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THE ESTABLISHMENT AND PUBLIC ACTIVITY OF THE SERBIAN PEOPLE'S PARTY IN 1991

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This work covers the establishment of the Serbian People's Party, which occurred in Zagreb in May 1991, and its activity until the end of that same year. This was a time when a considerable portion of the Serbian community in Croatia was involved in a revolt against the Croatian authorities. This revolt was a component of the policies of the then leadership of Serbia headed by Slobodan Milošević, which did not wish to allow Croatia its independence within the borders it had under the Yugoslav federation. Instead, in the case of Croatian independence, parts of its territory in which the Serbs formed a majority or significant share of the population were to remain in a rump Yugoslavia, i.e., in a union with Serbia. Such a policy led to war in the latter half of 1991, during which the Serbian side, with the assistance of the Yugoslav People's Army, occupied a considerable portion of Croatia's territory. The establishment and operation of the Serbian People's Party during 1991 is interesting in the sense that this was a party which intended to represent that part of the Serbian community in Croatia which had remained loyal to its government. The article concludes with a brief overview of this party's activity during the period from 1992 to 1995.

Key words: Serbian People's Party, Milan Đukić, Serbian Democratic Party, Croatian War for Independence

Soon after democratic elections were held in Croatia at the end of the first half of 1990, in which the Croatian Democratic Union (best known by its Croatian acronym HDZ – *Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica*) led by Franjo Tuđman secured a victory, this republic became the focal point of the crisis which had begun in Yugoslavia several years earlier, when Slobodan Milošević assumed leadership in Serbia. The latter intended to centralize the Yugoslav federation, which would be dominated by the Serbs as the most numerous nation. The

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League of Communists of Croatia (SKH - *Savez komunista Hrvatske*) passively observed Milošević's actions in the late 1980s. By contrast, once the HDZ, as a broad-based Croatian national movement, assumed authority, it advocated the reorganization of Yugoslavia into a confederation.. As these events unfolded, Belgrade altered its policies in that it backed down from maintaining Yugoslavia and underscored the slogan "all Serbs in one state". This meant that Serbia would not allow Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to become independent within the borders these republics had in Yugoslavia, rather it would aspire to retain the territories of these republics inhabited mostly or significantly by Serbs in a rump Yugoslavia, i.e. in a common state with Serbia. The leadership of Serbia was prepared to achieve this objective by force, and in this it was able to count on the support of the Yugoslav People's Army (*Jugoslavenska narodna armija* - JNA).¹

In compliance with this policy line by Belgrade, an armed revolt against the Croatian authorities began in the Croatian territories with Serb majority populations already in August 1990. The vanguard of the revolt was the Serbian Democratic Party (*Srpska demokratska stranka* - SDS). This party was established by Jovan Rašković, who was its first chairman, but soon Milan Babić, who became the chief of the Knin Municipality (a town in the Dalmatian hinterland) after the multi-party elections, soon began to act as its most prominent member. SDS deputies elected in the multi-party elections quickly withdrew from the Croatian Parliament (*Sabor*), thus severing all cooperation with the Croatian authorities. By the end of 1990, the Serbian Autonomous District (SAO) of Krajina, centred in Knin, was unilaterally proclaimed in the municipalities in central Croatia with Serbian majorities, while during 1991 similar Serbian autonomous districts were established in other parts of Croatia as well, in western and eastern Slavonia.²

During the first half of 1991, Croatia came under increasing pressure from the JNA as well, as this army threatened to disarm the Croatian police, while the first armed conflicts occurred between the Croatian police and rebel Serbs, who were attempting to expand the territory under their control. In the meantime, negotiations between the presidents of the Yugoslav republics failed to generate a negotiated solution, so Croatia began to make preparations for independence. Thus on 19 May 1991, a referendum was held at which the vast majority of Croatian citizens endorsed independence, with the option of Croatia joining an alliance of sovereign states with the other Yugoslav republics. A week prior to this, a referendum was organized by the leadership of the 'SAO Krajina', in which the Serbian population supported the unification of this autonomous district with Serbia, meaning its continued existence in Yugoslavia.³

¹ Nikica Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj 1990.-1995.* (Zagreb: Golden marketing - Tehnička knjiga, 2005), pp. 25-62.

² Ibid., pp. 62-120.

³ Ibid.

It was precisely during May 1991 that the Serbian People's Party (*Srpska narodna stranka* – SNS) was established in Zagreb with Milan Đukić as its president. Slightly more than a year earlier, Đukić, who lived in Donji Lapac, a small settlement in the Lika region, was involved in the establishment of the SDS.⁴ During the first democratic elections, the SDS assumed power in the Donji Lapac Municipality. Thus during May 1990, David Rastović was elected chairman of the municipal assembly in Donji Lapac, while Đukić was elected to head the municipal executive council.⁵

However, only three months later there was a development which resulted in Đukić's forced departure from Donji Lapac. On 17 August 1990, the Croatian police initiated an operation in northern Dalmatia and Lika in which arms caches for reserve police units had to be taken from all local police stations. This was done to prevent the potential armed revolt of the Serbian population in this region, as there were already indications of its outbreak, reflected in the disloyal conduct of ethnic Serb police officers and the organization of armed patrols among the Serbian population in this region. When the Serbs learned about this operation by the Croatian police, they blockaded roads in this area and seized the arms from several police stations. The further intervention of the Croatian police against the rebels was prevented by the JNA.⁶

According to Đukić's own recollections, at that time he was personally prepared to resist the Croatian authorities, but he also thought that all ties with them should not have been severed, i.e., that Zagreb should have been engaged in earnest negotiations. However, by that time the upper hand in Knin had been assumed by persons who believed that they should stand by Serbia and its interests, with which Đukić disagreed. According to Đukić's recollections, it was precisely on 17 August 1990 during a meeting in Knin that he told Milan Babić, the municipal chief in Knin and a distinguished member of SDS, that the Serbs in Croatia were not endangered, but rather that Slobodan Milošević was actually betraying the interests of the Croatian Serbs. A response from the Serb extremists was not long in coming. Already on 18 August, municipal chief David Rastović came to Đukić's office in Donji Lapac with a group of armed individuals. At the time, Đukić was meeting with two inspectors from the Croatian Ministry of Administration and Justice, whom Rastović declared "Ustasha". Rastović escorted Đukić and the two inspectors from the building, but the latter were freed at the intervention of the local police. Immediately

⁴ On the establishment of the SDS in Croatia, see: Domagoj Knežević, "Srpska demokratska stranka od osnivanja do konstituiranja prvog višestranačkog Sabora", *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 43 (2011), no. 1: 7.-24.

⁵ *Republika Hrvatska i Domovinski rat 1990.-1995., Dokumenti, Knjiga 1., Oružana pobuna Srba u Hrvatskoj i agresija Oružanih snaga SFRJ i srpskih paravojskih postrojbi na Republiku Hrvatsku (1990.-1991.)* (Zagreb: Hrvatski memorijalno-dokumentacijski centar Domovinskog rata, 2007), doc. no. 8.

