

THE SERBIAN RIGHT-WING
PARTIES AND INTELLECTUALS IN
THE KINGDOM OF YUGOSLAVIA, 1934–1941

Edited by
Dragan Bakić



INSTITUTE FOR BALKAN STUDIES
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**THE SERBIAN RIGHT-WING
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“Being capable or incapable of governing a great Yugoslavia”: The Serbian Right Wing and the Ideologies of Yugoslavism (1934–1941)

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Introduction: Typologies of Yugoslavism and the Political System of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia

“As a state-political term, Yugoslavia is of a very recent date; as a state, it has existed for just fourteen years, from 1 December 1918, and it was not until 3 October 1929 that it officially acquired its present name. Yet, if the Yugoslav polity is new, the Yugoslav ideology that led to it is not recent and neither are the tribes that created present-day Yugoslavia new in history. The history of Yugoslavia is the history of those tribes.”¹ This is how the historian Vladimir Ćorović, a prominent advocate of the ideology of Yugoslavism, began his *History of Yugoslavia*, a work imbued with the spirit and ideas of the existence of a single Yugoslav nation.

For decades, Yugoslav nationalists envisioned a future nation that would bring together all South Slavs between the Black and the Adriatic Sea. The proponents of the creation of a Yugoslav state sought models for overcoming religious, linguistic, ethnic, regional, cultural and economic differences in the unifications of Italy and Germany.² At the same time, from the second half of the 19th century, the ideology of Yu-

¹ Vladimir Ćorović, *Istorija Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Narodno delo, 1933).

² Endru Baruh Vahtel, *Stvaranje nacije, razaranje nacije. Književnost i kulturna politika u Jugoslaviji* (Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 2001), 83–85.

goslavism represented, in different political centers, a form of struggle for political domination, either among the South Slavs in the Habsburg Empire or with the idea of unification into a unitary country around the existing Serbian state.

The paper explores the ideological frameworks and political practices concerning the idea of Yugoslavism in the ranks of the heterogeneous movements covered by the umbrella term of the Serbian right wing. It is important to note that, for a significant number of political parties, movements and individuals, the attribute “Serbian” is used to reflect their regional origin and ethnic characteristics commonly associated with belonging to the Serbian community, as well as the vague distinction between the terms Serbdom and Yugoslavdom in the interwar period. That is particularly true of the Yugoslav National Party (JNS), Yugoslav People’s Movement ZBOR (JNP ZBOR) and the Yugoslav People’s Party – “Borbaši” (JNSb) as the movements that advocated Yugoslav nationalism without acknowledging any differences between the new state’s inhabitants. As for the Yugoslav Radical Union (JRZ), the ruling party from 1935 to 1941, their choice to respect the differences between the peoples of the Kingdom allows for a more straightforward identification of one of its segments as Serbian.

Like in most of Europe in this period, Serbian right-wing movements displayed ideological diversity, ranging from conservative authoritarianism to advocating a corporatist state under Yugoslav fascism. In practice, the most far-right political parties (JNSb and ZBOR) spent the entire interwar period on the fringes of political life, while the central roles belonged to politicians unsympathetic to democracy but with no intention of introducing a fascist system of government.

The importance of studying the attitude of the Serbian right wing toward Yugoslavism lies in the fact that, by the 1940s, the majority of political actors in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia saw Yugoslavism as an idea associated with conservatism, unitarism, centralism and an authoritarian style of ruling and, among the non-Serbian elites, also with Serbian hegemony in the joint state.³ The said association of Yugoslav-

³ Ibid., 97; Pieter Troch, *Nationalism and Yugoslavia: Education, Yugoslavism and the Balkans before World War II* (London: IB Tauris, 2015), 42.

ism and authoritarianism is strongly at odds with the fact that all political parties in the country, in the early years of its existence, held a moderate course and respected the principles of liberal democracy, rule of law and political pluralism, although limited.⁴ Therefore, one of the objectives of this paper is to contextualize Yugoslavism in the inner dynamics of Yugoslavia’s political life and the growing authoritarianism of the probably most complex post-1918 country.⁵

The state of the South Slavs rose from the ruins of Austria-Hungary after World War I, from which the Kingdom of Serbia emerged as one of the victorious countries. In cooperation with South Slavic politicians, until recently subjects of the Habsburgs, a new country was created and named the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, as it would be known for a little more than decade (1918–1929). The new state struggled under the cost of the huge war reparations, which deepened the existing economic inequality and added to the problems caused by immense demographic losses, especially in the territory of the pre-war Kingdom of Serbia.⁶ After the new country’s borders were delineated, the first years of its life were marked by constitutional debates, above all concerning the question of its political system.⁷ To simplify, there was a dispute between the supporters of the pre-war traditions of the Kingdom of Serbia and the formerly Habsburg-controlled territories. The former favored centralism, believing that the days of composite states were gone (citing the fate of Austria-Hungary), whereas the latter saw a federal unification as a confirmation of its “national affirmation.”⁸

⁴ Mari-Žanin Čalić, *Istorija Jugoslavije u 20. veku* (Beograd: Clio, 2013), 114.

⁵ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1984⁴), 201.

⁶ Branko Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918–1988, Knjiga I: Kraljevina Jugoslavija 1918–1941* (Beograd: Nolit, 1988), 87–89.

⁷ In the new state, after the abolition of the property census, approximately a quarter of the population had voting rights – men over the age of 21; women and members of the military did not have the right to participate in the electoral process. See Branislav Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke u Jugoslaviji 1919–1929* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, Narodna knjiga, 1979), 68.

⁸ With the exception of Germany and Austria, where the federal system had begun to crumble even before the formal changes, the pro-centralist view was dominant in post-1918 Europe. See Mark Mazover, *Mračni kontinent* (Beograd: Arhipelag,

Additional factors in this dispute were also some views held by the Serbian and Croatian elites as the representatives of the two largest ethnic groups in the country. The Serbian elites based their ambitions for dominance on the legacy of a strong state that had been developing for over a century, an endeavor crowned by the military successes in the recent war, and the Croatian elites harbored a sense of cultural superiority compared to the “barbarian East.”⁹

Conflicting opinions concerning the political organization of the future common state can be traced almost to the mid-19th century. Throughout this period, there had existed Serbian and Croatian forms of Yugoslavism, and we can conclude that “for them [the concept] meant different things at different times.” The decisive defining factor was the adaptation of political tactics to the group perceived as the majority or minority in a given area.¹⁰ The idea of “national unity” was accepted by the side that happened to be close to achieving a hegemonic position. Thus, in the post-1918 period, all Serbian political parties accepted the idea of the three-named nation, whereas the Croatian parties rejected it, although they had espoused that view while they were part of Austria-Hungary and were vying for primacy among the South Slavs.¹¹

The idea of Yugoslavism certainly cannot be reduced to Serbo-Croatian relations although they were the most important factor in its shaping. The paper will therefore underline the importance of various interwoven identities: national, regional, local, with a different legacy of, above all, political culture. It is especially important to analyze the ways in which the official state policy of Yugoslavism was transmitted and to explore the interaction between “the nationalizing state” and

2011), 21. On the pro-centralist views of the Serbian political elites: Ranka Gašić, “Struggling with Yugoslavism in the First Yugoslavia. The Belgrade Elite and the Public Debate,” *East Central Europe* 42 no. 1 (2015): 32–36.

⁹ Stevan K. Pavlowitch, *Yugoslavia* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1971), 64; Čalić, *Istorija Jugoslavije*, 113.

¹⁰ Jovo Bakić, *Ideologije jugoslovenstva između srpskog i hrvatskog nacionalizma (1918–1941): sociološko-istorijska studija* (Zrenjanin: Gradska narodna biblioteka “Žarko Zrenjanin,” 2004), 78–79.

¹¹ Branislav Gligoričević, “Jugoslovenstvo između dva rata,” *Jugoslovenski istorijski časopis* 21 (1986): 79.

different regional interests and identities.¹² In any research of this ideology, it is important to emphasize the possibility of neutralizing other candidates that had the potential to foster social, ideological and cultural divisions (e.g., Serbian or Croatian national identity) in the nation-building process. It should be noted that the terms used in the sources such as "tribes" were understood as lying somewhere between nation and region but also as interwoven rather than hierarchized identities compared to the Yugoslav identity.¹³

To understand the Yugoslavism of the Serbian right wing, it is important to highlight two factors: the state policy of Yugoslavism and the typology of power that had informed its reception and formation. The paper employs the following definitions of the policy of Yugoslavism in the interwar period:

1. "Tribal Yugoslavism," 1918–1929: the central feature was its emphasis on the idea of the "three-named nation" – Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Those communities were not seen as different nations but as "tribes," which meant that the state acknowledged their distinctiveness within the broader Yugoslav identity. The political system was unitary, centralist and rooted in constitutional parliamentary monarchy.
2. "Integral Yugoslavism," 1929–1935: on 6 January 1929, King Alexander I issued an edict declaring a unitary Yugoslav nation without acknowledging any distinctions among its members. Using elements of repression, he abolished the constitution and introduced the monarch's dictatorship. The new national identity was to be established through decrees and legislation.
3. "Real Yugoslavism," 1935–1939: this was a turnaround similar to the "tribal" type, a return to recognizing the distinctive characteristics of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, with the Yugoslav nation seen as a matter for the future. It involved a political system that was to be unitary, with the possibility of decentralization and regional autonomy but without federalization.

¹² Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed: nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 79; Oliver Zimmer, *Nationalism in Europe, 1890–1940* (Basingstoke [etc.]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 45–46.

¹³ Troch, *Nationalism and Yugoslavia*, 8–11.

4. “Minimal Yugoslavism,” 1939–1941: after the Cvetković–Maček Agreement, which was, in fact, an agreement between the Crown and the most powerful Croatian party, the possibility of federalization emerged, along with opening the questions of a Slovenian and Serbian territorial unit, and the issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In essence, Yugoslavism was seen merely as citizenship, whereas the Serbian, Croatian and Slovene community were understood as related yet distinct nations.¹⁴

After 1929, Yugoslavia became one of the European states with an authoritarian style of government. Analyzing the situation in Yugoslavia, we see that it was wedged between semi-authoritarian and semi-reactionary regimes. With the fundamental difference being the degree of implementing state-sponsored repression, these systems involved a partially elected government, manipulation of the electoral process and pronounced clientelism, while the Crown appointed and controlled the government. The tools of repression were threats and internment rather than drastic measures such as killing opponents en masse. Instead of revolutionary changes, conservative social and fiscal policies were implemented.¹⁵ Yugoslavia became one of the countries swept by the “authoritarian trend,” with a form of right-wing dictatorship but without a single-party system. And as the country’s political life grew more and more authoritarian, there was no real turn toward fascism.¹⁶

¹⁴ This typology is based on and adapted from the following works: Ljubodrag Dimić, *Kulturna politika u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji 1918*, tom 1 (Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 1996); Ljubodrag Dimić, *Srbi i Jugoslavija. Prostor, društvo, politika* (Beograd: Stubovi kulture, 1998); Bakić, *Ideologije jugoslovenstva*; Pieter Troch. “Yugoslavism between the world wars: indecisive nation building,” *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 2 (2010): 227–244.

¹⁵ Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 44–45.

¹⁶ Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003), 290. On the crisis of European liberalism, the organized left wing and most of 1930s Europe, see Mark Mazover, *Mračni kontinent: Evropa u dvadesetom veku* (Beograd: Arhipelag, 2011), 41. By the late 1930s, a series of dictatorships was established in the Balkans, most of them monarchies. See Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism. Comparison and Definition* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 119. In the European context, 16 out of 28 countries experienced authoritarian government in the period 1922–1936. See James M. Lutz, “The Spread of Authoritarian Regimes in Interwar Europe,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 18, no. 3 (2017): 251–252. The success of the Nazis in Germany gave a new impetus to the triumph of authoritarianism in 1933–1936.

