



THE CVETKOVIĆ- MAČEK AGREEMENT AND THE FOUNDING OF THE BANOVINA OF CROATIA

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Professional review

Submitted: July 24th, 2021

Accepted: September 26th, 2021

This paper will explore the conclusion of the Cvetković-Maček Agreement and the founding of the Banovina of Croatia. The introduction will cover the events leading up to the negotiations between Dragiša Cvetković and Vladko Maček, followed by a closer examination of the negotiation process, particularly the circumstances that influenced the outcome of the Agreement. Additionally, the structure and main features of the Banovina of Croatia, as well as Croatian and Serbian responses to its founding will be analyzed. For the final segment of the paper the author will provide their own commentary with regards to the aforementioned events.

Keywords: *the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, the Banovina of Croatia, the “Croatian Question”, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia*

Introduction

Following the collapse of Milan Stojadinović’s government in early 1939, amid strained foreign policy relations, the conclusion of the issue of nationality within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, especially that of Croats, was a matter of utmost urgency. In a country rife with both latent and open hostilities between ethnic groups, Prince Paul (Pavle) entrusted Dragiša Cvetković with the mandate for forming a new government, and with the primary task of reaching an agreement with Vladko Maček and the HSS (Croatian Peasant Party). This task was to resolve the “Croatian Question”. Negotiations and strategizing spanned several months, finally resulting in the founding of the Banovina of Croatia on August 26th 1939 (Matković 1998: 205).

The majority of works cited in this paper are general historical overviews, while other sources include articles discussing certain topics related to the Banovina of Croatia. It is important to note that nearly all historiographers cited here often draw on the work of Ljubo



Boban who, among else, dedicated a significant amount of time to the HSS and inter-war Yugoslavia. Horvat, however, had died long before the publication of Boban's monographies, and Čulinović's work also preceded Boban's by several years. In fact, Boban's dissertation, titled *The Cvetković-Maček Agreement*, is a detailed overview of the Agreement. However, despite the importance of this topic in the context of 20th century Croatian history, as the Agreement was the most notable attempt at resolving the pressing issue of monarchist Yugoslavia (or the "Croatian question"), in recent historiography it has not been given adequate attention, and there have been no recent works studying the Agreement. The conclusive part of this paper will, much like the main body, rely on Boban's own conclusions.

Circumstances and events leading up to the founding of the Banovina of Croatia

The 1934 assassination of King Alexander in Marseille thoroughly changed both domestic political relations and the foreign policy alignment of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The traditionally amicable alliance between France and Yugoslavia gradually faded, weakening due to Alexander's leaning towards Germany after Hitler's rise to power (Matković 1998: 184). This strategic relationship between Germany and Yugoslavia was to aid King Alexander in resisting Italian claims, while Hitler's Germany would benefit from it through economic subjugation of Southeast Europe on the pretext of benevolent economic relations. The growing amity of Yugoslavia and Germany coincided with French attempts at subduing the "awakened" Germany, which is why France was against the formation of such relationships. For this reason, in 1934 the French Minister of Foreign Affairs Louis Barthou visited Belgrade, where it was established that King Alexander would visit Paris (Matković 1998: 184). The King's visit, however, turned out to be fatal, as the *ustashe*, led by Ante Pavelić in cooperation with the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (VMRO), carried out an assassination in Marseille in 1934, killing both King Alexander and Louis Barthou. King Alexander's will stated that a tripartite regency was to rule the country in the name of the king, as his rightful heir Peter II was only 11. The regents were the king's cousin Prince Paul (Pavle), Radenko Stanković and Ivo Perović.