⁶ N. Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj*, pp. 77-85. See also: Davor Marijan, "Djelovanje JNA i pobunjenih Srba u Lici 1990.-1992. godine", *Senjski zbornik*, 33 (2006), no. 1: 219.

thereafter Đukić departed from Donji Lapac, and made his way to Zagreb through Bosnia-Herzegovina. On 25 August, Đukić had already secured a job as an official in the Croatian Parliament, and after a few months he became the chief of the Croatian Government's Interethnic Relations Office. Đukić's spouse and children had remained in Donji Lapac. After the conflicts between the Croatian police and rebel Serbs in the Plitvice Lakes National Park on 31 March 1991, when both sides sustained their first casualties, Serb extremists began to apply increased pressure on Đukić's spouse, and she also sought refuge in Zagreb together with their children. Even after all of this, Đukić's father, brother and other relatives remained in Donji Lapac.⁷

The already tense situation in Croatia was exacerbated on 2 May 1991 when Croatian police officers in Borovo Selo, next to Vukovar, fell prey to a Serbian ambush. On this occasion, twelve Croatian police officers were slain, while even more were injured.⁸ Immediately afterward, on 3 May, the Initiative Committee of the SNS issued a proclamation to the Serbian people in Croatia. It emphasized that the Serbs, regardless of the fact that they have grounds for dissatisfaction with certain elements of Croatian policy, cannot resort to violence and ignore Croatia. The Croats actually had many reasons for dissatisfaction, because some Serbs were brutally and crudely contesting Croatia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Furthermore it stated that the disproportionately few Serb representatives in Croatian governing bodies was impermissible, but that a prerequisite for halting this tendency was for the Serbs to adjust to the new realities and accept Croatia as their homeland. Furthermore, "[t]he Croatian and Serbian people must know that not one vital political issue, particularly the matter of state organization, can be resolved in a satisfactory manner without the Serbs in Croatia, and especially not against their interests". The SNS Initiative Committee also stressed that the Serbs in Croatia cannot resolve any of their pressing issues outside of Croatia. This is why the SNS advocated a Croatia incorporated into "Yugoslav and European integration processes" which would allow for all of the Yugoslav peoples to live in a union which would gradually be transformed into a "civic state":

"Our destiny is in our hands, let us not lose hold of our last historical chance, let us exclaim a resounding *NO* to the extremism in our own ranks. Let us allow future generations to be Serbs. Innocent victims have fallen, let us prevent this from leading to new casualties, for this would be a road of no return".⁹

⁷ Nedeljko Višnić, "Milan Đukić izbliza", *Naš glas, Glasilo Zajednice Srba Hrvatske*, no. 1, January 1995, pp. 23-26; Milan Đukić, *Ugašena ognjišta širom svijetle* (Zagreb: Srpska narodna stranka, 2008), pp. 18-19.

⁸ Davor Marijan, *Bitka za Vukovar* (Zagreb, Slavonski Brod: Hrvatski institute za povijest, Podružnica za povijest Slavonije, Srijema i Baranje 2004), pp. 50-53.

⁹ (Hina), "Sprječiti građanski rat", *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 4 May 1991, p. 5.

By the same token, the SNS Initiative Committee sent a letter to the Presidency of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, or rather the chairman of that body, Borisav Jović, otherwise Serbia's representative in the Presidency. In the letter, the SNS sought the prevention of violence and terrorism as soon as possible in order to avoid civil war. The letter also stated that the Croatian people would not threaten the interests of the Serbs in Croatia, while the vast majority of the Serbs in Croatia would resolutely defend peace and interethnic coexistence. It also noted that threats to the Croatian people will simultaneously constitute a threat to most Serbs in Croatia, particularly those living in ethnically mixed and urban areas.¹⁰

Not long afterward, on 18 May, the founding assembly of the SNS was held in the Europe Hall in Zagreb. This event was attended by 200 party members and approximately 30 guests. The very beginning was marred by an incident, as an unidentified individual called the Europe Hall and claimed a bomb had been planted in it. This is why those gathered had to leave the room in which the founding assembly was supposed to be held. The room was inspected and it was ascertained that the bomb threat was false. Then a working presidency was elected on behalf of the SNS Initiative Committee, which was supposed to preside over the founding assembly. Milan Đukić, the chairman of the Initiative Committee, delivered a political address to those present, while the new party's fundamental by-laws were adopted. The party's five-member presidency was elected. Đukić was elected the party chairman and chairman of its presidency. The remaining members of the SNS Presidency were: Milan Vergaš, an engineer from Karlovac, also the SNS deputy chairman; Milovan Balać, a lawyer from Kutina, an organizational/political advisor to the SNS Presidency; Prof. Milena Kerkez from Zagreb, also the SNS secretary, and sociologist Jagoda Savić from Zagreb, also the party's spokeswoman.¹¹

At the SNS founding assembly, it was stressed that the party would advocate peaceful coexistence between the Croats and Serbs in Croatia and Yugoslavia. It was also pointed out that without a comprehensive solution to the Serb issue in Croatia, there would be no solution to Yugoslav crisis. Due to the overall unfavourable circumstances in Croatia, the SNS felt a "historical responsibility" and called upon all citizens, particularly the Serbs in Croatia, to refrain from the use of force, to reject conform to those who push them toward bloodshed and to extend a hand to their Croat neighbours in order to secure mutual protection and safety. The platform principles adopted by the party emphasize that the SNS respected the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Croatia and that its members will oppose all forms of national intolerance and chauvinism. The establishment of the SNS was welcomed by the representatives of other

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ From the abridged minutes to the SNS founding assembly (*Skraćeni zapisnik osnivačke skupštine Srpske narodne stranke (SNS)*). A facsimile of the document can be found at: <http://www.sns.hr/sluzbeni-dokumenti.php>, accessed on 19 June 2011.

Croatian political parties. On behalf of the governing HDZ, Ante Beljo and Catholic priest Anto Baković wished the SNS success in its work. Baković stated that at no time in history did the Serbs “have more odious political leaders”, and he expressed the hope that the SNS could contribute “to the building of bridges of friendship and mutual coexistence” between the Serbs and Croats in Croatia. On behalf of the Croatian Parliament, the founding assembly was greeted by Neven Jurica, who expressed satisfaction that the SNS intended to work on the advancement of the freedom and rights of citizens and be “a credit to their Serbian descent and Croatian homeland”. In the deliberations, many other participants also advocated coexistence between the Serbs and Croats and a solution to the Yugoslav crisis by peaceful and democratic means in which, they assessed, the SNS could make a vital contribution.¹²

Immediately after the establishment of the SNS, the question arose as to its participation in the negotiations that should have secured a peaceful resolution of the crisis in Croatia. At a session held in Belgrade from 7 to 9 May 1991, the Yugoslav Presidency actually concluded that the JNA would work on the prevention of Croat-Serb conflicts in Croatia's crisis regions. It was also concluded that a “parity group” should be formed, consisting of representatives of the Croatian authorities and “legitimate representatives” of the Serbian people in Croatia, so that negotiations on contested political issues could commence. These superficially peace-oriented conclusions actually concealed further pressure by Belgrade on Croatia. With reference to these conclusions, Serbia's presidency member Borisav Jović concluded in his daily journal that they facilitated the actions of the JNA in Croatia, while the Croatian side assented to them because it was under great pressure and opted for a “tactical compromise”.¹³

Jovan Rašković, the first chairman of the SDS, actually expressed an interest in the establishment of this “parity group”. He proposed that SDS representatives who at that time were already officials in the ‘SAO Krajina’ be appointed to the group. Rašković proposed Milorad Pupovac, an ethnic Serb politician from Zagreb, as the only ‘independent’ Serbian representative in the “parity group”. However, Milan Babić, who headed the ‘SAO Krajina’, denied Rašković the right to engage in negotiations with the Croatian authorities, moreover he classified Rašković among the “traitors of the Serbian people”.¹⁴ The intolerance for Rašković, the founder of the SDS, on the part of Babić demonstrated that the leadership of the ‘SAO Krajina’ was dominated by extremist elements who were opposed to any compromise with the Croatian side, and they did not see their future in Croatia at all. However, it also became apparent that even Rašković, although open to negotiations, did not believe the SNS should be included in them.

¹² Tanjug, “Za miran suživot Srba i Hrvata”, *Vjesnik*, 19 May 1991, p. 6.