From tribal to integral Yugoslavism

The first decade in the life of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1918–1929) was marked by constant political instability caused, primarily, by Serbian and Croatian conflicting views. Despite years-long crises between the leading political actors, an agreement was nonetheless reached. From 1925 to 1927, an agreement was in place between Nikola Pašić and Stjepan Radić, the leaders of the People’s Radical Party (NRS) and the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) respectively. Both enjoyed undisputed primacy among their respective peoples, the Serbs and the Croats. The agreement, in which Radić’s party renounced its republicanism and accepted the country’s constitution and political system after boycotting political life for years, was an important step forward to normalize the situation.¹⁷ Besides party squabbles and the unresolved national question, another problem were the autocratic tendencies of the Regent (1918–1921) and later King Alexander I. He showed his autocratic inclinations already in December 1918 when he prevented Nikola Pašić’s appointment as the Prime Minister of the new country’s government although the political parties had agreed on it.¹⁸

After Pašić’s death (1926), the increasingly bitter political situation led to a shooting in the National Assembly, in which a member of NRS wounded and killed several HSS members, including their president. Stjepan Radić succumbed to his injuries in August 1928. On 6 January 1929, the King responded by introducing his dictatorship, which would continue the policy of unitarism and centralism but with a novelty in terms of national ideology. All differences were left aside, and legislation was passed banning the operation of organizations that spread “tribal” consciousness. From 6 January to 3 October 1929, culminating with the law on the organization of the country, now divided into ba-

See Aristotle Kallis, “The ‘Fascist Effect’: On the Dynamics of Political Hybridization in Inter-War Europe,” in *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship in Europe*, ed. Antonio Costa Pinto, Aristotle Kallis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 25–26.

¹⁷ Dejan Djokić, “(Dis)integrating Yugoslavia: King Alexander and Interwar Yugoslavism,” in *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918-1992*, ed. Dejan Djokić (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2003), 151.

¹⁸ Mira Radojević, *Srpski narod i jugoslovenska kraljevina*, tom 1 (Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 2019), 239–242.



NAČRTAO M. PETKANIĆ '37

Nine *banovinas*, administrative units of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, 1929-1939
 (Maps and Geographical Collection, Regional Museum Jagodina)

novinas named after toponyms, the idea of the three-named people was abandoned, and the integral Yugoslav nation was declared.¹⁹

Until 1929, the most fervent supporters of integral Yugoslavism among political organizations were the members of the right-wing Organization of Yugoslav Nationalists (ORJUNA), who shared with the ideology of fascism, among other things, the notions of anti-communism, authoritarianism, anticlericalism, expansionism (seeing the Bulgarians as part of the Yugoslav nation), the theory of national revolution, aggressive propaganda and terror over actors with different beliefs. ORJUNA enjoyed the regime’s support and by 1921 acted primarily against the communists, and after they were banned, they turned on the “tribal separatists,” i.e., parties with regional distinctions, including NRS and HSS.²⁰ Their ban after the introduction of the sovereign’s dictatorship was a clear sign of Alexander’s conservatism. This move revealed the monarch’s intentions in a period when the full affirmation of ORJUNA’s views was expected.²¹

Just a few months after the dictatorship was proclaimed, rumors surfaced about the return of constitutional power to keep the public waiting for change. Two years later (1931), Yugoslavia was granted a constitution by its sovereign, the so-called Octroyed Constitution, an act that restored limited parliamentary freedoms but only to all-Yugoslav political organizations, while the king retained his dominant influence.²²

The monarch’s decisions did not fail to elicit a response from the political actors. In the early 1930s, there was a reaction from the members of former political parties, ideologically diverse and ranging from the pro-federalization Croatian nationalists to staunchly pro-Yugoslav

¹⁹ Christian Axboe Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs: Identity in King Aleksandar’s Yugoslavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 77–79.

²⁰ Vasilije Dragosavljević, “Influences of Italian Fascism on the Ideology and Political Practice of the Organisation of Yugoslav Nationalists (ORJUNA),” in *Serbian-Italian Relations: History and Modern Times*, ed. Biljana Vučetić (Beograd: The Institute of History, Roma: Sapienza University of Rome, Research center CEMAS, 2015), 231–241.

²¹ Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs*, 284; Todor Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature 1929–1935* (Beograd: Prosveta, 1969), 83.

²² The constitution declared Yugoslavism the official state policy. See Dimić, *Kulturna politika*, 279; Stojkov, *Opozicija*, 83.

liberals and democrats who condemned centralism, unitarism and the lack of political freedom. The King, however, remained committed to the principles proclaimed on 6 January until he died. The disappearance of his personal authority showed the fragility of the concept of integral Yugoslavism. After King Alexander was assassinated in Marseille (1934) in a plot organized by Bulgarian and Croatian separatists, his death did not have the effect that the assassins had expected. Rather than the dissolution of the state, the aftermath of the King's murder saw the Yugoslav idea grow stronger, at least temporarily. Despite their dissatisfaction with his authoritarian methods, the majority of Serbs had respected Alexander as their sovereign and the victorious warrior of the 1912–1918 wars, while the majority of Croats, notwithstanding their discontent with the political system in the country, agreed with his firm position toward Italy.²³

The implementation of the ideas of integral Yugoslavism was hampered by economic limitations, and the entire first decade in the existence of the new state had passed without a clear cultural policy.²⁴ At the same time, the new form of Yugoslavism, associated with the introduction of the monarch's personal rule and the ban on political parties, suppressed its earlier version, which had largely been rooted in completely different political grounds – democracy and civil liberties. The kingdom's dictatorship was an important part of the initial process of associating the notion of Yugoslavism with authoritarianism and the attendant resistance.

The Croatian movement was additionally radicalized and saw Yugoslavism as a synonym for “Serbian hegemony,” and the intellectual elite of pre-war Serbia increasingly abandoned the Yugoslav idea in its struggle for the restoration of political freedoms. The integral version of Yugoslavism mostly enjoyed support among the (primarily Serbian) elites in the regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Dalmatia and Vojvodina, whose inhabitants feared a division of the country and Croatian secession. These processes marked the 1930s in the Kingdom.²⁵

²³ Pavlowitch, *Yugoslavia*, 87.

²⁴ Dimić, *Kulturna politika*, 167; for a detailed analysis of the country's budgets, see *Ibid.*, 138–166.

²⁵ Milosav Janičijević, *Stvaralačka inteligencija medjuratne Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 1984), 127–128.

The bearers of the King's legacy were his underage son King Peter II, his first cousin Prince Regent Paul and his political organization, the Yugoslav National Party (JNS). Formed in 1933, the party ruled in the spirit of the King's principles.²⁶ Its program stated that the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes belonged to the same Yugoslav nation due to their origin, language, centuries-long aspirations, and their shared historical fate and experience, and Yugoslav national unity was seen as a natural fact. During the dictatorship period, the party's members toured the country and spread the idea of Yugoslavism at rallies and meetings, while also using the press, propaganda films and similar tools. Their efforts, however, had the opposite effect. The pressure on the citizenry to become registered members of the party and other kinds of aggressive campaigning had tarnished the concept of Yugoslavism.²⁷

Already in early 1935, JNS faced strong resistance to its policies. The repressive methods the government resorted to was met with violent reactions from the opposition, deepening the crisis in the country. Prime Minister, Bogoljub Jevtić, tried to consolidate his position by founding associations such as the Patriotic Youth Front and the Organization of National Students. Faced with different pressures, the government proved itself increasingly authoritarian, only for the elections of May 1935 to turn into terror from both sides.²⁸ JNS ran the electoral campaign with the motto "For Oplenac or Janka-Puszta," which meant that those who refused to vote for the government's candidates, continuing the legacy of King Alexander (Oplenac was the site of the king's burial) and instead favored the opposition candidates, were being labeled supporters of terrorists and separatists (the king's assassins were trained at the training camp of Janka-Puszta in neighboring Hungary).²⁹

²⁶ The party was initially named the Yugoslav Radical Peasant Democracy (1931–1933). See Dimić, *Kulturna politika*, 290–291.

²⁷ Ivana Dobrivojević, *Državna represija u doba kralja Aleksandra 1929–1935* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 2006), 133.

²⁸ Milica Bodrožić, "Jugoslovenska nacionalna stranka pod vladom Bogoljuba Jevtića i petomajski izbori 1935. godine," *Zbornik Matice srpske za istoriju* 40 (1989): 148–149; Ferdo Čulinović, *Jugoslavija između dva rata* (Zagreb: Jugoslavenska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1961), 82–83.

²⁹ Todor Stojkov, *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića 1935–1937* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1985), 10; Bodrožić, "Jugoslovenska nacionalna stranka," 154.

Although the opposition (comprising the leading Croatian and Serbian opposition parties), led by the president of HSS, Vladimir Maček, suffered an electoral defeat, almost 40% of votes it had won in these circumstances was nonetheless a heavy blow to the government. Continuing the tradition of the Crown's primacy over other organs of government, Prince Paul dismissed the government and entrusted the new cabinet to Milan Stojadinović, the former Minister of Finance and a well-known economic expert. The change, it would turn out, was not merely a personal one. Stojadinović's cabinet endured for almost three and a half years – a remarkable score in the history of interwar Yugoslavism.

Real Yugoslavism and its rivals

Shortly after he came to power, with the support of Prince Paul, Stojadinović initiated talks about forming a new political organization: the Yugoslav Radical Union (JRZ). Unlike JNS, the new organization was not made with the intention of obliterating old parties but was, to the contrary, formed by merging them.³⁰ The very structure of the new party indicated a new turnaround in the policy of Yugoslavism. JRZ was created through the fusion of one fraction of NRS, the Slovene People's Party (SLS) and the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (JMO). The latter two included the majority of Slovenes and Bosnian-Herzegovinian Muslims, and since neither of the two lost its local distinctive characteristics, JRZ can be seen as more of a coalition bloc than a unitary party.

The JRZ program highlighted the need for the unity of the state and people under the monarchy and the Karadjordjević dynasty, but still "respecting the three names of our peoples." In other words, regardless of the commonly cited King's legacy, Stojadinović, with Prince Paul's support, essentially reverted to the concept of the three-named people, hinting at the possibility of self-government to meet the demands of regional and historical specificities.³¹ It is not without rele-

³⁰ Stojkov, *Opozicija*, 320.

³¹ Archives of Yugoslavia (Arhiv Jugoslavije, hereafter AJ), Milan Stojadinović Papers (Zbirka Milana Stojadinovića), collection no 37, box 1, folder 4, hereafter 37-1-4, Deklaracija Stojadinovića, Korošeca i Spaha.

vance that Stojadinović’s government allowed the use of “tribal” flags and symbols, which had been banned since 1930.

But what did the concept of “real Yugoslavism” mean in the political practice of Milan Stojadinović’s government? Speaking at the first national convention of JRZ, he summarized his views on the political system and national policy of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia:

“For 18 years now there has been one major misunderstanding in our public life. We have always been in favor of the broadest self-government. Others sought autonomies and others still a federation ... We believe that the content and scope of the powers of what is being proposed for some administrative divisions is the most important. We are for respecting the three names of our people: Serb, Croat and Slovene. We support respecting their equality and their traditions ... while leaving it to some administrative areas to cater to their needs – administrative, economic, financial, cultural and others – as they see fit ... and in a way that would not bring this governance at odds with the state and its aims and needs.”³²

For the argument I am making here, Stojadinović’s emphasis on the “content and scope” of future self-government is particularly important. Real Yugoslavism was rooted in a direct agreement between the central government, embodied in the Prime Minister who enjoyed the undisputed support of the Prince Regent, and the regional political leaders, who, with the dominant influence they wielded in their respective regions, also had significant influence on the state level. The limit, however, was the preservation of the Constitution without assigning a territory to any of the “tribal identities,” which could have potentially led to federalization. In addition, research has shown that not only was the concept of integral Yugoslavism abandoned but the official idea of “tribal identities” was interpreted loosely and in opposition to the official discourse, particularly in the central part of the Kingdom, the former Austro-Hungarian crownland of Bosnia and Herzegovina and among the political elite of its Muslim part.