Upon taking over, the new regency declared that they would “remain on the bulwark of national and civic unity” and stay with the notion of Yugoslav unitarism. Despite the new regency being a collective authority, Prince Paul was at the head of it (Matković 1998: 185). Even though announcements were made supporting the social and political status quo, the regency, namely Prince Paul, was forced to change their minds and appease the dissatisfied opposition. Nikola Uzunović was replaced as head of government by Bogoljub Jeftić as per order of Prince Paul, and this new government was described by Jeftić as one of “conciliation and peace” (Matković 1998: 185). This statement was indicative of possible changes to the country’s internal political structures that would democratize the current state. To further confirm this, Vladko Maček was released and elections were called wherein the opposition was allowed to participate following an amendment of the electoral law. In 1935 a United Opposition was formed, comprising the Peasant-democratic Coalition (hereinafter “SDK”), the Democratic Party, the Farmers Association and the Yugoslav Muslim Organization (hereinafter “JMO”). The opposition’s aim was to overthrow the Yugoslav National Party (hereinafter “JNS”) led by Bogoljub Jeftić as head of government. The government’s list ultimately won the election, but the United Opposition was not without success: the government’s list won 1 746 982 votes, or 60,6 %, while the opposition won 1 076 345, or 37,4 % of all votes (Matković 1998: 187). However, due to an unusual law allowing for the party with the majority of votes to automatically win 3 out of 5 total seats, as well as to participate in the assignment of the remaining seats, the opposition was at a disadvantage (Matković 1998: 187).

Despite winning the elections, the JNS led by Bogoljub Jeftić was replaced by the Yugoslav Radical Union (hereinafter “JRZ”), as Prince Paul believed a change in leadership was necessary. The JRZ was formed through joining together of the members of the Slovenian People’s Party, with Anton Korošec, the Yugoslav Muslim Organization, with Mehmed Spaho, and the radicals led by Milan Stojadinović. They proposed a unique plan and leadership, keeping in line with the fundamentals of the 1931 Granted Constitution (Oktroiirani Ustav) and its unitarist-centralist concepts, while Prince Paul handed Milan Stojadinović the mandate for forming a new government (Matković 1998: 197). Stojadinović replaced Jeftić, being a better fit for Prince Paul’s expectations – he supported maintaining a close relationship



with Hitler's Germany, whereas Jeftić was notably pro-French in a time when Yugoslavia was clearly distancing itself from France and the Little Entente (Čulinović 1961: 99). Furthermore, Jeftić compromised his integrity by terror reigning and suppressing the opposition's votes and opinions, which brought him public scorn. The public was to be appeased through recalling Jeftić, signaling thus the government's willingness to change (Čulinović 1961: 97). This new regime party heralded greater liberalization of politics and Prince Paul's intent to reinstate the party system. Stojadinović's inaugural speech at the Parliament further confirmed this; Stojadinović noted that the newly formed government would create "an atmosphere of mutual trust that shall enable a swift resolution to the Croatian question" (Matković 1998: 188). The importance of this statement is twofold: firstly, the governing body in Belgrade had, for the first time, publically and officially recognized the issue of nationalities, or the Croatian question, and secondly and most importantly, they were willing to resolve it. Stojadinović's statement clearly reflected Prince Paul's stance, otherwise he would suffer serious consequences for making such statements without prior "clearance". The statement also goes directly against the Granted Constitution, as discussing the resolution of the Croatian question and the position of the Croatian nation within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was contrary to the idea of a single, united Yugoslavian nation, as per the constitution (Matković 1998: 188). Such actions that oppose the fundamentals of the constitution were what paved the way for the founding of the Banovina of Croatia, a separate Croatian territory within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The Rule and Downfall of Milan Stojadinović

In 1935, the magazine *New Europe (Nova Europa)* published a survey on the topic of Kingdom of Yugoslavia's domestic politics. Public officials were called to name the main problems of Yugoslavian domestic politics and to propose solutions to these problems (Matković 1998: 192). The list of participants reveals that they were from all over the country, yet they all agreed that the Croatian question was the most pressing political issue that requires a swift resolution (Matković 1998: 193). However, Stojadinović, and therefore Prince Paul as well, proved unwilling to "create an atmosphere of mutual trust" as was