¹³ Borisav Jović, *Poslednji dani SFRJ, izvodi iz dnevnika* (Beograd, 1996), pp. 320-321.

¹⁴ Ivica Marijačić, “Lideri bez pokrića”, *Vjesnik*, 28 May 1991, p. 4.

Even so, on 3 June 1991, the SNS Presidency contacted the Croatian authorities, submitting its proposals for the establishment of the “parity group” for negotiations between the Croatian authorities and the Croatian Serbs. They proposed that 20 Serbian representatives be appointed to the group. Political parties which “claim to advocate the national interests of Serbs” in Croatia – here explicitly mentioning the SDS, SNS, as well as the Party of Democratic Change (SDP) and the Alliance of Socialists – should designate two representatives each to the negotiating group, which would make a total of eight negotiators. Each of the parties would propose an additional two members for the group, who would be non-partisan Serbs, otherwise persons active in the fields of scholarship, culture, public affairs and the economy, which would account for an additional eight negotiators. Finally, two negotiators each would represent the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serb members of the organization of Partisan veterans of the Second World War (SUBNOR). These negotiators could only negotiate on the “most pressing aspects” of Croatian-Serbian relations, while the comprehensive resolution of the status of the Serbs in Croatia should have been done in negotiations on broader foundations.¹⁵

The problem was that in the first multi-party elections a significant number of the Serbs in Croatia voted for the reformed League of Communists of Croatia, which would later be called the SDP, as well as the Alliance of Socialists. After the elections, as already noted, the SDS assumed the primary role in the revolt against the Croatian authorities and the creation of the Serbian autonomous districts. Individual Serbs who were elected to local office in the municipalities as candidates of the reformed communists transferred to the SDS.¹⁶ Due to these reasons, the question arose as to the legitimate representatives of the Croatian Serbs. For the SNS, the problem lay in the fact that during the first multi-party elections in 1990 it had not yet even been established, so it was rather simple, particularly for the SDS, to point out that it had no legitimacy among the Serbs.

With reference to the SNS proposal to nominate Serbian members to the “parity group”, this party’s officials held a press conference in Zagreb on 5 June, at which they publicly presented their ideas on the Serbian composition of the negotiating team. On this occasion, Đukić announced that he would accept members of the SDS who backed “extremist policies” to be among the negotiators. However, he added that this party had a “broad-based membership” and that it could nominate “more moderate politicians” for negotiations, although there was some question as to whether they would.¹⁷

¹⁵ Croatian National Archives, Zagreb (hereinafter: HDA), Office of the President of the Republic of Croatia (hereinafter: UPRH), 247/91, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, Classification designation: 007-03/91-01/20, Registration number: 0-91-5538.

¹⁶ N. Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj*, p. 61.

¹⁷ Gordana Grgas, “Pregovori putem paritetnih grupa”, *Vjesnik*, 6 June 1991, p. 4.

Croatian President Franjo Tuđman held a meeting with high Croatian officials on 8 June, at which they discussed the declaration of Croatia's independence. Tuđman backed the negotiations between the Croatian authorities and representatives of the Croatian Serbs, regardless of "what they are called, to whom they belong", with the exception of those participating in the armed uprising against Croatia. In this sense, the "parity group" was endorsed, although some Croatian officials expressed scepticism that this group would truly be formed and begin functioning. It was also noted that other Serbian representatives did not accept the SNS, even though Tuđman personally preferred that Đukić's party be included in the negotiations.¹⁸

Indeed, instead of negotiations, in the subsequent period the crisis deepened. After Slovenia and Croatia declared independence on 25 June 1991, a brief intervention by the JNA in Slovenia ensued. With mediation by the international community, Slovenia and Croatia proclaimed a three-month moratorium on their independence declarations. But this did not prevent the spread of warfare in Croatia, in which the rebel Serbs with the support of the JNA and Serbia continued to occupy parts of Croatian territory. Under such trying circumstances, on 8 October 1991 Croatia proclaimed a definitive severance of all ties with the Yugoslav state.¹⁹

Nonetheless, a meeting of a large number of Serbian intellectuals and politicians from Croatia was held in Lipik, in western Slavonia, on 13 July 1991, and the objective was to find a peaceful solution to the existing conflict. This gathering was also attended by Jovan Rašković, the first chairman of the SDS, as well as certain officials of the 'SAO Krajina'. This meeting constituted the germ of the later Serbian Democratic Forum (SDF) headed by Milorad Pupovac, which would operate in the territory under the control of the Croatian authorities. However, the leadership of the 'SAO Krajina' harshly condemned the meeting in Lipik, rejecting talks with Serbian representatives from Zagreb.²⁰

SNS representatives were not invited to the meeting in Lipik, although Đukić quickly issued a public statement in which he said he welcomed the peacemaking efforts of this meeting. Since SDS officials were present at this meeting, Đukić concluded that this was good because these were persons whose political activities enabled or provoked unrest and armed revolt by the Serbs in Croatia. If the result of the meeting in Lipik had been the establishment of a negotiating group, Đukić assessed that it should first and foremost negotiate with the authorities of the 'SAO Krajina', so that peace and lawful order could finally be established over Croatia's entire territory. This would have

¹⁸ Minutes to the seventh session of the Supreme State Council of the Republic of Croatia, held on 8 June 1991. Transcript published in: Predrag Lucić, ed., *Stenogrami o podjeli Bosne*, Vol. 1 (Split, Sarajevo: Kultura&Rasvjeta-Civitas, 2005), pp. 9-74.

¹⁹ N. Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj*, pp. 119-122.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

been a prerequisite for an arrangement on resolving the status of the Serbs in Croatia. Even though the SNS, for “reasons unknown”, was not included in the peace initiative launched in Lipik, this party expressed its readiness to participate in it.²¹

The most information on the activity and positions of the SNS in the middle and latter half of 1991 was provided by their press conferences in Zagreb, and their press releases.

The end of May 1991 saw yet another incident in Pakrac, a town in western Slavonia where several conflicts between Serbs and the Croatian authorities had already occurred. The Serbian flag was removed from the building of the municipal assembly, after which the Serbs staged an armed incident. On 29 May the SNS Presidency announced that it condemned the use of arms but supported the justified demand for the use and display of the Serbian national flag in public places. This is why the SNS sent an appeal to the Croatian Parliament to initiate a resolution to this matter as soon as possible and to make an interim decision on the use of the Serbian flag that would satisfy the Croatian Serbs.²²

At a press conference called on 5 June on the topic of relations between his party and the SDS, Đukić announced that the latter party had “shattered” the Croatian Serbs by creating Serbian autonomous districts, and that the question arose of what would happen to the high number of Serbs who live in those parts of Croatia not encompassed by the Serbian autonomous districts. He noted that this is why the establishment of such districts constituted “self-destruction” for the Serbian people. Đukić also assessed that the leadership of the ‘SAO Krajina’ had no support from the population living in that district. Despite everything, the SNS expressed readiness to contact the SDS and to invite Jovan Rašković to a meeting. It was another question altogether as to whether Rašković would respond to this invitation, for the representatives of the SDS did not even respond to the invitation to attend the founding assembly of the SNS, while Đukić was proclaimed a “traitor” among “extremist” Serbian circles. Đukić nonetheless expressed the hope that the “moderate wing” would overcome in the SDS, and that the SNS aspired to assume the central role as advocate of Croatian Serb interests. Even though the SNS was not a parliamentary party, it also made preparations for future elections. Đukić further noted that the SNS advocated a “realistic policy”, i.e., an “alliance of Yugoslav states”. He announced that he did not believe that Croatia would declare independence, rather that a new alliance of Yugoslav republics based on a compromise would be formed.²³

²¹ (Hina), “SNS podržava skup u Lipiku”, *Vjesnik*, 16 July 1991, p. 5.