³² *Rad prve zemaljske skupštine Jugoslovenske radikalne zajednice, održane 1 i 2 juna 1936. u Beogradu* (Beograd: izdanje Samouprave, 1936), 15.

Opposition to this new policy came from JNS, formerly the ruling party. Its representatives, particularly powerful in the Senate of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, accused the government of reducing Yugoslavism to having the country's citizenship.³³ An interpellation filed by JNS senators on 11 November 1935 cited the fall in the government's authority, embittered tribal relations and the conflicts and violence that had resulted from them, with the consequent departure from the Yugoslav program; it also accused JRZ of being a "coalition of three tribal parties."³⁴ The banning of the Yugoslav National Youth, an organization close to the former government and with a clear ideological descriptor in its name, in December 1935, did little to fend off the criticism of the supporters of integral Yugoslavism.³⁵

By criticizing the government, JNS was trying to consolidate itself and, in mid-February 1936, it held a party conference in Belgrade and highlighted that, in the general public, "questions believed to have been resolved were again being asked," while the government was pursuing a policy against the "fundamental principles of the Yugoslav ideology." The attendees rejected any thought of creating a totalitarian state or resorting to fascist methods. They based their program on the concept of Yugoslav unitarism, condemning the persecution of "Yugoslav elements and reviving tribal and religious divisions."³⁶

The clash between JRZ and JNS clearly illustrates the shift that had taken place with Stojadinović's premiership. The new Prime Minister sought to be seen as the guardian of the King's legacy, which he described as the heritage of not just a single cabinet but the entire Yugo-

³³ Dimić, *Kulturna politika*, 341–343.

³⁴ *Stenografske beleške senata Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, redovan saziv za 1935 i 1936. godinu, knj. 1, od I prethodnog do XIII redovnog sastanka, od 20 oktobra 1935 do 27 marta 1936 godine sa budžetskom debatom u načelu i pojedinostima (Beograd, 1936), 13–16. Dragan Bakić, "Prilog za biografiju: politička karijera Uroša Desnice u vremenu iskušenja (1919–1941)," *Zbornik radova sa znanstvenog skupa Desničini susreti 2014.*, ur. Drago Roksandić i Ivana Cvijović Javorina (Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2015), 245.

³⁵ AJ, 37-19-149, Otvoreno pismo omladinske organizacije jugoslovenskih nacionalista, 7 December 1935; Dragan Tešić, *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica u Srbiji 1935–1939* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1997), 68.

³⁶ AJ, 37-12-146, Kominike Jugoslovenske nacionalne stranke, 15 February 1936.

slav people. He built his position as someone who had fought against the previous regime, describing it as “Yugo-fascist.” Speaking on behalf of JRZ, he noted that they “had come to demobilize some of those forces, just those Yugo-Fascist forces that profess in the Parliament to be the only defenders of state and national unity.”³⁷

This clash subsided after the assassination attempt on Stojadinović in the National Assembly in March 1936. Prince Paul and his Prime Minister indirectly suggested that the person behind the plot had been Petar Živković, the former president of the Council of Ministers (1929–1932) and one of the pillars of Alexander’s dictatorship, who was serving as the Minister of the Army and Navy in Stojadinović’s cabinet. Although the subsequent indictment did not mention Živković, this event was used to remove this influential actor and symbol of the dictatorship from power. Stojadinović also took it as an opportunity to present himself as a fighter for democracy, as opposed to the forces of the former dictatorship.³⁸

In an intriguing turn, the freshly retired General Živković became the leader of JNS in the summer of 1936, proclaiming his allegiance to King Alexander’s legacy. The proclamation issued after he took the helm of JNS emphasized that this approach was the national mission of the party, citing “twelve centuries of struggle for Yugoslavia,” and stressed that now was the time to fight for “one indivisible kingdom, with one people in one state.”³⁹ Until an agreement between HSS and the Serbian United Opposition in October 1939, in the public statements and propaganda of JRZ representatives, the representatives of the former regime played the role of the government’s main rivals; after that the parties to an agreement became the target.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Stenografske beleške Narodne skupštine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, redovni sastanak držan 4. 7. 1935, 116; *Stenografske beleške Senata Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, šesti redovni sastanak držan 27. 7. 1935, 91–92.

³⁸ Bojan Simić, “Atentat u Narodnoj skupštini marta 1936 – pozadina, sudski proces, posledice,” *Nauka i savremeni univerzitet* 9 (2020): 163–174.

³⁹ *Proglas Jugoslovenske nacionalne stranke* (Beograd, 1936), 4–9.

⁴⁰ Bojan Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju, 2007), 181; Mira Radojević, *Udružena opozicija 1935–1939* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1994), 176–178.

The remaining critics of Stojadinović's government among Serbian right-wing political actors were the members of the *Borbaši* and ZBOR. The former were led by Svetislav Hodjera, who had previously served as chief of staff in General Živković's cabinet and whose party had been founded during the dictatorship as a faux rival to JNS. Their program underlined the struggle for the freedom of the press, independence of the judiciary and the depolitization of civil service, uncompromising support for integral Yugoslavism and against federalization in any shape or form, while also highlighting the importance of the state above all.⁴¹ They rejected "any disruption to the state monolith" and took a stand against "tribal nationalism."⁴² In the *Borbaši* program, Yugoslavia was seen as "one indivisible kingdom, with one people in one state" and the "national holy of holies."⁴³ The *Borbaši* were against the government, especially after it banned their list from participating in the 1935 elections, when they chose to support the opposition.⁴⁴ This animosity continued after the founding of JRZ, which was accused of having been created from "above," much like JNS.⁴⁵

Dimitrije Ljotić, after a brief stint as Minister of Justice in 1931, led a movement founded shortly after the assassination of King Alexander. JNP ZBOR had many of the characteristics of fascist political parties.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Bogumil Hrabak, "Jugoslovenska narodna stranka 1935. i 1936. godine," *Novopazarski zbornik* 31 (2008): 74. For placing *Borbaši* on the ideological spectrum of the far right, but not fascism, see Rastko Lompar, "Politička biografija Svetislava Hodjere," *Studenti i nauka: Studkon* 2 (Niš: Filozofski fakultet 2017): 39–49.

⁴² Hrabak, "Jugoslovenska narodna stranka," 75. *Jugoslovenska narodna stranka. Proglas i program. Statuti i uput za opštinske izbore* (Beograd: Izdanje Jugoslovenske narodne stranke, 1933), 5–9; *Program Jugoslovenske narodne stranke* (Novi Sad: Štamparija Natošević, 1936), 3–31.

⁴³ AJ, The Yugoslav People's Party "Borbaši" (Jugoslovenska narodna stranka "Borbaši"), 307–1, Program Jugoslovenske narodne stranke, 3–4.

⁴⁴ AJ, 307-1, Rezolucija Izvršnog odbora Jugoslovenske narodne stranke, 24 April 1935.

⁴⁵ AJ, 307-2, „Unutrašnja politička situacija,” 2.

⁴⁶ Rastko Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić – učitelj ili farisej: Zbor, hrišćanstvo i verske zajednice: 1935-1945* (Beograd: Catena mundi, 2021), 59–61. The importance of Ljotić's party grew on account of his connections at the Palace. See Branislav Gligorić, "Politički pokreti i grupe s nacionalsocijalističkom ideologijom i njihova fuzija u Ljotićevom Zboru," *Istorijski glasnik* 4 (1965): 67.

In their view, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes made up the Yugoslav national, social and spiritual community, bound together by kinship and a sense of sharing the same fate.⁴⁷ ZBOR’s anthem “Army of Change” hailed the coming of a “new age and new men” who would vanquish Bolshevism and “make Yugoslavia happy.”⁴⁸ The ideology of ZBOR involved historical claims about the “thirteen-century-long history of the Yugoslav people” and the Serbian uprising against Ottoman rule (1804) “as the opening stage of the Yugoslav revolution.”⁴⁹ According to information contained in the German sources, Ljotić and his supporters never renounced the idea of Yugoslavism.⁵⁰

However, both parties were on the fringes of political life in interwar Yugoslavia. All plans to reach an agreement between the forces of integral Yugoslavism after 1935 turned out to be either rumors or failed attempts.⁵¹ Ljotić claimed that JNS members and *Borbaši* were not committed to the Yugoslav idea and denied them the right to draw on the King’s manifest of 6 January 1929, while also describing their programs as obsolete and unsuited to the needs of modernity.⁵² Any attempts to form a broader bloc around the platform of integral Yugoslavism crumbled when it came to the leader of this hypothetical movement. Živković, Ljotić and Hodjera all saw themselves at its helm, which proved an obstacle both before and after the elections of 1938.⁵³ This inability to form a more substantial bloc certainly opened the way for the authoritarian regime in Yugoslavia to clamp down on the fascist opposition

⁴⁷ Mirko Bojić, *Jugoslovenski narodni pokret “Zbor”, 1935–1945: jedan kritički pri-laz* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1996), 33. The Bulgarians were seen as part of the nation, without which Yugoslavia would not be complete. See Dimitrije Ljotić, *Naš put* (Novi Sad: bez izdavača, 1936), 20. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was seen as historically inevitable. See Velibor Jonić, *Šta hoće Zbor?* (Petrovgrad: Gutenberg, 1937), 11.

⁴⁸ Mladen Stefanović, *Zbor Dimitrija Ljotića: 1934–1935* (Beograd: Narodna knjiga, 1984), 28.

⁴⁹ Vasilije Z. Dragosavljević, “JNP Zbor i concept srpske državnosti,” *Nauka i sa-vremeni univerzitet* 8 (2018): 275.

⁵⁰ Lompar, *Dimitrije Ljotić*, 35–36.

⁵¹ Rumors about a coalition were circulating already in 1935. See AJ, 37–9–48, Iz-veštaj uprave grada Beograda, 25 December 1935.

⁵² Vasilije Dragosavljević, *Druga Evropa i Kraljevina Jugoslavija: JNP Zbor (1934–1941)* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 2021), 42–43.

⁵³ Stefanović, *Zbor*, 49.

and the movements that would have been seen as more suitable partners to Germany, like in Hungary and Romania in 1937.⁵⁴ Thus, by attracting segments of former political parties, including right-wing ones, Stojadinović strengthened the position of JRZ as the only relevant all-Yugoslav party.⁵⁵

The implementation of real Yugoslavism

Milan Stojadinović proved himself the most powerful Yugoslav politician since Nikola Pašić, whose political protégé he had been, serving as Minister of Finance in his cabinet (1922–1926).⁵⁶ His political ambition was to establish a functional Yugoslav state in which he, like Vlatko Maček in Croatia, would enjoy unchallenged political leadership in the Serbian community.⁵⁷ Stojadinović used a two-pronged strategy to achieve his objective.

As one of the pillars of his policy, Stojadinović emphasized the restoration of democracy and civil liberties, thereby underscoring differences from the previous regime.⁵⁸ Although no real democratization of political life took place, JRZ was indeed more liberal in implementing – or, more accurately, not implementing – the legislation promul-

⁵⁴ Rastko Lompar, “Afera ‘Tehnička unija’ i veze JNP Zbora sa nacističkom Nemačkom 1935–1941,” *Istorija 20. veka* 38 (2020): 97.

⁵⁵ Stojadinović expected that the bulk of ZBOR would join JRZ “except Ljotić himself, whom we have no need of, at the end of day.” See AJ, 37-44-295, Milan Stojadinović to Mehmed Spaho, 30 November 1937.

⁵⁶ Rotschild, *East Central Europe*, 250.

⁵⁷ Dejan Djokić, “‘Leader’ or ‘Devil’? Milan Stojadinović, Prime Minister of Yugoslavia (1935–39), and his Ideology,” in *In the Shadow of Hitler: Personalities of the Right in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Rebecca Haynes and Martin Rady (London: IB Tauris, 2010), 161. Stojadinović compared himself and Maček as “spokesmen” for Serbs and Croats (Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, 560). For such ambitions, see also Tešić, *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica*, 8.

