policies aimed at increasing the number of cities in the Bulgarian lands by granting city status to the economically and demographically more important villages, such as Gabrovo, Troyan, Tryavna, Elena, Kotel, Gorna Oryahovitsa, Kalofer, Koprivshtitsa, Panagyurishte, Pirdop, etc., as well as the formation of new urban centres developed based on modern urbanization plans (such as *Orhanie*, today's Botevgrad). As a result of this policy, more than 25 settlements in the lands on both sides of the Stara planina (Balkan Mountain Range) were granted an official city status, which largely shaped the urban network in today's Bulgarian lands on the eve of the National Liberation (Muchinov 2017, 113-140; Muchinov 2020b, 467-480).

As already indicated, the relative share of the urban population in the lands that became part of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia after 1878 exceeded 22% by the mid-1870s. The above indicated value will be compared with the available information on other Ottoman provinces in the Balkans, on the Balkan countries adjacent to the Ottoman Empire and for the rest of the European countries, to highlight the degree of urbanization in the studied space. While the share of urban population in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1864 was 17.7%, in 1879, after this Ottoman province was occupied by Austro-Hungary, this share fell to 11.5%¹⁰. Urban population in the adjacent Principality of Serbia in the 1860s and in the 1870s accounted for a mere 7 to 9.5% out of the

⁹ It is no coincidence that it was during the period studied that the first signs of the *demographic transition in the Bulgarian lands* began to be observed, the beginning of which is associated with the decline in the mortality rate of the population inhabiting the studied area since the 1840s. Regarding the beginning and specifics of the demographic transition in the Bulgarian lands, see in more detail: Shterionov 2012a, 248-258; Shterionov 2012b, 395-406.

¹⁰ If the rest of the Ottoman provinces on the Balkans are concerned, the finding authored by M. Palairt on the great share of the urban population in Macedonia in the 1880s and 1890s (27% of the total population of the province) is based on a misinterpretation of the data on the population of Macedonia published by Vasil Kanchov in 1900, since Palairt puts all the settlements mentioned by Kanchov with a population of 2,000 and more into the category of urban dwellers, without taking into account that some of them did not have official city status until the end of the Ottoman rule in that province (see Palairt 2005, 37-39).

country's overall population¹¹, and meanwhile, over the same period, the urban population share in the Kingdom of Greece was varying from 16.8 up to 18.6% (Todorov 1972, 313-321; Palairot 2005, 38-39). The quoted data showed that in the years preceding the National Liberation, today's Bulgarian lands featured a higher degree of urbanization if compared to the values of the same indicator for the neighbouring regions and countries lying within the Balkan Peninsula.

The comparison with the development of urbanization in other European countries in the 19th century is complicated by the *differing definitions of the term "urban population"* in the individual countries during the considered period¹². To avoid the inevitable problems in the statistical processing and comparison of data for different countries, foreign researchers such as P. Bairoch and G. Goertz based their calculations on the level of urbanization in European countries during the "long 19th century" on the population of cities accounting for more than 5,000 inhabitants. Notwithstanding the fact that the use of this criterion is not particularly appropriate in relation to less urbanized countries such as Bulgaria, where on the eve of the National Liberation, more than 40% of the urban population lived in cities with less than 5,000 inhabitants, the specified criterion will also be applied in the present research for the needs of the comparative analysis. For this purpose, the relative share of the urban population in the Bulgarian lands in the 1870s was recalculated, taking into account only the population of cities with more than 5,000 inhabitants. The calculations show that, using this criterion, the relative share of the urban population in the Bulgarian lands in the years before the National Liberation was 13.3% (compared to 22.6% when considering the population of all settlements with official urban status in the studied territories). The comparison of the indicated value with those quoted by P. Bairoch and G. Goertz data for various European countries (see Table 2) shows that the level of urbanization in today's Bulgarian lands in the 1870s was higher than in Russia, but it was much lower than the values of this indicator in Western European countries such as Great Britain, Germany, Italy, and France. The significantly lower value compared to the

¹¹ To a large extent, the low degree of urbanization in Serbia was due to the specificity of the urban network in the country, in which in the 1860s there was only one large city with over 20,000 people and that was the capital Belgrade, while all other cities had populations of less than 10,000 inhabitants, with the predominance of very small towns with 2,000 to 3,000 or fewer inhabitants. The situation contrasts with the situation in the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule, in which, during the period under review, the urban population was much more evenly distributed both in individual groups of cities and in terms of their territorial location.

¹² The prominent French demographer R. Pressat takes into account the highly variable nature of the criteria applied in various countries when determining the definition of an urban population. For example, in France, the population of a municipality covering an agglomeration of at least 2,000 inhabitants is considered an urban population (Pressat 2006, 48-49). In other Western European countries, urban population is defined as the population of settlements with over 5,000 inhabitants; at the opposite pole are the Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway, where the population of all settlements with a concentrated population, even those inhabited by no more than 500 inhabitants, is considered urban over the studied period (Veber 1903, 9 et seq.). The mentioned differences make it difficult to compare urbanization in individual European countries in the 19th century.

Table 2. Relative share of the urban population in individual European countries, taking into account the population living in cities with more than 5,000 inhabitants (%)

Countries \ Years	1880
UK	56.2
Germany	29.1
Italy	28.0
France	27.6
Austria-Hungary	16.0
Romania	14.0
Bulgaria*	13.3
Russia	10.6
Europe average	23.5

* For lands included in the territory of today's Bulgaria, data are for 1873.