²² (Hina), “SNS o upotrebi simbola”, *Vjesnik*, 30 May 1991, p. 3.

²³ Gordana Grgas, “Pregovori putem paritetnih grupa”, *Vjesnik*, 6 June 1991, p. 4.

Milan Škorić, the chairman of the SNS Initiative Committee for the city of Zagreb and the Zagreb environs, granted an interview to the Zagreb-based daily newspaper *Vjesnik* in early July 1991. To the question of widespread claims about the current threat to the Serbs in Croatia, Škorić responded that such a feeling “realistically exists”, but that the real question pertained to the basis on which it was created. He speculated as to whether it was based on actual moves made by the Croatian authorities, or “propaganda from a part of the press and certain individuals” who dreamed of a “Greater Serbia” and who wanted to exploit the Croatian Serbs, stir up a conflict between them and the Croatian people, and in fact sacrifice them to achieve their own ends. Nonetheless, Škorić warned, there were genuine examples of discrimination against Serbs in Croatia. When asked if he perhaps agreed to the view that the new Croatian authorities were responsible for Serb extremism, particularly because of the aggressive election campaign in early 1990 and the HDZ’s failure to put its own “hawks” under control once it assumed authority, Škorić responded negatively, concluding that no Croatian national programme could be adapted to the “unitary Yugoslav space”, wherein he obviously meant the policies being implemented at the time by Belgrade. Škorić nonetheless assessed that after assuming power, the HDZ made some mistakes, primarily because it accepted the SDS as the sole legitimate representative of the Croatian Serbs, which rendered the formation of other Serbian parties a difficult prospect. Škorić also concluded that the Serbs should have been better prepared for the introduction of new Croatian national symbols, so that the latter would be accepted as a “logical and normal matter”. Ultimately, a mistake was made in what Škorić described as the waxing of “militarism”, by which he obviously meant the strengthening of the Croatian police and the establishment of the National Guard Corps. However, Škorić also concluded that this “militarism” could be justified due to the appearance of Serbian terrorism.²⁴

With reference to parties which declared themselves “Yugoslav”, and which in Croatia only had support among the Serb population, Škorić assessed that these parties were actually undermining their own principled Yugoslav orientation with their “unitarist-militarist” activity. When asked how many Croatian Serbs considered Croatia their homeland, Škorić responded that too much importance should not be accorded to Knin and neighbouring areas where the revolt against Croatia was ongoing. This area had a majority Serb population, although in absolute terms, many more Serbs lived outside of this territory, for example in Zagreb, while Škorić expressed the conviction that these Serbs were oriented toward a sovereign Croatian state. Škorić accused persons “imported” into Croatia for Serbian terrorism, wherein he obviously meant the arrival of such persons from Serbia. Škorić said of the ‘SAO Krajina’ that it constituted neither a “state” nor “territorial autonomy”, i.e., (that) in

²⁴ Sanja Kapetanić, “‘Žele nas svjesno žrtvovati’”, *Vjesnik*, 11 July 1991, p. 7.

reality it had no economic structure, monetary assets, nor governing bodies. All it had was a “propaganda machine” and it existed as a “fiction” in the minds of the “Chetniks”, or rather extremist Serbs.²⁵

Škorić mentioned that not long before, “unitary Greater Serbian Yugoslavism”, i.e., the JNA, had carried out a military intervention in Slovenia, which definitively shattered Yugoslavia. The army intervened on the pretence of defending Yugoslavia, but it was actually implementing an anti-national policy, attempting to void the will of the Slovenian and Croatian nations for independence. The army operated similarly in Croatia, leading to human casualties. The predominantly Serbian staff in the JNA was actually served the “unitarist structure”, he said, and they were not defending the interests of the Serbian nation, but rather the hub of “Greater Serbian political might”. He noted that the JNA in Croatia’s crisis regions, where it was at the time playing the role of “buffer zone” between Croatian forces and rebel Serbs, had in the meantime openly placed itself on the side of those who came from Serbia to attack the Croatian police. Škorić concluded that “Greater Serbian policy” wanted to prod the Croats into an anti-Serbian mood in order to provoke a conflict with the Serbs in the territories in which they were a minority, and that it would thereby contrive the justification that the Croatian authorities were actually “Ustasha”, i.e., extremist, allegedly placing the Serbs in peril. He therefore concluded that the Croatian Serbs were thereby sacrificed in order to open the door to a showdown with the Croats.²⁶

At an SNS press conference held on 18 July, the state of affairs in Croatia and Yugoslavia at the time was assessed as extremely dramatic. The proposed way out of the crisis would have been the establishment of a bloc of peace-making, democratic and European-oriented parties, movements and individuals, regardless of national, religious or political conviction. The JNA was supposed to be reduced and restructured, its units had to unconditionally withdraw to their barracks, and it was no longer supposed to interfere in politics. This is why the SNS condemned the “extremist section” of the military leadership headed by Col. General Blagoje Adžić, the chairman of the JNA Chiefs of Staff. The SNS nevertheless opposed the call for troops and officers to leave the JNA, for in the party’s opinion it would then become exclusively Serbian, and thereby an instrument of the “Greater Serbian policies” of Slobodan Milošević.²⁷

The spread of warfare in Croatia at the end of July 1991 prompted the SNS to issue a public appeal to the Croatian Serbs. The appeal further states that the “treacherous and uncivilized killing”, the suffering of the civilian population and the destruction of property are beneath even the “most primitive tribes”. This is why the SNS leadership for the “umpteenth time” called upon the Serbian

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ HINA, “Osuda vojnog ekstremizma”, *Vjesnik*, 19 July 1991, p. 4.

people in Croatia to exercise reason and to publicly condemn the actions of “all extremists” who represented a return to the “dark past” and everything that prevented civilized coexistence. If the “spectre” of the past was repeated, by which the party was obviously alluding to the interethnic strife of the Second World War, then nobody in this region would be able to secure “any kind of future” for a long time.²⁸ Only several days later, the SNS issued a new appeal in which it called on citizens of Serbian nationality to help in Croatia's defence:

“Embittered by the crimes against the wounded and civilian populations of Croatian nationality by terrorists who in this extol the Serbian nation and its interests, the Serbian People's Party deems this (...) a betrayal of the Serbian people in Croatia intended to foment ethnic conflict and civil war. This is why the party calls on all Serbs in Croatia who consider Croatia their country to contact the relevant authorities in order to defend the Republic of Croatia.”²⁹

In the same appeal, the SNS stressed that it would ask the Croatian authorities that it finance exclusively those Serbian cultural programmes which do not exploit the culture of the Serbian people for political ends. This characterization also encompassed the Prosvjeta (‘Enlightenment’) Serbian Cultural Association which, the SNS concluded, had put itself in the service of “Greater Serbian policy”. The SNS also stated that it would initiate rallies of Zagreb's citizens that would condemn violence and terrorism, as well as gatherings of intellectuals of Serbian ethnicity who do not support the policy of pulling Croatia apart.³⁰ At an SNS press conference held on 16 August, Đukić announced that Milošević “has no chance” of taking a “piece of Croatia” because the Croatian Serbs were not on his side, while his support among the citizens of Serbia itself was diminishing.³¹

At a press conference held on 30 August, SNS released a new proclamation to the Serbian people in Croatia. The Serbs were called upon to oppose and refuse obeisance to the “self-proclaimed leaders” imposed upon them by “terror and unscrupulous propaganda” and to join the Croatian people in the defence of Croatia from the “militarized, Bolshevik and Greater Serbian clique”. The party also invited the entire Serbian people and all Serbian parties of democratic orientation to organize a “Serbian democratic front” which would depose Slobodan Milošević and the “oligarchy of generals”. At the same conference, it was noted that the mood of the Serbs in Croatia would become apparent when the Croatian authorities receive the petition for peaceful coexistence, whose signing was organized by the SNS in a high number of Croatian cities. The petition advocated that the status of Croatian Serbs be resolved democratically, and also condemned the “terrorist forces” which were

²⁸ (HINA), “Poziv Srpske narodne stranke”, *Vjesnik*, 28 July 1991, p. 4.