⁵⁸ See the statements of multiple ministers and JRZ members about restoring democracy and civil rights, the “cornerstones of success,” identifying JRZ success with the success and triumph of democracy: AJ, Central Press Bureau (Centralni presbiro), 38-335-483, *Samouprava*, 22. 7. 1936; *Samouprava*, 17. 9. 1936; *Pravda*, 4. 12. 1936. They also underlined the struggle for democracy against “communism, Bolshevism, fascism and Yugo-fascism” in AJ, 38-336-484, *Narodna samouprava*, 11. 7. 1936.

gated under King Alexander. To put it simply, this regime was "more democratic than the previous one but not democratic."⁵⁹ Stojadinović thus positioned himself as both the rival of integral-Yugoslav nationalists, whose ideas were now being associated with the dictatorship, and the far left (communism) and far right (fascism) to create an image for his party as a moderate conservative option.⁶⁰ And yet, as noted above, he failed to deliver on his promises about restoring democracy, continuing to use his official powers to stabilize his party and facilitate its electoral success. Asked by his chief propagandist whether they were going left or right, he replied: choreographed democracy.⁶¹

Compared to the policy of real Yugoslavism, the promise of democratization and the above mentioned statement against "Yugo-fascism" were supposed to make Stojadinović a desirable partner in other parts of Yugoslavia and to make the arguments of the Serbian opposition about the struggle for the restoration of political freedoms superfluous. The first sign was that SLS and JMO sided with his political option after they had refused to be part of Bogoljub Jevtić's cabinet. His "creative interpretation" of the 6 January Manifest, which the Stojadinović cabinet never formally renounced throughout its existence, facilitated his cooperation with the majority representatives of Slovenes and Bosnian Muslims and even seemed to pave the way for talks with the most influential Croatian party. So what did the concept of real Yugoslavism look like in practice?

As noted in previous research, "in terms of government and enforcement of legislation," Yugoslavia under Stojadinović was unofficially made up of four units: Korošec's Slovenia, Spaho's Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian areas under HSS control, and finally, the remaining territory as "Stojadinović's political domain," leading to the

⁵⁹ Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića*, 38–39.

⁶⁰ Giving propaganda guidelines, he underscored that the legacy of the late King was not to be challenged; instead, it was to be emphasized that he had also supported the return of democracy while harshly criticizing everything that had come later, especially the Jevtić government and all that was "anti-democratic and fascist." See Milan Jovanović Stoimirović, *Dnevnik 1936–1941* (Novi Sad: Matica srpska, 2000), 37.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 161; Dragan Bakić, "Mussolini of Yugoslavia? The Milan Stojadinović Regime and the Impact of Italian Fascism, 1937–1939," *Qualestoria* 49, no. 1 (2021): 248–249.

conclusion that the JRZ regime implemented a “political polarization based on nationality.”⁶² These views, however, need to be relativized and analyzed further by exploring the agreements made by Stojadinović upon the creation of JRZ, the plans to get the Croatian representatives to participate in the government, and local, regional and central governance. The key to understanding this is to be sought in Stojadinović’s statement cited above about “administrative areas [that should be left] to cater to their needs ... as they see fit.”⁶³ Rejecting autonomy and federalization so as not to endanger the “unitary nature of the state,” the JRZ regime turned to acknowledging different political and cultural traditions.⁶⁴ I argue that these claims were not merely a façade for abandoning the concept of integral Yugoslavism but an unofficial “home rule” for some regions, accompanied by shared participation in the central government.

In the Dravska *banovina* (composed almost entirely of Slovene-inhabited lands), Anton Korošec and his SLS were allowed to have primacy; in the Vrbaska and Drinska *banovinas*, which can be described as an expanded version of the Austro-Hungarian crownland of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mehmed Spaho, the leader of JMO, was given the foremost position. Both politicians also served as vice-presidents of JRZ and ministers in the government of Yugoslavia. With their support, Stojadinović was buying time to organize JRZ in the eastern parts of the state as his own political organization and realize his intention of proving himself the legitimate representative of Serbs, rivalling the politicians from the western reaches of the country.⁶⁵ I will first show how “Stojadinović’s model” worked in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The main problem was the conflict between JMO leaders and the parts of NRS that supported Stojadinović. The former rivals in the struggle for domination were now called on to establish cooperation,

⁶² Nikola Žutić, “Ideologija jugoslovenstva i njeno raspadanje (1929–1939) s posebnim osvrtom na Vladu M. Stojadinovića,” *Istorijski glasnik* 1, no. 2 (1988): 83–84. Tešić, *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica*, 8.

⁶³ See p. 274.

⁶⁴ Tešić, *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica*, 40.

⁶⁵ Stojkov, *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića*, 78–85.

which would inevitably be reflected in the relations between the Orthodox Serbs and the Bosnian Muslims, who were mostly concentrated in these political groups. Already by August 1935, Stojadinović was receiving reports about the radicals' discontent and some reservations toward JRZ because it seemed that the government in Belgrade had let JMO take the leading role in the "social and political life in Bosnia and Herzegovina."⁶⁶ The doubts of the local leadership of JRZ about the support of the Serbian population are attested in a letter of the (Drinska) *ban*, Predrag Lukić, which discusses the need for JMO to "initiate its political work" because the Orthodox inhabitants were split into three groups, and underlines that the former political clash between the radicals and JMO should be taken into account.⁶⁷

Special attention was paid to the relations between "Serbs and Muslims" or "the Orthodox and the Muslims," reflecting the shift away from the official policy, which recognized the national distinctive characteristics of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes while, in political practice, treating the Bosnian Muslims as a separate community with its own political objectives and interests.⁶⁸ To balance out the two groups, there

⁶⁶ AJ, 37-51-315, Bogoljub Kujundžić to Milan Stojadinović, 16 August 1935. A letter most likely sent by Ilija M. Stanković, an "old radical" from Sarajevo, to Vojko Čvrkić, a member of the JRZ Main Committee, reports that, although Stojadinović had promised to safeguard Serbian interests, things were not going as planned. "The agreement with Spaho in Bosnia was not made with the aim of surrendering Bosnia to Spaho and denying the existence of Serbs ... I had a duty, as a radical but above all as a Serb, to present the situation as it is, with no beating around the bush ... Are we really going to allow tens of thousands of hangings of local Serbs, all of their sacrifices throughout the centuries ... to be for nothing, to leave Bosnia at the mercy of foreigners, non-Serbs, who pretend to fall under some ephemeral notion of Yugoslavism only to mislead Serbs and thereby impose their rule over them. It follows that we have absolutely no one in Bosnia." N. Baković, "Izabrana prepiska Vojka Čvrkića 1935-1939," *Izvornik* 28 (2013): 95.

⁶⁷ AJ, 37-48-310, Predrag Lukić to Milan Stojadinović, 3 November 1935.

⁶⁸ AJ, 37-52-326, Izveštaj senatora Dušana Djerića o partijskim prilikama u Zvorniku, 13 September 1936. Senator Djerić was trying to convince the local Serbs that the Muslims did not have an advantage "in everything" and get them to see the "bigger picture." Also see Lukić's report about the situation in JRZ, with an analysis through a description of the relations between the Serbs and Muslims, potential local leaders, the number of the members of both groups and the areas in which "suc-

was an effort to establish stable relations given that the Croatian segment of the population remained completely beyond the horizon of the central government. This is attested by the results of local elections in the Vrbaska *banovina* when JRZ won around 66 percent of Orthodox, 92 percent of Muslim and just eight percent of Catholic votes.⁶⁹ Stojadinović also sent instructions not to allow in the Vrbaska *banovina* the founding of any associations that already existed in the Savska *banovina*, where HSS was dominant.⁷⁰

Stojadinović's plans were dealt a heavy blow by the Concordat Crisis, the months-long resistance of the Serbian Orthodox Church supported by the Serbian opposition to the signing of a concordat between the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and the Holy See. Although the text of the convention had been agreed upon before Stojadinović's appointment as Prime Minister, the response of the Serbian Orthodox population was unexpectedly harsh and directed at the government. There were rumors about "Catholicization" and "re-establishing the border on the Drina River," and the MPs and members of JRZ got scared and withdrew completely.⁷¹

The experience of the crisis in the relations with the church additionally decreased the support of JRZ and increased its need for the support of Mehmed Spaho and his followers. And yet, this relationship cannot be said to have been one-sided. Despite Spaho's frequent threats that he would resign and leave the government unless his demands

cess was ensured." AJ, 37-48-310, Predrag Lukić to Milan Stojadinović, Anton Korošec, Mehmed Spaho, 6 October 1936.

⁶⁹ AJ, 37-48-310, Predrag Lukić to Milan Stojadinović, 12 January 1937. The regime took care to have the number of civil servants from both groups reflect their numbers in the general population. See AJ, 37-51-315, Bogoljub Kujundžić to Milan Stojadinović, 4 November 1935 where the *ban* compared the percentages of the population and the employees in civil service; also Draga V. Mastilović, "Srpska elita iz Bosne i Hercegovine u političkom životu Kraljevine SHS/Jugoslavije (1918-1941)" (PhD diss., University of Belgrade, 2013), 757.

⁷⁰ AJ 37-48-310, Milan Stojadinović to Predrag Lukić, 9 February 1937.

⁷¹ AJ, 37-52-326, Dušan Djerić to Milan Stojadinović, 21 August 1937; AJ, 37-48-310, Predrag Lukić to Milan Stojadinović, 30 August 1937. In other *banovinas*, the names of excommunicated members of the cabinet and MPs were read daily in churches. See AJ, 37-48-311, Predrag Lukić to Milan Stojadinović, 11 September 1937.



JRZ rally in Bijeljina, 27 November 1938. “People’s cavalry” and the crowd comprised of Muslims and Orthodox Christians from eastern Bosnia
(Courtesy of the Archives of Yugoslavia, Photo Collection, no. 377)

were met, JMO needed the support of the Belgrade regime to ensure its primacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and it is therefore unsurprising that their cooperation continued even after Stojadinović lost power. Spaho not only acted on behalf of the “territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina” but also used his position as minister to vie for influence in the broader JRZ framework and protested against the events concerning the Islamic Community in Skopje, acting as the representative of Yugoslav Muslims in general.⁷²

The relationship between JMO and JRZ involved multiple “departures” from the official policy – not just from integral Yugoslavism but also indirectly, albeit unofficially, recognizing the existence of the Bosnian Muslims as a separate political actor or, in other words, acknowledging that Bosnia and Herzegovina was one of the territories that were to be given “real powers.”⁷³ Regardless, this was not a matter of surrendering a part of the territory to JMO and its president Spaho but the creation of a network of relations that intertwined the state policy at the central and regional level, balanced out influences at the local level and tied local actors to the Yugoslav state. The most glaring weakness of Stojadinović’s policy was not excessive indulgence of JMO’s interests, which, due to its own divisions, needed support, but his failure to attract the support of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Serbs that NRS had once enjoyed.⁷⁴

⁷² For Spaho’s threats that he would resign see: AJ, 37-44-295, Mehmed Spaho to Milan Stojadinović, 26 February 1936; Mehmed Spaho to Milan Stojadinović, undated, probably late 1937; Mehmed Spaho to Milan Stojadinović, 1 May 1938. For interventions on behalf of the Muslims, see AJ, 37-44-295, Mehmed Spaho to Milan Stojadinović, 16 March 1938; AJ, 37-44-295, Mehmed Spaho to Milan Stojadinović, 22 May 1938.

⁷³ For example, Spaho’s letter to Stojadinović and the suggestion that the party meeting in Bijeljina should be a “meeting for the whole of Bosnia.” See AJ, 37-44-295, Mehmed Spaho to Milan Stojadinović, 7 November 1938.