Source: for Bulgaria: author's calculations based on the sources presented in Table 1; *for other European countries:* Bairoch, Goertz 1986, 288, Table 3.

developed industrial countries in Western Europe is not surprising, but more important is the fact that the level of urbanization in the Bulgarian lands on the eve of the National Liberation approached that of the Danube countries and the Central European countries, such as Romania and Austria-Hungary. This shows that with regard to one of the main modernization processes during the considered period, namely urbanization, the studied territories were gradually coming into sync with pan-European trends.

These findings make it possible to correct the thesis imposed in Bulgarian science that, in relation to Bulgaria, urbanization is a process characteristic of the post-liberation era and especially of the period after the World War Two¹³. The present study proves that in terms of today's territory of Bulgaria, urbanization is a process that started to emerge as early as in the 19th century under the influence of a complex of factors of a political-administrative, socio-economic, demographic, etc., character.

Undoubtedly, it is also necessary to take into account the *existence of some substantial differences* between the process of urbanization in European countries and the urbanization which took place in the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule in the 19th century. In contrast to Western European countries, where

¹³ The collectivization of agriculture and the intensive industrialization of Bulgaria in line with the Soviet model carried out by the communist regime in the period after 1944 led to forced urbanization. As a result, by the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the relative share of the urban population in the country already exceeded 50% (see in more detail: Marcheva 1997, 119-130; Vezekov 1999, 56-69; Vezekov 2001, 17 et seq.; Shterionov et al. 2018, 343 et seq.; Tsekov 2018, 124 et seq.; Peykovska 2019, 259 et seq.; along with the sources cited in those research works).

industrial production used to be the main driving force of urbanization, in the Bulgarian lands (and in the Ottoman Empire as a whole), the factory industry remained underdeveloped throughout the studied period. In the Bulgarian lands, the role of the driving force was taken by the proto-industrial centres in the area of the Balkan Mountain Range, the Sub-Balkan valleys and the Sredna Gora Mountain Range, such as Gabrovo, Kotel, Karlovo, Sopot, Kalofer, Koprivshitsa, Panagyurishte, etc., which are urban-type settlements that in fact stood out as some of the most dynamically developing, both economically and demographically in the region during the second and third quarters of the 19th century. Among the main driving forces of urbanization were also the commercial centres along the Danube and Black Sea coasts and inland, such as Ruse, Varna, Svishtov, Tarnovo, Pleven, Plovdiv, Sliven, etc., all of these having been trade hubs on the trade routes between the Balkan dominions of the Ottoman Empire and European countries.

Another significant difference is the *role of the state power in activating the process of urbanization*, which is important for the studied area of the Ottoman possessions in the Balkans. The changes implemented by the Ottoman rulers in the administrative-territorial division of the Empire had a significant impact on the development of the cities in the Bulgarian lands, stimulating the prosperity of the cities promoted to the status of administrative centres of higher ranks¹⁴. The need for new administrative (and, accordingly, urban) centres in the Ottoman provincial system after the introduction of the *vilayet* reform was one of the main reasons for the promotion of a number of villages in Bulgarian lands to towns in the second half of the 1860s and the early 1870s¹⁵.

In general, it can be summarized that, unlike the Western European countries, where factors of economic nature were the main drivers, political and administrative factors had a much more significant impact on the development of urbanization in the Bulgarian lands under Ottoman rule. It was the political factors that were at the basis of the downward trend in the dynamics of urbanization in the Bulgarian lands found at the end of the studied period. The political events of 1876-1878 (the April Uprising of 1876, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 and the subsequent formation of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia) led to some significant upheavals in the demographic development of the Bulgarian lands, and in terms of urbanization *inter alia*. The destruction of the city of Stara Zagora in the process of the battles in July 1877 is known, but to one extent or another, the rest of the urban centres that fell into the epicentre of hostilities were also negatively affected. Some townships,

¹⁴ For more details on the influence of the changes in the administrative-territorial structure of the Ottoman Empire on the development of the cities in the Bulgarian lands in the 19th century (until 1878), see Muchinov 2022, 34-48.

¹⁵ It should be emphasized that the intervention of the Ottoman State to guide the urbanization process in the Bulgarian lands in the 19th century never reached the parameters characteristic of the development of Bulgaria in the second half of the 20th century, when for the purposes of its policy, the communist leadership tried to establish complete control over the dynamics of this key process for the country's economic and demographic development. See more detail on this matter Vezekov 2001, 236-274.

such as Adzhar (now Svezhen) in the Plovdiv region and Bebrovo in Tarnovo region, never recovered from the blow and even lost their city status forever in post-liberation Bulgaria. The emigration of a considerable part of their Muslim population during and immediately after the war of 1877-1878 had negative consequences on the number of urban population in the liberated Bulgarian lands. In towns, this process was much faster and much more extensive than in rural areas, and it took more time to overcome the demographic vacuum created.

All this led to a certain decline in the share of the urban population in the liberated Bulgarian lands: from 22.6% in 1873 to 19.3% in 1880 (in total for the territory of the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia) (Popov 1916, 13). It would take several decades before the relative share of the urban population in Bulgaria reached the parameters of the mid-1870s. However, this fact should not disprove the upward trend in the dynamics of urbanization in the present Bulgarian lands during the period from the beginning of the 19th century to the 1870s, as noted in this study, thanks to which some significant changes were produced not only in the demographic, but also in socio-economic and cultural development of the population inhabiting the studied territories.

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