²⁹ (HINA), “SNS poziva na obranu Hrvatske”, *Vjesnik*, 31 July 1991, p. 3.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Gordana Grgas, “Tko maltretira Srbe u Zagrebu?”, *Vjesnik*, 17 August 1991, p. 4.

manipulating a part of the Serbs in Croatia and intended to threaten Croatia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The petition also called for the rapid enactment of a constitutional law that would define the status of the Serbs in Croatia in compliance with international standards.³² Unfortunately, I have no data on the work done on this petition, that is, how many Croatian citizens of Serbian ethnicity did in fact sign it.

However, given the expanding war and worsening Croatian-Serbian relations, this SNS initiative had no chance of success. Under such circumstances, a new press conference was held on 11 November 1991 which was attended by the members of the SNS Presidency, Milan Đukić, Milan Škorić and Veselin Pejnović. On this occasion, it was underscored that Croatia was currently undergoing the "most trying times" in its history, and the aggression by Serbia and the JNA against Croatia was at that time in its "fiercest phase". They noted that the aggressor has no interest in a ceasefire and the establishment of peace, rather the intention was to depose the democratically elected Croatian authorities and bar Croatian independence. What the JNA and rebel Serbs were doing in the territories they either had under the control or were attacking was described as "crimes and genocidal acts". Đukić concluded that the end to the aggression against Croatia could come exclusively if it is internationally recognized as an independent state. Europe had "failed the test" on this issue; Europe had taken too long to realize "who was the aggressor" and only looked after its own interests. At this same conference, Đukić mentioned the fact that Milošević claimed he is protecting the Serbian people, but that he was actually unconcerned over the fate of the Serbs living in the territories under the control of the Croatian authorities, i.e., he did not care about the Serbian people, but rather only about conquering territory.³³

The SNS advocated the participation of the Croatian Serbs in Croatia's defence to show in this way that they accepted it as their homeland. In early July 1991, Milan Škorić complained to the Croatian press that Serbs were not being recruited into Croatian forces, assessing this an unnecessary lack of confidence in them.³⁴ At the end of August 1991, the SNS urged the Croatian authorities to create the conditions for Serbs to become involved in Croatia's defence, for there was even pressure among the Croatian public for the Serbs to do so, which put them in a difficult situation.³⁵ In this regard, on 24 September 1991, Đukić send a special letter to Žarko Domljan, the speaker of the Croatian Parliament, stating that the SNS leadership, at the initiative of its members and adherents, has invited all Croatian citizens of Serbian ethnicity to volunteer for service in Croatia's defence forces. In the meantime, initiatives also appeared for the SNS

³² Gordana Grgas, "Zajednička borba", *Vjesnik*, 31 August 1991, p. 4.

³³ Andrea Latinović, "Priznanje Hrvatske zaustavilo bi rat", *Vjesnik*, 12 November 1991, p. 4.

³⁴ Sanja Kapetanić, "Žele nas svjesno žrtvovati", *Vjesnik*, 11 July 1991, p. 7.

³⁵ Gordana Grgas, "Zajednička borba", *Vjesnik*, 31 August 1991, p. 4.

to designate at least one person who would become a part of the command structure of the Croatian police and national guard. The appointment of such individuals would have constituted a political act that would show that Croatia “demonstrated confidence” in its citizens of Serbian ethnicity “to engage in defensive affairs at the highest levels”. This is why Đukić asked Domljan to personally see to the engagement of such a person, who would be proposed by the SNS after the necessary consultations were completed.³⁶ To the best of my knowledge, this initiative was not implemented, while SNS Presidency member Veselin Pejnović declared in November 1991 that the Croatian authorities did not involve a sufficient number of Serbs in Croatia's defence, even though there nonetheless were Serbs willing to do so.³⁷

The SNS and the Violation of the Human Rights of Serbs Living in Territories under Croatian Control

As of mid-1991, SNS officials stressed that there were cases of discrimination and violence against Serbs living in the territories under the control of the Croatian authorities. Thus, at the SNS press conference held on 5 June, it was noted that this party would soon file complaints in cases in which Serbs were dismissed from their jobs or, in some cases, forced to move out of their homes.³⁸ In early July, Milan Škorić, the chairman of the SNS Initiative Committee for the city of Zagreb, mentioned the case of 26 Serbs in the city of Zadar, on the Adriatic coast, were dismissed from their jobs. He also had examples of Serbs being asked to sign declarations of loyalty to the Republic of Croatia, and in this regard Škorić noted that such actions were even condemned by the Croatian Parliament's Human Rights Committee.³⁹

During a press conference held in mid-August, Đukić observed that pressure and mistreatment of Serbs living in areas under the control of the Croatian authorities had recently increased. Škorić, who in the meantime had become the chairman of the SNS City Committee for Zagreb, at that time mentioned that there were cases of bombings of houses in Zagreb owned by Serbs. There was also information that at the beginning of August 1991 uniformed individuals who were assumed to have been Croatian guardsmen came to the Kozari Putovi neighbourhood. They searched houses in which Serbs lived, during which the Serbs were mistreated, one was beaten, and their weapons were seized even if they held them legally.⁴⁰

³⁶ Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, Classification designation: 007-03/91-01/20, Registration number: [...] 9581.

³⁷ Andrea Latinović, “Priznanje Hrvatske zaustavilo bi rat”, *Vjesnik*, 12 November 1991, p. 4.

³⁸ Gordana Grgas, “Pregovori putem paritetnih grupa”, *Vjesnik*, 6 June 1991., p. 4.

³⁹ Sanja Kapetanić, “Žele nas svjesno žrtvovati”, *Vjesnik*, 11 July 1991, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Gordana Grgas, “Tko maltretira Srbe u Zagrebu?”, *Vjesnik*, 17 August 1991, p. 4.

At the SNS press conference held in late August, Škorić mentioned manipulations involving the removal of Serbs from Zagreb. He announced that there were such cases, that Serbs were moving out due to political harassment, but that some were leaving for other reasons as well. He also said that there had been cases of bombs being set in houses and commercial facilities owned by Serbs, but he concluded that this was not “a pre-conceived policy of the Croatian authorities”. Additionally, SNS officials, together with Živko Juzbašić, an ethnic Serbia member of the Croatian Government, and the chief of police in Zagreb visited the Zagreb neighbourhood Kozari Putovi, and on this occasion safety was pledged to all residents. It was also mentioned that the residents of this neighbourhood were revolted when the sensationalist Zagreb newspaper *Slobodni tjednik* carried an article in which it stated that there were “Chetniks” in Kozari Putovi.⁴¹

At the press conference held on 11 November 1991, top SNS officials once more noted that discrimination and terminations of employment of ethnic Serb citizens were frequent in the territories under control of the Croatian authorities. The rule of law was not functioning in some parts of Croatia hit by the war, so that phenomena were emerging that aroused panic and concern among ethnic Serb citizens.⁴²

Since at that time Đukić announced that the city of Zadar was an example that the Serbs in Croatia were under threat, Ivica Marijačić, a Croatian journalist from that city, responded to him. Marijačić stated that Đukić, although a “tolerant and realistic” politician, was incorrect when making this assertion. He recalled that the Serbs in the Zadar area had already begun to push for their political objectives in a violent manner during 1990, blocking roads and resorting to arms. The current situation for Croats from places in the Zadar hinterland was very precarious. The Serbs had expelled them from their homes, which were then looted and destroyed. Moreover, the Serbs who had expelled these Croats were actually their neighbours. Thus, in Zadar at that time there were 17,000 Croats who had been displaced from the city’s environs. Besides this, Zadar itself was exposed to fierce bombardment by the JNA. It was true that during May 1991, after the Serbs in the Zadar environs had killed a Croatian police officer, the destruction of property owned by firms from Serbia occurred, and that there were cases of bombs set in houses owned by Serbs. Marijačić concluded that this was a crime that merited all condemnation, but that what had preceded it should also be considered. When speaking of the dismissal of Serbs from their jobs, Marijačić mentioned that numerous Croats in Zadar had also lost their jobs due to economic reasons. A part of the Serbs employed in Zadar were dismissed because they no longer came to work, rather they decided to join the rebel Serbs, and something similar had also happened to Croats who under wartime conditions did not meet their

⁴¹ Gordana Grgas, “Zajednička borba”, *Vjesnik*, 31 August 1991, p. 4.