⁷⁴ On pro-Serbian, pro-Croatian and other factions in the JMO, see AJ, 37-48-310, Predrag Lukić to Milan Stojadinović, 24 June 1937; Reports on “Bosnian Serbs who are not aligning themselves with JRZ although at this time it is the only place for them”; AJ, 37-48-310, Dušan Davidović to Milan Stojadinović, 29 May 1938. JRZ was also troubled by the local “tribal division” in Sarajevo and Mostar with “zero turnout of the Catholics” (AJ, 37-53-341, Dušan Vasiljević to Milan Stojadinović, 1 October 1938).

The territory of the Dravska *banovina* was dominated by SLS under Anton Korošec. The complaints of the representatives of the most powerful Slovene party ranged from textbooks that “offended national individuality” to the representation of Slovenes in the staff of central state institutions such as the National Bank of Yugoslavia.⁷⁵ The bridge of cooperation between the two sides was, from the viewpoint of SLS, the idea explained by one of its most influential members, Miha Krek, in September 1936: that the Slovene position was such that national aims could be achieved only in Belgrade.⁷⁶ In his letters to Stojadinović, Korošec consistently used the term “Slovenia” for the territory of the Dravska *banovina*.⁷⁷ From the perspective of real Yugoslavism, the alignment of the leading Slovene politicians with the central government eliminated the unpleasant possibility of a rapprochement between SLS and HSS in a joint front.

A particularly important topic for understanding the relations in the “Slovenian self-government” was that of the *Sokol* movement in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. As an institution that had enjoyed King Alexander’s direct support and cultivated strongly secular Yugoslav nationalism paired with the nation’s physical fitness, the *Sokols* and their strongholds in the Slovene milieu posed an obstacle to the conservative SLS. When JRZ came to power, the *Sokol* movement first lost its privileges, and the person who championed that move had been precisely Anton Korošec.⁷⁸ However, although the *Sokol* movement was significantly marginalized, Stojadinović did not want to completely let go of it, as attested by Korošec’s persistent efforts to prove, through meticulous lists of members, that the “*Sokol* movement of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in Slovenia was one and the same with the JNS” and accuse them of “godless propaganda.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ AJ, 37-48-309, Marko Natlačen to Dobrivoje Stošović, 20 February 1936; AJ, 37-46-299, Anton Korošec to Milan Stojadinović, 19 February 1937.

⁷⁶ Anka Vidovič-Miklavčič, “Mladina Jugoslovske radikalne zajednice (MJRZ) v Dravski banovini,” *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 32 (1992): 20.

⁷⁷ AJ, 37-46-299, Anton Korošec to Milan Stojadinović, 6 July 1936.

⁷⁸ Nikola Žutić, *Sokoli: ideologija u fizičkoj kulturi Kraljevine Jugoslavije, 1929-1941* (Beograd: Angrotrade, 1991), 106. Dimić, *Kulturna politika*, 350–351.

⁷⁹ For Korošec’s claim that the *Sokol* and JNS members were the same, with tables: AJ, 37-46-299, Anton Korošec to Milan Stojadinović, 30 October 1937 and *Sokol*

The very fact that SLS continued its anti-*Sokol* activities throughout the duration of Stojadinović's government shows that his propaganda activities, in which he was portrayed as a *Sokol* supporter,⁸⁰ were not just for show. Stojadinović used *Sokol* as a counterweight of sorts to SLS, as attested by his conversation with the Minister of the Court, Milan Antić, whom he told that he would instruct Korošec not to ban local *Sokol* activities so that it would not seem as if they were on the side of JNS. He also underscored that the *Sokols* should be defended because during recent festivities in the Dravska *banovina* Slovenian flags had been flown everywhere and the crowds cheered to Korošec and free Slovenia. Stojadinović commented on the political tactic of the leading Slovene politician, noting that he would wait to see "how far [our] lenience toward the Croats would go and then ask the same for the Slovenes."⁸¹

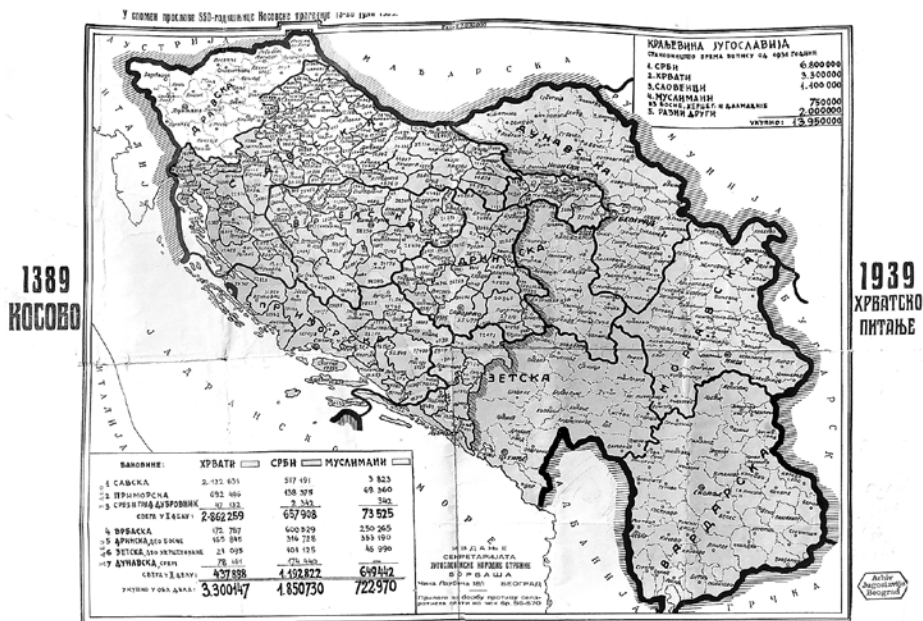
In his relations with the political elites of the Slovenes and Bosnian Muslims, Stojadinović implemented a sort of "checks and balances" system, in which all actors depended on the others both in safeguarding local domination and in their joint participation in the Yugoslav government. A particular difficulty for him was the weak organization of JRZ because on the other side were established political parties whose leaders had spent decades at their helm.⁸² This was also the case in the relations with HSS and its president Maček. That relationship, however, was the reason behind the failure of real Yugoslavism.

propaganda, AJ, 37-46-299, Anton Korošec to Milan Stojadinović, 27 April 1938. Another influential SLS member, the *ban* of Dravska, Marko Natlačen, also wrote of the *Sokols*' "rabble-rousing and inappropriate" behavior at the commemoration held in Ljubljana for King Alexander and the organization's ties with Ljotić's ZBOR. See AJ, 37-48-309, Marko Natlačen to Milan Stojadinović, 15 October 1938.

⁸⁰ Simić, *Propaganda Milana Stojadinovića*, 229–230.

⁸¹ AJ, Collection of Microfilms (Zbirka mikrofilmova), no. 797, Prince Paul Karadjordjević Papers (Arhiva kneza Pavla Karadjordjevića), 12-970/55-56, Izveštaj ministra Dvora Milana Antića, 12 June 1937.

⁸² Report of Stojadinović's representative from the Zetska *banovina* that he was working on "making Stojadinović in the Zetska *banovina* what Korošec is in Slovenia and Spaho to the Muslims in Bosnia," in AJ, 37-54-346, Djuro Čejović to Milan Stojadinović, 27 December 1937.



Propaganda of the *Borbaši* from 1939, comparing concessions made to the Croats to the “tragedy” of the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 (Courtesy of the Archives of Yugoslavia, Milan Stojadinović Papers, no. 37)

The Croatian question as the obstacle to the implementation of real Yugoslavism

The critical question in the time of Stojadinović’s government and interwar Yugoslavia in general was the integration of Croatian political representatives into the state system. Following the creation of the state, owing to universal male suffrage and broader political freedoms than they had had in Austria-Hungary, HSS evolved from a marginal group into the leading political party in Croatia. The size of the Croatian movement had no equivalent among the Serbs as the only larger Yugoslav community. This situation endured for most of the 1920s and 1930s, making an agreement between the two sides more difficult to reach.⁸³

⁸³ For more details, see Dejan Djokić, *Nedostižni kompromis: srpsko-hrvatsko pitanje u međuratnoj Jugoslaviji* (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2010), 77–82.

As Prime Minister, Stojadinović often received reports from the Savska and Primorska *banovinas*, both of which with a Croatian majority, about tense “tribal” relations, various incidents, and the rejection of state symbols and holidays. HSS led a community in which the majority did not accept the Yugoslav state.⁸⁴ Maček openly called on selected officials and county representatives not to mark any state celebrations, thanksgivings and holidays and asked them not to display Yugoslav flags.⁸⁵

Looking at the views of the leading political actors in Yugoslavia, it is clear that there were deep-seated differences in their priorities and goals. For the opposition parties founded in pre-war Serbia, the most pressing concern was restoring parliamentarism and civil liberties, with everything else being of secondary importance. On the other hand, the leadership of HSS saw the internal composition in the Kingdom as the critical issue, and when working with the Serbian opposition, they pressed them to straightforwardly declare their views on the matter. A similar “roadblock” existed in the talks between the regime and HSS: Prince Paul and Milan Stojadinović wanted Maček and his supporters to join the government but within the framework of the Constitution, whereas the leader of the largest Croatian party wanted the Constitution rescinded as a prerequisite for his cooperation.⁸⁶

At a meeting between Stojadinović and Maček held in mid-January 1937 in Brežice, the Yugoslav Prime Minister offered HSS to enter the government with five ministerial posts and a change of the Constitution once the King came of age. If Maček found the offer unacceptable, Stojadinović was willing to accept ministers from the Independent Demo-

⁸⁴ For various kinds of incidents and the danger of creating “tribal-religious” fronts, see AJ, 37-49-313, Josip Jablanović to Ivo Perović, 18 January 1936; Josip Jablanović to Milan Stojadinović, 13 July 1936; In July 1936, Minister of the Army and Navy reported to Stojadinović that “Croatian nationalists see JRZ as a party barely surviving by making concessions to everyone” and that pro-Yugoslav people were dissatisfied because they felt that the government had left them at “the mercy of the Croatian front.” See Stojkov, *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića*, 174–175.

⁸⁵ AJ, 37-19-138, Uputa novoizabranim načelnicima i občinskim odbornicima izabranim na listi HSS i SDK, 25 November 1936.

⁸⁶ Ljubo Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček* (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 1965), 12–22.

cratic Party, HSS’s coalition partner, having confidence in its president. Essentially, a part of the offer was also a new electoral law, with the formation of two fronts: a centralist one led by Stojadinović and a federalist one led by Maček. Although the talks failed to result in a formal agreement, a channel of communication remained open, with the intention of keeping HSS away from the forces of the United Opposition.⁸⁷

Stojadinović tried not to exert unnecessary pressure on the Croatian side. Reporting on his meeting with Maček on 15 March 1937, the Chief of Staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote to Stojadinović: “I personally said that you’ve given Maček *carte blanche* for his work in the Savska banovina, to strengthen it and make a definitive agreement with the man heading the entire Croatian people, Maček was happy – he smiled, nodded his head and said: I know that!”⁸⁸ Also, Stojadinović criticized his main propagandist in June 1937 because he had written about the Croatian question although he had been instructed not to. An explanation of Stojadinović’s reaction came from Minister Behmen, a JMO member: “We keep to the tactic of binding Maček and stalling.”⁸⁹

Although there was no break in the relations between HSS and the regime, both sides remained entrenched in their views. While Stojadinović continued his “political war of attrition” in an attempt to exhaust HSS and its leader by isolation, Maček continued to put up passive resistance.⁹⁰ In a proposition about the “state system” drawn up in HSS circles, there was no departure from the existing objectives. “In order to establish trust between Serbs, Croats and Slovenes,” they asked for

⁸⁷ Boban, *Sporazum*, 23. In his memoirs, Stojadinović recorded that, before the meeting, Prince Paul literally told him that he could discuss “everything” except amending the Constitution. See Milan Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt* (Buenos Aires: El Economista, 1963), 513–514. It turned out that the report of Minister Cvetković, who had prepared Stojadinović’s meeting with Maček, that the Croats were “ready to give in” and that Maček would agree to a slight correction of *banovina* borders, was incorrect (AJ, 37-1-5, Izveštaj ministra Dragiše Cvetkovića iz Zagreba, 7 January 1937).