⁴² Andrea Latinović, “Priznanje Hrvatske zaustavilo bi rat”, *Vjesnik*, 12 November 1991, p. 4.

labour obligations. Marijačić concluded by stating that despite everything, a considerable number of Serbs who had not joined the rebellion still lived in Zadar. Marijačić expressed the conviction that Đukić was only insufficiently informed, for he was a “reasonable man” whose thinking was far different from that of the “Greater Serbian politicians”.⁴³

SNS Proposals to Resolve the Status of the Serbs in Croatia

The new Croatian Constitution, enacted at the end of 1990, after the multi-party elections, guaranteed the members of all nations and minorities the right to use their languages and scripts, and cultural autonomy. In the referendum held in May 1991 at which Croatian citizens were supposed to declare their stance on Croatian independence, the referendum question stated that as an independent state Croatia would guarantee cultural autonomy and all civil rights to the Serbs and members of other nationalities in Croatia.⁴⁴

In this regard, on 3 June Đukić contacted Croatian Parliamentary Speaker Žarko Domljan, giving him the SNS proposal to resolve the Serbian national question in the Republic of Croatia. The proposal reflected the desire to resolve this matter in a comprehensive and professional manner, with the participation of the political parties purporting to represent the Croatian Serbs, the relevant Croatian authorities and experts from various fields. This was supposed to create cultural autonomy for the Serbs, which would, among other things, imply the right of the Serbs to proportionate participation in political decision-making, the right to free use of the Serbian language and Cyrillic script, the right to Serbian signs and symbols and, ultimately, the right to Serbian institutions. Among its basic demands, the SNS sought the creation of mechanisms which would prevent the infringement of the human and civil rights of Serbs due to their ethnicity. The latter referred to the arbitrary dismissal of Serbs from their jobs, the destruction of their property and threats to their physical and mental integrity. With regard to their share in the overall population, there was also a demand for proportionate representation of the Serbs in the legislative, executive and judicial authorities. The proposal also called for consideration of establishment of a separate body that would represent the Croatian Serbs, which would have to be consulted by the relevant authorities when making any decisions of key interest to the Croatian Serbs. The new administrative/territorial division of Croatia and the level of independence of local governments was also supposed to take into account the interests of the Serbian community. In this regard, attention was supposed to be given

⁴³ Ivica Marijačić, “Hrvati nisu počeli s nasiljem”, *Vjesnik*, 15 November 1991, p. 5.

⁴⁴ *Dokumenti o državnosti Republike Hrvatske (Od prvih višestranačkih izbora 1990. do međunarodnog priznanja 15. siječnja 1992)*, edited by: Anđelko Milardović (Zagreb: Alinea, 1992) pp. 44-69, 80.

to economically underdeveloped areas that were generally populated by Serbs, in order to promote their development. All prerequisites for the functioning of cultural associations, special cultural institutions (museums, libraries) and print and electronic media for the Croatian Serbs also had to be secured, while the curricula for primary and secondary schools was supposed to incorporate special content for ethnic Serb pupils. All contested and unresolved matters concerning the operation of the Serbian Orthodox Church also had to be settled.⁴⁵

Upon declaring Croatia's independence on 25 June, the Croatian Parliament also adopted the Charter on the Rights of Serbs and Other Nationalities in the Republic of Croatia, in which the Serbs, among others, were guaranteed proportionate participation in local government and in the corresponding national governmental bodies.⁴⁶ A meeting of a narrower task force of the parliamentary Commission on Protection and Advancement of Equality of Nations and Nationalities was held in Parliament on 5 July 1991, which was attended by Milan Đukić. The general conclusion was that this commission should prepare materials to formulate a fundamental document on the national rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia and the Charter on the Rights of Serbs and Other Nationalities in the Republic of Croatia. In this regard, documents compiled in late 1990 when the new Croatian Constitution was enacted were already extant, and the aforementioned SNS proposal of 3 June 1991 had already been received. It was concluded that the question of the Serbs in Croatia could not be comprehensively resolved exclusively by guaranteeing their cultural rights, which encompassed education, language, and script, rather their political rights also had to be resolved. This referred to proportionate participation of Serbs in local governments and the national authorities, and the fulfilment of their needs in the economic sense. This was seen as the reason for a constitutional law that would establish the rights of the Serbs and other minorities, wherein the Serbian question was seen as crucial to the institution of Croatia's full sovereignty. At the meeting it was also stressed that the achievement of the aforementioned objective came up against numerous difficulties because there was no positive progress in reaching the political agreement foreseen under the decision of the Yugoslav Presidency of 9 May 1991 on the establishment of the Croatian-Serbian "parity group".⁴⁷

A meeting of representatives of Croatian parties was held in the Croatian Parliament on 30 July 1991, which was also attended by Đukić. At this meeting, participants discussed the exercise of cultural autonomy by the Serbs and their proportionate participation in national, as well as local and

⁴⁵ HDA, UPRH, 247/91, Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, Classification designation: 007-03/91-01/20, Registration number: 0-91-5538.

⁴⁶ *Dokumenti o državnosti Republike Hrvatske*, pp. 91-92.

⁴⁷ Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, Minutes of the first meeting of the narrower task force held in the Office of the Parliamentary Speaker on 5 July 1991 at 10:00 a.m.

regional governance, based on the materials prepared by the task force of the Commission on Protection and Advancement of Equality of Nations and Nationalities.⁴⁸

At an SNS press conference held on 11 November 1991, Đukić claimed that the status of the Serbs in Croatia was “uncertain” because a constitutional law that would regulate their status had not yet been enacted. Đukić assessed that in this regard the Croatian authorities should reaffirm their democratic orientation, while such a law had to be passed because it was also a prerequisite for Croatia’s international recognition.⁴⁹ Finally, on 4 December 1991, the Croatian Parliament passed the Republic of Croatia Constitutional Act on Human Rights and Freedoms and Ethnic and National Community or Minority Rights, which, *inter alia*, stipulated the establishment of self-government in the municipalities in which the Serbian population constituted a majority.⁵⁰ In mid-1992, this law was amended, so the aforementioned municipalities were unified into two special self-governing districts, Glina and Knin.⁵¹

The Question of Credibility

Under circumstances of continually increasing tensions between Croats and Serbs, and then the all-out war in Croatia in the latter half of 1991, the status of Đukić and his party was troubled, both before the Croatian Serbs and the Croatian public in general. Based on available data, it is difficult to say how many members and adherents the SNS had after its establishment, and how the organization of branches proceeded in those parts of Croatia under the control of the county’s legal authorities.

In early June 1991, Đukić boasted that his party even had members in the territory of the ‘SAO Krajina’, and that it furthermore had as many as 70 members in Knin, the ‘capital city’ of this Serbian autonomous district. On the same occasion, Đukić stated that the SNS had established initiative committees in eleven Croatian cities.⁵² However, it is difficult to ascertain the veracity of this assertion on SNS members in the territory of the ‘SAO Krajina’. Nonetheless, over the latter half of 1991, local SNS organizations were established in various parts of Croatia. For example, an organization for the Cres-Lošinj Municipality was established on 22 September 1991, but this was on an island on the northern Adriatic, which were not parts of Croatia in which a significant Serbian population traditionally lived.⁵³

⁴⁸ Vlado Rajić, “Posljednja prilika za dogovor”, *Vjesnik*, 31 July 1991, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Andrea Latinović, “Priznanje Hrvatske zaustavilo bi rat”, *Vjesnik*, 12 November 1991, p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Dokumenti o državnosti Republike Hrvatske*, pp. 93-109.

⁵¹ N. Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj*, pp. 164-165.

⁵² Gordana Grgas, “Pregovori putem paritetnih grupa”, *Vjesnik*, 6 June 1991, p. 4.

⁵³ Parliament of the Republic of Croatia, Cres-Lošinj Municipal Branch of the Serbian People’s

It need not be especially noted that the rebel Serbs had no affection for the SNS. Thus, in an interview in May 1991, Milan Kresojević, an SDS official from the Karlovac area, when asked for his opinion on the establishment of the SNS, stated:

“This party and its leaders have all conditions to succeed. These are former criminals, there are verdicts, I’ve seen them. I think that the [Croatian] leadership picked a party of bad people for itself, who are Serbs but who will not be accepted by the Serbian people. It has absolutely no chance among the Serbs.”⁵⁴

SNS deputy chairman Milan Vergaš responded to this and other attacks made during June of that same year. He told Kresojević that in his interview he talked about “democracy”, while actually promoting “terrorism” and threatening murder. Vergaš also responded to the other accusations that the SNS did not even have members and added that all of those who attack him and the SNS would be invited to attend the SNS founding assembly to be held in Karlovac, where the party already had a considerable number of members. He wondered why those places in the Karlovac area which support the SDS did not have “more intelligent and reasonable people”, rather placing their faith in those – and here he meant the leaders of the SDS – who “lie to, cheat and mislead the people”.⁵⁵ However, during August 1991, the SNS leadership expelled Vergaš from the party. Vergaš said of this that most of the SNS Presidency’s members did not agree with public statements made by Đukić, who was an employee of the Croatian president’s office. This is why the SNS Presidency asked him to refrain from making public statements without assent from its members.⁵⁶ However, Đukić denied this, concluding that this was disinformation intended to break apart the SNS from the “greater Serbian standpoint”.⁵⁷ Based on this, it may be concluded that divisions had emerged among the SNS leadership, and that a part of its members obviously did not agree with Đukić, who considered the conflicts in Croatia the fault of the Serbian leadership in Knin and the policies of Serbia. This is why it comes as no surprise that one report released in early September 1991 dealing with the situation in the ‘SAO Krajina’ and most likely compiled by members of the state security of the Republic of Serbia, stated among other things that the SNS headed by Đukić was “by all indications essentially operating treasonously”.⁵⁸

Party, letter of support submitted to the Parliament of the Republic of Croatia.

⁵⁴ Vera Duduković, interview with Milan Kresojević, “Ne treba nam ni strah ni panika”, *Nokat*, no. 12, Karlovac, 14 May 1991, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Milan Vergaš, deputy chairman of the SNS Zagreb, “Pozvat ću ih na skupštinu stranke”, *Nokat*, no. 16, Karlovac, 11 June 1991, p. 15.

⁵⁶ (Tanjug), “Sukob u vrhu SNS”, *Vjesnik*, 16 August 1991, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Gordana Grgas, “Tko maltretira Srbe u Zagrebu?”, *Vjesnik*, 17 August 1991, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Milisav Sekulić, *Knin je pao u Beogradu* (Bad Vibel: Nidda Verlag GmbH, 2001), pp. 31-32.

Đukić simultaneously had to defend his credibility before the Croatian political public. At the end of May 1991, he sent an open letter to Ivica Račan, the chairman of the Party of Democratic Change (later the Social Democratic Party – SDP), the reformed Croatian communists, who at a press conference not long before this characterized the SNS as a “contrived” party. In his letter, Đukić stated that the SNS needed time to demonstrate its strength, intentions and operating methods. He added that it was the position of the SNS that the interests of the Serbian people could only be advocated by those who confirmed their legitimacy in free and democratic elections. He conceded that the SNS did not have such legitimacy at that point, but that the party intended to engage in extra-parliamentary activity in the interest of resolving the Serbian national question. Đukić told Račan that the SDP had had “a historical opportunity” to resolve the Serbian question in Croatia, but that this party had allowed this opportunity to slip away. This is why “a high number of Serbs in Croatia” emerged with the idea of creating a new Serbian party, the SNS.⁵⁹ Obviously, Đukić’s statement about the “historical opportunity” which the SDP failed to exploit referred to the fact that in the first democratic elections, the SDP received many votes precisely from Croatian citizens of Serbian ethnicity.

At the beginning of August 1991, Đukić was granted the opportunity to hold a speech during a session of the Croatian Parliament. On that occasion, he stated that he was not “the extended hand of Tuđman nor a [Serb] terrorist”, which drew the applause of the gathered MPs. In the same speech, Đukić warned that mistrust of all Serbs was on the rise in Croatia, and that they were confronted with demands to adopt a stance on the attacks being carried out by the rebel Serbs. Additionally, the Croatian authorities did not know who constituted the legitimate representative of the Serbs in Croatia. If this was the SDS, as an extremist party, then the question arose as to the status of the SNS. Đukić stressed that the SNS had “healthy strength” in contrast to the SDS, whose leaders were leading “the people into perdition” to further their own interests. He also expressed regret that the session of Parliament was not also attended by Croatian President Tuđman, for he also had to hear that Croatia “has no problem with the Serbs” and that the Serbs would defend their Croatian homeland, i.e., that Serbs had to be distinguished from “Chetniks” – the rebel Serbs and extremists. With reference to the formation of a new Croatian Government, Đukić expressed the criticism that it included Serbs, but not those who could be seen as legitimate representatives of the Croatian Serbs.⁶⁰

The aforementioned points indicate the type of problems that confronted the SNS and Đukić. The Serbs from ‘Krajina’ deemed them “traitors” and an “extended arm” of the Croatian authorities. At the same time, frustration was growing among the Croatian public due to the aggressive war against Croatia in which a major role was being played precisely by Croatian citizens of Serbian

⁵⁹ “Imali ste šansu”, *Vjesnik*, 1 June 1991, p. 4.

⁶⁰ “Tko predstavlja Srbe u Hrvatskoj”, *Vjesnik*, 2 August 1991, p. 3.

ethnicity, while Đukić attempted to convince this same Croatian public that the Serbs in Croatia should not be collectively condemned.