⁸⁸ AJ, 37-1-5, Izveštaj Dragana Protića, šefa kabineta Ministarstva spoljnih poslova, o razgovoru sa Mačekom u Zagrebu, 15 March 1937.

⁸⁹ Jovanović Stoimirović, *Dnevnik*, 129–130.

⁹⁰ Dragan Bakić, “Milan Stojadinović, the Croat Question and the International Position of Yugoslavia, 1935-1939,” *Acta Histriae*, 26–1 (2018): 210.

general amnesty for all except the communists, a law on freedom of the press composed so as to protect the unity of the state and the dynasty, a new electoral law and free elections, the administrative merging of the Savska and Primorska *banovinas*, to be headed by a ban who would be the chief of the entire state administration apparatus.⁹¹

The agreement reached in Farkašić between HSS and the Serbian opposition (8 October 1937) was a blow to Stojadinović's efforts. It highlighted the interdependence of all moves in Yugoslavia. Namely, there was confusion within JRZ itself. According to information obtained "from all Serbian administrators in the territory of Bosnia," the Muslims were afraid that the Farkašić agreement would "group the Serbs" and lessen their "superior position in JRZ," while Korošec in Slovenia also refused to make a stand, concluding that the Muslims did not seem to want to go against the Croats before the Slovenes.⁹²

In late 1937, the statements of JRZ members did not show any inclination to cede ground. There were reports of a desire for an agreement "like the one we already have with our Slovene and Muslim brothers, but only of the kind that would be to the benefit of Croats and Slovenes and Serbs and would honor the unity of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia"; however, "We from the Yugoslav Radical Union declare: we don't want a federation but a broad self-government implemented through the *banovinas*!"⁹³

The main goal was to avoid opening the Serbian question by resolving the Croatian.⁹⁴ Stojadinović insisted that an agreement with HSS was possible, but without any concessions concerning the dynasty, monarchy, national and state unity and amending the Constitution.⁹⁵ Stojadinović saw the relationship with the Croats as "the progressive grant of autonomous measures."⁹⁶ Maček's visit to Belgrade in August 1938 and the warm reception given to the "leader of the all-

⁹¹ AJ, 37-19-138, Predlozi Hrvatske seljačke stranke o državnom uredjenju.

⁹² AJ, 37-48-310, Predrag Lukić to Milan Stojadinović, 15 October 1937.

⁹³ AJ, 38-335-483, *Narodna samouprava*, Kragujevac, 23. 10. 1937; AJ, 38-335-483, *Vreme*, 15. 11. 1937.

⁹⁴ AJ, 38-335-483, *Vreme*, 16. 11. 1937.

⁹⁵ Boban, *Sporazum*, 26.

⁹⁶ Bakić, "Milan Stojadinović," 212.

Yugoslav democratic opposition to Prince Paul" convinced the regime that it needed to affirm the state policy at the elections.⁹⁷

Maček's deal with Petar Živković's JNS about joining the opposition was criticized within HSS, but was significant for Maček personally because it tactically showed that this was a clash between two similar political blocs, which was meant to weaken Stojadinović's position as the only guardian of the unitary state concept, whereas HSS led its campaign as a "national referendum with the right to self-determination."⁹⁸ JNS justified its rapprochement with Maček by the difficult situation and claimed that, notwithstanding the differences between their programs, the monarchy, dynasty, border integrity, political freedoms and parliamentary rule were non-negotiable; on the other hand, the Croatian question was seen as the primary interest of the state and people.⁹⁹ In other words, Maček was toying with the idea of creating two blocs relayed to him by Stojadinović at their meeting.¹⁰⁰

Stojadinović entered the 1938 elections considerably weakened by the Concordat crisis. His words in the Parliament that the Concordat was a matter of "being capable or incapable of governing a great Yugoslavia, not Serbia but Yugoslavia" would prove justified.¹⁰¹ Although the crisis formally began in July and ended in October 1937, it was not until February 1938 that the Serbian Orthodox Church repealed the excommunications, which significantly undermined Stojadinović's ambition to portray himself as the leader of the Serbs.¹⁰² In his campaign, Stojadinović reminded the public of his liberal implementation of "inherited laws," accusing JNS of having betrayed the Yugoslav idea and a habit of dropping in to see the chief of the "federalists" in Zagreb before paying a visit to the leader of "integral Yugoslavs" in Belgrade; he also spoke of his desire for an agreement but "not at any cost"¹⁰³ and declared: "We

⁹⁷ Boban, *Sporazum*, 46; A. Djilas, *The Contested Country. Yugoslav unity and communist revolution 1919-1953* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 129.

⁹⁸ Boban, *Sporazum*, 52.

⁹⁹ AJ, 37-19-146, Saopštenje predsedništva Jugoslovenske nacionalne stranke.

¹⁰⁰ Bakić, "Milan Stojadinović," 213; Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, 516.

¹⁰¹ AJ, 37-2-9, Ekspoze o Konkordatu pretsednika Ministarskog saveta i ministra inostranih poslova g. Dr. Milana Stojadinovića, 8 July 1937.

¹⁰² Tešić, *Jugoslovenska radikalna zajednica*, 91-94.

¹⁰³ AJ, 37-2-9, Stojadinovićev predizborni govor u Beogradu, 16 October 1938.

want a unitary and indivisible Yugoslavia through the joint efforts of all our people of all three names and all three main faiths.”¹⁰⁴ At the last rally, held in Belgrade on 9 December 1938, he reiterated his program of one king, one people, one state, noting that Maček was in favor of a federal state, which he planned to build with those who had portrayed him as an Austro-Hungarian officer at the 1935 elections; federalization, in his view, would mean “weakness and probably the dissolution of the state” and was reminiscent of the fate of Czechoslovakia.¹⁰⁵

Three out of four million voters voted in the elections, with the government’s list winning 54.09%, the opposition’s 44.90% and Ljotić’s 1.01%. The regime won around 300,000 votes more, but the opposition achieved considerable growth; in the territory of pre-war Serbia, the regime had used oppressive methods, whereas in the Croatian areas it was the other way round and, consequently, Stojadinović’s government recorded the worst result in those areas since 1918.¹⁰⁶ Stojadinović was confident in Prince Paul’s support and his foreign policy successes.¹⁰⁷ Touting analyses of the elections in the “pre-Kumanovo” territory of Serbia, he tried to portray himself as the legitimate leader of the Serbs in a bid to strengthen his position, stressing that in Šumadija, the central area of Serbia before 1914, JRZ won the majority in 81 out of 90 counties.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ AJ, 37-2-9, Stojadinovićev predizborni govor u Bosanskom Novom, 20 November 1938.

¹⁰⁵ AJ 37-2-9, Stojadinovićev predizborni govor u Beogradu, 9 December 1938.

¹⁰⁶ On the election violence, Croatian State Archives (Hrvatski državni arhiv, hereafter HR-HDA), Zagreb, Political Situation 1910–1940 (Politička situacija 1910–1940), Collection no. 1363, Inv. br. 5695, Tromjesečni izvještaj Kraljevske banske uprave o radu opće uprave, 21 January 1939.

¹⁰⁷ Boban, *Sporazum*, 53–55. In his memoirs, Stojadinović noted that, after he informed the Prince Regent that they had won 300,000 votes more than Maček, Paul replied: “I would have liked that number to have been a bit higher.” (Stojadinović, *Ni rat ni pakt*, 560). On JRZ’s organizational weakness and internal strife, HR-HDA, Group VI – Burgeois Parties and Societies (Buržoaske partije i društva), Collection no. 1353, inv. br. 1647, Uprava policije u Zagrebu. Otek opšte policije Kraljevskoj banskoj upravi Savske banovine. Odjeljak za državnu zaštitu, 5 November 1938.

¹⁰⁸ AJ, 37-6-40, Parlamentarni izbori, 11 December 1938, Rezultati izbora uz kartogram: “Za koga je glasala Šumadija?” On unsatisfying results of elections in former Bosnia and Herzegovina regions despite Stojadinović’s propaganda, see Mastilović, “Srpska elita,” 852–854. On undermining the JRZ position among Serbs in

Stojadinović blamed his less than stellar electoral results on Anton Korošec, Minister of the Interior, accusing him of a “liberal approach” in Croatia, where the opposition had been free to terrorize the voters. After the elections, the cabinet was restructured but, since the dissolution of JRZ was in no one’s interest, Korošec became the president of the Senate of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. As it turned out, Prince Paul cut off his support to the policy pursued thus far and, through Minister Dragiša Cvetković, began talks about an agreement with HSS.¹⁰⁹ This was a clear sign that the end of Stojadinović’s government was not far off. HSS’s passive resistance and rejection of offers to join the JRZ regime cost Stojadinović a successful implementation of the model of real Yugoslavism. Prince Paul’s decision to make a sharp turn in his internal policy, like the one in 1935, toppled the Prime Minister.

Minimal Yugoslavism

The time around the fall of Stojadinović’s government and the ensuing months were marked by the protracted talks between Prince Paul and the HSS leadership. In early January 1939, Minister of the Court Antić informed the Prince that Maček had given up on the demand of amending the Constitution but still wanted some changes made to the *banovina* borders. The initial demand was merging the Savska and Primorska *banovinas* into one large self-government unit. Summing up the Croatian demands, Antić concluded: “They need this politically to appease Croatian nationalism, which, no doubt, represents a spiritual, national and political movement, both under the Austro-Hungarian regime and under the present Yugoslav one, and Yugoslavism can be achieved through long-term effort, struggle and content life together.”¹¹⁰ Prince Paul’s view that the international situation required

Croatia based on consequences of the Concordat crisis, see a leaflet titled “Can a Serb vote for JRZ” with accusations of fascism, in HR-HDA, Elections in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Izbori u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji), Collection no. 1364, inv. br. 3769, Skupštinski izbori Glina, 3 November 1938.

¹⁰⁹ Boban, *Sporazum*, 57-59.

¹¹⁰ AJ, Collection of Microfilms, Prince Paul Karadjordjević Papers, 14-991/841-843, Milan Antić to Prince Paul Karadjordjević, 9 January 1939.



Banovina of Croatia. Frontpage of the book published in Zagreb (1939)

a quick resolution of the Croatian question worked in favor of Maček’s strategy.¹¹¹ That was the reason he indulged Maček’s territorial demands, which had in time grown from merging the two banovinas to including Dubrovnik and its area and parts of the Vrbaska *banovina*, and did not stop there.¹¹²

The new government headed by Dragiša Cvetković, a minister in the previous cabinet, was formed according to the established principle. After a “palace plot” with the support of some ministers (in this case, Cvetković, Korošec and Spaho), the Prime Minister, who had shortly before his fall won the majority at the elections, was overthrown.¹¹³ Shortly thereafter, it became clear that the main purpose of the Cvetković cabinet was to speedily resolve the Croatian question. In the address delivered in the Parliament on 16 February 1939 about the internal situation, the new Prime Minister declared: “One of the critical questions on this road is getting our relations aligned in the views that have existed for twenty years among our Croat brethren concerning the main problems in our state policy,” adding that an agreement with the Croats would “provide a solid foundation for a new orientation of our internal policy.”¹¹⁴

In the 1930s, the idea of Croatian autonomy became acceptable to the majority of the Serbian intellectual and political elite, but there was no consensus on the degree of this autonomy and, more importantly, the borders of this future Croatian province.¹¹⁵ Only the *Borbaši* and

¹¹¹ For more on the impact of the international situation on the Croatian question, see Bakić, “Milan Stojadinović,” 216–220.

¹¹² For the evolution of Maček’s demands: AJ, Mihailo Konstantinović Papers (Zbirka Mihaila Konstantinovića) 845-20, Izvodi iz mišljenja o predlogu Mačeka, 4 August 1939. The first suggestion was merging the Savska and Primorska *banovinas* with Dubrovnik and the surrounding areas and determining the final scope of this territory by holding a referendum in “parts of Bosnia, Herzegovina, Dalmatia, Srem and Vojvodina.”