The SNS from 1992 to 1995

In early 1992, Croatia secured international recognition in the borders it had within the Yugoslav federation. A ceasefire was also declared. Already at the end of 1991, the rebel Serbs had proclaimed the 'Republic of Serbian Krajina' (RSK) in the territories which they had seized with assistance from the JNA. At the same time, implementation of the United Nations peace operation, known as the Vance Peace Plan, began in these territories.⁶¹

Parliamentary elections were held in Croatia in early August 1992. These elections could not be held in the territory held by the RSK. In compliance with the Constitutional Act on Human Rights and Freedoms and Ethnic and National Community or Minority Rights, the new convocation of the Croatian Parliament also had to secure proportionate representation of the Serbian community, which had to have a total of 13 representatives in it.⁶² The SNS therefore secured three seats in Parliament, assumed by Milan Đukić, Dragan Hinić and Veselin Pejnović, while Đukić also became deputy speaker of the Parliament's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies. The remaining Serbian MPs were either independents or members of other Croatian parties.⁶³ The SNS was not happy with this allocation of parliamentary seats which had to go to the Serbs, believing that the SNS was entitled to all 13 seats. Đukić speculated that the governing HDZ intentionally resorted to a solution whereby the SNS would not receive all of these seats, so that among those MPs representing the Serbs were those who could be described as "bigger Croats" than the actual Croatian MPs.⁶⁴

Gradually Đukić became more critical of the Croatian authorities. He believed that the Serbs in Croatia were "second-class citizens" because they were exposed to various forms of discrimination. He believed that responsibility for the aggression against Croatia could not be foisted upon the Croatian Serbs because Croatia's territorial integrity was threatened by a policy that had originated outside of Croatia, by which he obviously meant Belgrade. Besides this, there was the responsibility of the Croatian side, which had made mistakes in its treatment of Croatian Serbs. Đukić stressed that the SNS would continue to

⁶¹ For more on this see: N. Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj*, pp. 145-166.

⁶² Nenad Zakošek, *Politički sustav Hrvatske* (Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2002), pp. 39-40.

⁶³ "Zastupnici i ministri Srbi u hrvatskom Saboru", *Naš glas*, no. 7-8, October/November 1994, pp. 36-37.

⁶⁴ Milan Đukić, "Demokracija na 'žlicu' i 'vreće'", *Naš glas*, no. 7-8, October/November 1994, pp. 12-13; Nedeljko Višnić, "Milan Đukić izbliza", *Naš glas*, no. 1, January 1995, pp. 23-26.

contribute to the peaceful reintegration of the territories under UN protection into Croatia, but that this had to be done in a manner acceptable to the Serbs.⁶⁵

In an interview from late 1994, Đukić was told that after the establishment of the SNS, there were remarks that the party emerged thanks to the Croatian authorities, as a response to the SDS, and that was why the Serbs were reserved toward the SNS. In the meantime the SNS became a parliamentary party whose members worked to protect Serbian interests. Đukić responded that that some people told him he had changed, that he had become “more radical”, meaning more critical of the Croatian authorities. However, he assessed that it was not he who had changed, but rather the circumstances in which he operated. At that moment when the SNS had “disclosed” the true nature of Croatian policy, that its intent was to impose collective culpability for the war on the Serbs, and when the SNS began to speak out about violations of the human rights of Serbs and the violence perpetrated against them, then this party began to be attacked by the Croatian media and public. In this regard, Đukić stated that certain representatives of the Croatian authorities may have been disappointed with him because they expected that he would unconditionally support Croatian policy. Đukić also stated that he brought his complaints to President Tuđman personally.⁶⁶

In early May 1995, the Croatian Army liberated a part of western Slavonia, which had been under Serb control since late 1991, and a considerable portion of the Serbian population fled from the area at the onset of this Croatian operation.⁶⁷ The SNS was critical of this operation by the Croatian Army, concluding that it had “conquered territory, but without Serbs”, who had generally left the area. At the same time, the SNS also addressed the RSK leadership in Knin, telling them that their policies were “spent” and that that had to find the “wisdom, good sense and political will to reach a political solution by compromise”. This is why Knin was called upon to accept the political negotiations that were the starting point of the Z-4 Plan.⁶⁸ This was a plan that had been proposed to Zagreb and Knin by international representatives in early 1995. It foresaw that the territories which had had majority Serb populations prior to the war would be granted a high degree of autonomy, which would actually have led to the federalization of Croatia. The Croatian authorities were not pleased with the plan, but they demonstrated willingness to consider it, acknowledging that that plan did have some positive aspects. However, the RSK leadership in Knin rejected even discussing it.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Milan Đukić, “Srpsko pitanje i njihova budućnost u Hrvatskoj”, *Naš glas*, no. 2-3, May/June 1994, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Nedeljko Višnić, “Milan Đukić izbliza”, *Naš glas*, no. 1, January 1995, pp. 23-26.

⁶⁷ N. Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj*, pp. 488-499.

⁶⁸ Milan Đukić, “Teritorij bez Srba”, *Naš glas*, no. 5, May 1995, pp. 28-29.

⁶⁹ N. Barić, *Srpska pobuna u Hrvatskoj*, pp. 474-480.

Despite the criticism levelled at the Croatian authorities by the SNS and Đukić, I believe that the primary problem involved in a peaceful, compromise solution to the conflict in Croatia lay with the leadership and political public in the RSK. They had no intention of consenting to any compromise, except full statehood and separation from Croatia. Because of this even the Vance Peace Plan could not be seen as just. At the same time, Zagreb was under pressure from the international community to refrain from taking back the territories under Serb control by military force. However, once the RSK rejected any compromise, and continued to depend on the equally obstinate Serbs in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Croatian Army launched Operation Storm in early August 1995, in which the western part of the RSK was militarily crushed, while the Serb population fled from this area.

In the end, it may be concluded that the SNS did not fulfil the objectives for which it had been established. Under the circumstances of Yugoslavia's collapse and the war in Croatia, it could not establish itself as the representative of the Serbs who lived in the areas in which the revolt against the Croatian authorities broke out. For the Serbs from 'Krajina', the SNS was a "traitorous" party in the service of Croatian interests. In the subsequent period, from 1992 to 1995, there continued to be no possibility for the SNS to serve as something of a link that would help in reaching a compromise between Zagreb and Knin, even though the party had secured seats in the Croatian Parliament and became a representative of at least some Serbs who lived in the territories under the control of the Croatian authorities. At the same time, the intensified criticism of the Croatian authorities expressed by the SNS was not met with understanding among most of the Croatian political public, frustrated by years of war and the existence of a self-proclaimed Serbian republic on considerable parts of Croatian territory.

Die Gründung und öffentliche Tätigkeit der Serbischen Volkspartei im Jahre 1991

Zusammenfassung

In dieser Arbeit wurde die Gründung der Serbischen Volkspartei (Srpska narodna stranka) im Mai 1991 in Zagreb und ihre Wirkung bis zum Ende des Jahres geschildert. In dieser Zeit befand sich ein beträchtlicher Teil der serbischen Gemeinschaft in Kroatien in Rebellion gegen die kroatischen Behörden. Diese Rebellion war ein Teil der Politik der damaligen politischen Führung Serbiens mit Slobodan Milošević an der Spitze, welche darauf zielte, die Verselbstständigung Kroatiens innerhalb der Grenzen verunmöglichen, die es als eine Teilrepublik der jugoslawischen Föderation gehabt hatte. Stattdessen, im Falle der Verselbstständigung Kroatiens sollten Teile seines Territoriums, die mehrheitlich oder im beträchtlichen Maße mit serbischer Bevölkerung besiedelt waren, im verschmälerten Jugoslawien bleiben, beziehungsweise in Gemeinschaft mit Serbien. Diese Politik führte in der zweiten Hälfte des Jahres 1991 zum Krieg, während dessen die serbische Seite, unterstützt von der Jugoslawischen Volksarmee, große Teile des kroatischen Territoriums okkupierte. Die Gründung und Wirkung der Serbischen Volkspartei in 1991 ist deswegen interessant, weil es um eine Partei handelte, die denjenigen Teil der serbischen Gemeinschaft in Kroatien repräsentieren wollte, der den kroatischen Behörden treu geblieben war. Am Ende des Artikels wird die Tätigkeit dieser Partei zwischen 1992 und 1995 in Hauptzügen dargestellt.