¹¹³ Stojkov, *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića*, 222.

¹¹⁴ *Stenografske beleške Narodne Skupštine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, I redovni sastanak Narodne skupštine Kraljevine Jugoslavije držan 16. februara 1939. godine u Beogradu, 76.

¹¹⁵ Djilas, *The Contested Country*, 128. There was fear of breaking up and majorization of the Serbs if the country were to be split into provinces. See Gligorijević, “Jugoslovenstvo,” 82.

ZBOR, both far-right parties and advocates of integral Yugoslavism, were against the agreement and asked for its cancellation. In a speech about the Croatian question on 19 March 1939, the leader of the *Borbaši*, Svetislav Hodjera, spoke of the Serbs and Croats as the same people, accusing Maček of reducing Yugoslavism to a piece of fiction, unlike the founders of HSS. By asking for “Croatian rifles on Croatian shoulders,” the Croatian leader was inviting the fate of Czechoslovakia.¹¹⁶ Dimitrije Ljotić, ZBOR’s leader, saw the agreement as the disintegration of a homogenous Yugoslavia, stressing the unresolved border situation and the illogical fact that only the Croats enjoyed autonomy: while the central government keeps out of their internal affairs, he claimed, the Croats have a say in the work of the the former.¹¹⁷

The former Prime Minister, Stojadinović, issued a statement on 28 June 1939 to the “members and friends of JRZ,” in which he accused Prime Minister Cvetković of having abandoned the main principles of the party’s program about the indivisibility of Yugoslavia and warning that the Serbian question would be opened along with the Croatian.¹¹⁸ For his part, at a session of the JRZ Main Committee, Cvetković spoke of the obvious economic successes of his predecessor but noted that Stojadinović had gradually moved away from the party program, and “his closest entourage ... [kept] pushing him into fascism.”¹¹⁹

When the deal between the Crown and HSS known as the Cvetković–Maček Agreement was made on 26 August 1939, it was the last and final blow to the belief of the Serbian opposition that an agreement with the Croatian side could be reached through democratic channels. The Croatian leader favored an agreement with Prince Paul.¹²⁰ Already at

¹¹⁶ AJ, 37-21-151, Govor Svetislava Hodjere, 19 March 1939.

¹¹⁷ Bojić, *Zbor*, 128–130.

¹¹⁸ For the statement signed by twenty senators and eighty MPs, see AJ, 37-19-146, Proglas članovima i prijateljima Jugoslovenske radikalne zajednice, 28 June 1939, and AJ, Political Parties in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia (Političke stranke u Kraljevini Jugoslavije), 730–32.

¹¹⁹ AJ, 37-12-79, Izveštaj o sednici glavnog odbora Jugoslovenske radikalne zajednice.

¹²⁰ Mira Radojević, *Naučnik i politika: politička biografija Božidara V. Markovića* (Beograd: Filozofski fakultet, 2007), 368; Radojević, *Udružena opozicija*, 134. On the opposition’s hopes for a democratic solution, which endured right until the signing

the beginning of this text, it was stressed that Yugoslavia was the “best guarantor of the independence and progress of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes,” indicating the importance of the perceived international threat as the reason behind the agreement. Prime Minister Cvetković and Maček, as the president of HSS, had also agreed on the formation of a joint government and the establishment of the *Banovina* of Croatia.¹²¹

Having come to power, HSS proceeded to remove JRZ members from administration and their armed supporters, gathered in organizations known as the Croatian Peasant Defense and the Croatian Civil Defense, used oppressive methods: abuse, physical violence and even murder, also targeting, besides the supporters of the former regime, communists, their own disgruntled members, Serbs and pro-Yugoslav Croats.¹²² The regime established in the *Banovina* of Croatia was centralist and unitary, with no local autonomies or systems for ensuring civil and political liberties. Thus, HSS not only gave up on its fight against the Constitution but also accepted power without having run in the elections.¹²³ Although there was no doubt about the support that the party enjoyed in Croatia, the new administrative division was created by a personal decision of Prince Paul – another sign of increasing authoritarianism in Yugoslavia. The key problem was that the agreement lacked legitimacy. Serbian and Slovene political actors and the representatives of Bosnian Muslims had been almost completely blocked

of the agreement, see Mita Dimitrijević, *Mi i Hrvati. Hrvatsko pitanje (1914–1939). Sporazum sa Hrvatima* (Beograd: Štamparija Privrednik, 1939), 241.

¹²¹ Boban, *Sporazum*, 403–404. They also stressed that the Decree on the *Banovina* of Croatia was promulgated to “ensure the participation of Croats in the country’s public life and safeguard public interests.” See *Službene novine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, dodatak, 194-A-68, 26 August 1939.

¹²² Ljubo Boban, “O političkim previranjima na selu u Banovini Hrvatskoj,” *Istorija XX veka* 2 (1961): 240–245. In most Serbian-majority municipalities, there was widespread fear from persecutions with reservations and distrust towards the new authorities, although the change went smoothly due to increased disappointment with JRZ. See HR-HDA 1353, inv. br 5735, Izvještaji sreskih načelnstava o političkoj situaciji na pojedinim kotarima, 9 October 1939, also inv. br 6043, Sresko načelnstvo u Glini to Banska vlast, 16 November 1939.

¹²³ Djilas, *The Contested Country*, 132–133. Barely a month after the formation of the *Banovina* of Croatia, all public events and rallies were banned in its territory, as reported in *Vreme*, br. 6347, 24. 9. 1939.

out and excluded from the negotiation process. Another contentious matter was whether the non-Catholic inhabitants of the newly established *banovina* (comprising almost a quarter of its total population) wanted to live within its borders. This “solution” of the country’s organization was not seen as final, and there was talk of referendums and possible changes to the internal borders.

The majority of Serbian parties called for a resolution of the “Serbian question” that had now been opened, but they did not necessarily ask for Croatian autonomy to be rescinded. The Serbian question truly replaced the Croatian.¹²⁴ One of the possible solutions was to create a Serbian territorial unit, to which the Croatian side was not generally opposed, hoping that such a move might pave the way for the federalization of the country. Like in the case of the Serbian elites, the problem was the demarcation of borders because the separation of areas with a Serbian majority population in the *Banovina* of Croatia was unacceptable.¹²⁵

As the Croatian elite, after twenty years of fighting for a special status, had its moment of triumph, confusion was rampant on the Serbian side. Despite frequent accusations against the Serbian side of wanting to dominate Yugoslavia, in practice, it was the Croats who received broad territorial autonomy, and the Slovenes already had “carte blanche” in the Dravska *banovina*. On the other hand, the Serbs did not have a clearly demarcated territory. Therefore, the Serbian protest against the formation of the *Banovina* of Croatia can be said to have been comparable to the Croatian resistance to the constitutions of 1921 and 1931.¹²⁶ The above mentioned confusion among the Serbian elites was so pronounced that their only common denominator, regardless of ideological differences, was the conviction that Yugoslavia must survive.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Bakić, “Milan Stojadinović,” 223.

¹²⁵ Djokić, *Nedostižni kompromis*, 273.

¹²⁶ Dejan Djokić, “Nationalism, Myth and Reinterpretation of History: The Neglected Case of Interwar Yugoslavia,” *European History Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2012): 86–87.

¹²⁷ Marko Bulatović, “Struggling with Yugoslavism: Dilemmas of Interwar Serb Political Thought,” in John Lampe and Mark Mazower, eds., *Ideology and Identity: Southeastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2003), 267–268.

The Serbian Cultural Club (henceforth SKK or the Club) became an important institution after 1939. Although formed already in 1937, primarily as a cultural institution, its membership included different individuals, from unitarists and federalists to republicans and democrats; it was not until the Cvetković–Maček Agreement that its focus shifted to politics.¹²⁸ The emergence of SKK was a direct result of the fact that, after HSS entered the government together with JMO and SLS representatives, Cvetković’s JRZ remained the representative of the Serbs. Weakened by its break with Stojadinović’s supporters, JRZ, the “Serbian component” in the government, was certainly the least powerful.¹²⁹ SKK essentially abandoned its “self-proclaimed cultural and economic action ... From that moment on, the principle of tribal or ethnic demarcation of a Serbian unit in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia absorbed almost all intellectual forces in SKK.”¹³⁰

In terms of its membership, the number of university professors and members of the cultural and economic elites, SKK indeed included “the representatives of the true social elite of the Serbian people at the time.”¹³¹ Its chairman, Slobodan Jovanović, can be described as a “liberal conservative and enlightened Serbian nationalist,” who had spoken against full unitarism already in the constitution debates of 1921.¹³² SKK members supported the Serbs in Croatia in their intention to seek a status equal to the Croatian one in Yugoslavia.¹³³ As the “rot of society” they classed Marxism, fascism and imperialism; the Club had its organ, *Srpski glas*, and its motto was Strong Serbdom – Strong

¹²⁸ Dimić, *Kulturna politika*, 520–522. What they all had in common was that they were all opponents of NRS and its daughter parties and/or fractions. See Nebojša Popović, “Srpski kulturni klub (1937–1941),” *Istorija 20. veka* 7, no. 1 (1989): 111.

¹²⁹ Boban, *Sporazum*, 246. Dimitrije Ljotić was also invited to participate in the work of SKK. See AJ, Dimitrije Ljotić Collection (Zbirka ZBOR Dimitrija Ljotića), Collection no. 115, Nikola Stojanović to Dimitrije Ljotić, 1 December 1939.

¹³⁰ Ljubodrag Dimić, „Srpski kulturni klub i preuredjenje jugoslovenske države,” *Dijalog povjesničara-istoričara* 4 (Zagreb: Zaklada Friedrich Naumann, 2001), 369.

¹³¹ Bakić, *Ideologije jugoslovenstva*, 467.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 470; Boris Milosavljević, “Drafting the Constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (1920),” *Balkanica* 50 (2019): 239.

¹³³ Miloš Timotijević, *Dragiša Vasić i srpska nacionalna ideja* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2019), 326.

Yugoslavia!¹³⁴ They essentially saw Yugoslavism as a state-endorsed but not necessarily national ideology and as a sort of political necessity, believing that only large states could survive in Europe. Therefore, the development of the Serbian, Croatian and Slovene national identities was a natural path.¹³⁵ One of the Club's most influential members, Dragiša Vasić, described the agreement about the creation of the *Banovina* of Croatia as the "Serbian Munich [Agreement]," alluding to the fate of Czechoslovakia.¹³⁶

By November 1939, "Milan Stojadinović's political group" had formulated its views on the agreement, arguing that the new organization of the country was sharply at odds with the constitutions of 1921 and 1931. Its implementation and creation generally exacerbated the position of Serbs and "Yugoslav nationalists." In their opinion, the "state of the Croats" should not have been made because it did nothing to bring closer Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and instead led to the disunification of the Serbs. Given that the agreement was reached without Serbian participation, it was not an agreement between the Serbs and Croats but a "dictum to the Serbian people." The right to unification accorded to the Croats should now be extended to the Serbs because "strong and united Serbdom could save Yugoslavia and Yugoslavism."¹³⁷

In response to the activities of SKK and Stojadinović's supporters, in November and December 1939, the circle around Prime Minister Cvetković came to consider creating a *banovina* called "The Serbian Lands."¹³⁸ The idea, in the form of a working document, was formulated by professors of constitutional law from the University of Belgrade led by Mihailo Konstantinović, a minister without portfolio who

¹³⁴ Popović, "Srpski kulturni klub," 116–119.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 120–121.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 125. On reactions to SKK actions, HR-HDA 1353, inv. br 6129, Raspis banske vlasti Banovine Hrvatske, 11 March 1940; Krešimir Regan, *Sporazum ili nesporazum? Srpsko pitanje u Banovini Hrvatskoj 1939-1941* (Zagreb: Naklada Breza), 299–302.

¹³⁷ AJ, 37-18-124, Zaključci političke grupe Milana Stojadinovića povodom nove unutrašnje situacije u Kraljevini Jugoslaviji.

¹³⁸ Mihailo Konstantinović, *Politika sporazuma: dnevničke beleške 1939-1941, londonske beleške 1944-1945* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 1998), 77–79.

delivered the draft to Prince Paul on 16 December 1939. The document envisaged the merging of all banovinas east of the Croatian into one with its capital in Skopje, although it was unclear what would happen with the areas that were already part of the Croatian territory.¹³⁹

Dimitrije Ljotić had spoken against the Serbian front already in 1937, stressing that it was difficult to defend Yugoslavia and easier to work on its dissolution or fragmentation.¹⁴⁰ This is where the differences in the “Serbian corpus” became evident: SKK wanted a Serbian unit to be formed, not unlike Stojadinović and his supporters and the regime, too. In contrast, ZBOR wanted the agreement to be repealed.¹⁴¹ Criticizing SKK, Ljotić wrote: “We can increasingly hear views about the need to create a Serbian front. Usually, these voices come from those who are the most responsible for this situation in the country ... That is why they consent to the breakup of Yugoslavia so easily. That is why they so easily accept the formation of Greater Serbia – Greater Serbia that is nothing, which in no way measures up to Yugoslavia.”¹⁴² Unlike Jovanović, Ljotić stressed that the Yugoslav idea was infeasible if it was merely a matter of state and not nationality too.¹⁴³ The *Borbaši*, by now completely marginalized, were also openly against the agreement and called for all Yugoslavs to come together regardless of political affiliation.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁹ Djokić, *Nedostižni kompromis*, 275; Konstantinović, *Politika sporazuma*, 83. Multiple drafts of the Decree on the Serbian Lands can be found in AJ, 845–20.

¹⁴⁰ Dimitrije V. Ljotić, „Srpski front“, 28. 1. 1937, *Sabrana dela* 4 (Beograd: Novo videlo, 2001).

¹⁴¹ Aleksandar Stojanović, *Ideje, politički projekti i praksa Vlade Milana Nedića* (Beograd: Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, 2015), 47.

¹⁴² Dragosavljević, *Druga Evropa*, 48. The difference could not be overcome regardless of favorable personal impressions (AJ, 115-1, Slobodan Jovanović to Dimitrije Ljotić, 6 December 1939). ZBOR had a lenient attitude toward Maček in the hope of a compromise, but the relationship soured after August 1939 (Dragosavljević, *Druga Evropa*, 50–51). JRZ members in Croatia supported the Agreement pointing out that: “It is not necessary to yell ‘Serbs, gather,’ when all the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes are already gathered in Yugoslavia.” See HR-HDA 1353, Inv. br 1667, Sresko načelstvo u Daruvaru Kabinetu bana Banovine Hrvatske, 13 May 1940.

¹⁴³ Dimitrije Ljotić, „Tekst Jugoslovenska misao g. Sl. Jovanovića,“ 14. 1. 1940, *Sabrana dela* 8 (Beograd: Novo videlo, 2001), 122.

¹⁴⁴ AJ, 37-21-151, Rezolucija glavnog odbora Jugoslovenske narodne stranke.

The first half of 1940 showed the full scope of the resistance to the formation of the *Banovina* of Croatia. SKK actively worked among the Serbs of the Vrbaska *banovina*, and its members attended a rally of the “Serbs of Bosnia” in Dobož, where around 2,000 representatives passed a resolution against the fragmentation of Yugoslavia and in favor of rejecting the agreement as a *fait accompli*.¹⁴⁵ One of those who spoke against the agreement was Džafer Kulenović, the new president of JMO after Mehmed Spaho’s death, who claimed that the majority of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina would vote for autonomy.¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, due to having acquiesced to the demands of HSS, JRZ had lost all of its support among the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁴⁷ An identical movement emerged in the Dravska *banovina*. The leaders of SLS demanded “the transfer of powers to the Banovina of Slovenia.”¹⁴⁸ As Minister Miha Krek stated, the draft on the Banovina of Slovenia they proposed was in fact a “*mutatis mutandis* translation of the Decree on the Banovina of Croatia.”¹⁴⁹

Encouraged by the discontent in the wider Serbian population, at a meeting on 22 February attended by about 90 delegates Stojadinović’s circle decided to found the Serbian Radical Party (SRS). The party program stressed that it did not “recognize the border established by the Agreement of 26 August because it posed an obstacle to the unification of all Serbs, including those in the Banovina of Croatia, and firmly demanded the unification of all Serbs.”¹⁵⁰ SRS emerged from a faction of JRZ that had remained loyal to Stojadinović after the formation of Cvetković’s cabinet and claimed in its program that a “*coup d’état*” had taken place in August 1939. The new *banovina*, they argued, was in fact

¹⁴⁵ AJ, 37-52-326, Dušan Djerić to Milan Stojadinović, 2 January 1940. AJ, 38-95-227, Rezolucija sabora Srba u Doboju, 3 January 1940.

¹⁴⁶ AJ, 38-337-485, *Jugoslovenski list*, 1. 2. 1940.

¹⁴⁷ Jovanović-Stoimirović, *Dnevnik*, 352. For the tensions between the Serbs and Muslims in the Vrbaska and Drinska *banovina*, both between the two groups and among their internal factions AJ, 38-95-227, *Politički pregled*, br. 7, 19. 10. 1940; AJ, 38-95-227, *Politički pregled*, br. 9, 25. 10. 1940.

¹⁴⁸ *Vreme*, br. 6335, 12. 9. 1939; *Vreme*, br. 6356, 3. 10. 1939; *Vreme*, br. 6372, 19. 10. 1939.

¹⁴⁹ AJ, 845-20, Miha Krek to Mihailo Konstantinović, 11 October 1939.

¹⁵⁰ Boban, *Sporazum*, 248.

a continuation of the erstwhile “semi-independent Croatian state with territorial expansion unprecedented in history.” On the other hand, this solution was imposed on the Serbs and, if the territories were to be “demarcated,” the Serbs should have one, too.¹⁵¹ Stojadinović negatively compared the Cvetković–Maček Agreement with the Pašić–Radić deal from 1925, emphasizing the advantages of the earlier one and the need to organize the Serbs.¹⁵² Although it generally seemed that the aims of SKK and SRS were similar, instead of cooperation, the two harbored a deep rivalry. After Milan Stojadinović’s internment, the official organ of SKK published a markedly negative article about him, and his supporters wrote to the author of the text, Dragiša Vasić, protesting that their president had not been removed because of compromising evidence but to “disrupt his work against the internal policy of the Royal Government.”¹⁵³

Although Stojadinović was interned and removed from political life in April 1940, Dragiša Cvetković – the “creator of the national agreement” who had helped “Yugoslavia find its path,” as he was portrayed in JRZ propaganda – could not achieve comparable influence or significance to that of his predecessor. The first test before him – municipal elections in the *Banovina* of Croatia in April 1940 – showed that the ruling party could not repeat the results from Stojadinović’s era.¹⁵⁴ From the promulgation of the Agreement and the formation of the new cabinet, the government tried to portray the agreement with the Croats as the solution to all of Yugoslavia’s internal problems.¹⁵⁵ In truth, the

¹⁵¹ *Program i pravila Srpske radikalne stranke* (Beograd: Srpska radikalna stranka, 1940), 1–6.

¹⁵² AJ, 38-337-485, *Jugoslovenski list*, 28. mart 1940. The Serbian Radical Party published the speech in Milan Stojadinović, *Dva sporazuma* (Beograd, 1940).

¹⁵³ AJ, 37-18-124, Stanković, Bogoljub Kujundžić to Dragiša Vasić, 8 May 1940.

¹⁵⁴ *Svim sreskim organizacijama Jugoslovenske radikalne zajednice* (Beograd, 1940), 5–7. They also stressed that, having recognized the interests of the Croats, they could see more clearly the interests of the Serbs and Slovenes and would not allow their rights or the rights of the whole to be endangered (*Ibid.*, 15); Stipica Grgić, Tomislav Kardum, “Općinski izbori u Banovini Hrvatskoj,” *Historijski zbornik* 74 (2021): 108; Regan, *Sporazum ili nesporezum*, 152–58.

¹⁵⁵ Examples of the Croats’ “loyalty” to the dynasty in the pro-regime newspaper *Vreme*: on one of its cover pages, on the occasion of King Peter’s birthday, only the

relations between JRZ and HSS were complicated, even Prince Paul was displeased, and it seemed that Maček “had one foot in the government and one in the opposition.”¹⁵⁶ As it turned out, the reorganization of Yugoslavia was not enough to ensure internal stability. The country would soon fall apart in the brief April War against the Axis Powers in 1941.

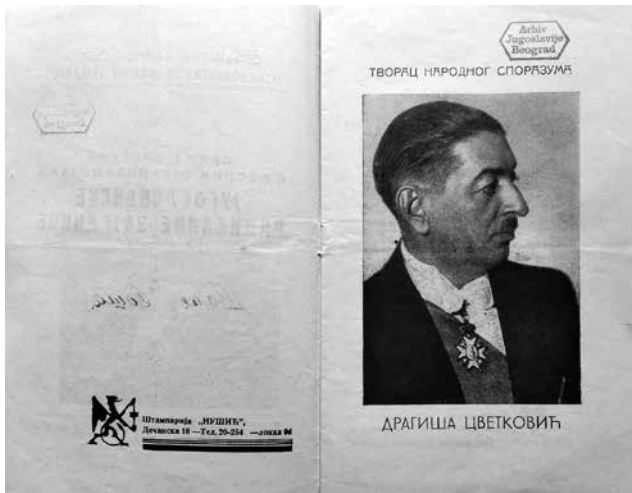
The Serbian right wing and the devolution of Yugoslavism

Except the most extreme right-wing parties, which continued to champion the idea of integral Yugoslavism in the last years of the Kingdom’s existence, the most influential representatives on the right side of the ideological spectrum gradually abandoned this concept. The most conspicuous case is JNS, which essentially made a complete turnaround. From an organization envisaged as the champion of King Alexander’s Yugoslav project, at the elections of 1938 they sided with the opposition led by HSS which aimed at federalizing the country. The attempt to find a “middle ground” through the concept of real Yugoslavism – as Milan Stojadinović and his JRZ (1935–1938) had tried – ultimately failed after they lost the Crown’s support, paving the way for a change of the political system.

The most glaring weakness of the Serbian right, as well as political parties in general, was their susceptibility to the Crown’s influence and the legacy from the era of King Alexander. Unlike HSS, which clearly enjoyed majority support in the Croatian areas, none of the dominantly Serbian parties could secure a similar level of support. Coupled with the authoritarian trend in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the process in which the leading parties of the Serbian right wing moved away from the idea of Yugoslavia launched in 1918 revealed its fragility. Internal rivalry and the dominant influence of the Crown, along with the precarious international situation and the beginning of World War II,

Croatian *ban* was shown congratulating him besides the regents and the government; reporting on a visit of Prince Paul and his wife to Zagreb, the paper highlighted the “Manifestations of love and loyalty of the Croatian people” for the pair, *Vreme*, br. 6330, 7. 9. 1940; *Vreme*, 6p. 6457, 15. 1. 1940.

¹⁵⁶ Konstantinović, *Politika sporazuma*, 175.



“The Maker of National Agreement”. Illustration from the JRZ booklet, 1940. (Courtesy of the Archives of Yugoslavia, Milan Stojadinović Papers, no. 37)



Prince Paul and Princess Olga visiting Zagreb, 1940. Waking behind them are Prime Minister, Dragiša Cvetković, and the Croatian *ban*, Ivan Šubašić. (Courtesy of the Archives of Yugoslavia, Photo Collection, no. 377)

created a climate that led the bulk of the Serbian right wing to turn to the idea of a Serbo-Croat agreement and the establishment of Croatian autonomy. With this, the process of the devolution of the Yugoslav idea – and the Yugoslav state, too – came to its end, a course that the Serbian right wing had not wanted for most of the interwar period.