promised in his inaugural speech – in fact, he avoided dealing with the Croatian question altogether. Maček explained the consequences of such behavior to a Czech diplomat, saying how in the event of war recruitment would be impossible in Croatia, and those Croatians that would be recruited would probably fight against Yugoslavia (Bilandžić 1999: 103). The reality of the Croatian question ultimately forced Prince Paul and Stojadinović to at least feign handling the issue, and so in 1937 Stojadinović met with Maček in Brežice, where he asked him to join the government, but was refused. Maček in turn asked for a repeal of the Granted Constitution. Finally, the negotiations were unsuccessful, as Stojadinović refused to amend the constitution before Peter (Petar) II takes the throne (Matković 1998: 189). The failed negotiations urged Maček to strengthen his connections with the Serbian opposition, then comprising the Democratic Party, the Farmers Association and a number of radicals that would join together to form the United Opposition (Matković 1998: 189). On October 8th 1937 an agreement was concluded between SDK and the United Opposition, forming the Bloc of National Democracy. The agreement required a repeal of the Granted Constitution and an adoption of a new constitution that would only be adopted if the majority of Slovenians, Croatians and Serbs agreed (Matković 1998: 189). The new government was to be tasked with its implementation with the approval of Prince Paul, who refused to consider repealing the Granted Constitution.

By 1938 international relations had become tense, especially following the joining of Germany and Austria and the growing revanchist tendencies of certain European countries. Amid these events, and having found itself bordering Hitler's Germany, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia found itself surrounded by extremely hostile neighbors. Failing to resolve the Croatian question in such circumstances had the potential of harming the country as a whole. The neighboring countries like Italy and Hungary had already voiced their support of various nationalist organizations such as the *ustashe*, aiming to bring about the collapse of the Yugoslav country (Regan 2007: 219). The dissatisfied Croatian opposition led by Maček was gradually evolving into a general Croatian movement, which meant that – in the atmosphere of tense foreign policy relations and facing the threat of a new war – the Croatians would be unwilling to defend a country wherein one nation seems to dominate all other. Other nations perceived the Yugoslav country in



much the same way. It is important to note that the HSS had previously begun forming their own economic, political, cultural, and paramilitary organizations that had the objective of transform society “in the best way”. They were considered “branches of the Croatian peasant movement”, used by the HSS to control the field (Leček 2014: 35). Thousands of peasants and citizens gathered under the watch of the HSS, hoping to resolve their own burning issues. By forming these organizations, the HSS garnered so much support that it could be said that a “country within a country” was created (Leček 2014: 35). The most noteworthy of these organizations was the *Croatian Peasant and Civil Defense*, formed in 1936 as a response to state violence and the state’s tacit approval of Serbian extremist violence as well as a counterbalance to the *ustashe*’s growing influence among Croatians (Leček 2014: 41, Ramet 2011: 145). The fact that such paramilitary organizations with tens of thousands of members even existed meant that Maček had a respectable “party” army at his disposal and could make his demands more confidently. Maček’s demands gained more gravitas with the backing of the *Croatian Peasant and Civil Defense*, and thus his statement that “in the year 1918 we had nothing, so they did whatever they wished with us (...) and now we have the Peasant defense” implies the use of *Defense* as defending Croatian national interests (Goldstein 2008: 172). In addition to other nations’ opposition, Stojadinović employed undemocratic and dictatorial methods to win the Serbian opposition. Their increasing dissatisfaction with Stojadinović led to the opposition’s refusal to recognize him as the nation’s representative (Matković 1998: 200). Additionally, Stojadinović and Prince Paul were growing apart due to the former’s glorification of his own image and political role, in a rather fascist manner, defying thus Prince Paul’s authority (Matković 1998: 201). Stojadinović also formed his own green-shirt force who chanted his name, in the style of Hitler and Mussolini. Prince Paul feared that Stojadinović would rise to a position within Yugoslavia akin to the one Mussolini held in Italy, overshadowing the King (Matković 1998: 201).

For these reasons Prince Paul decided to consult the electorate, leading to a snap election. Stojadinović did not oppose this, as he firmly believed he would win and form a parliament that would support all his decisions unconditionally. The elections were held on December 11th 1938, with the following candidates: the JRZ, headed by Stojadino-



vić, Maček's opposing party and the Yugoslav National Movement headed by Dimitrije Ljotić. The government's list won yet again, but the opposition received a lot more votes than in 1935: the government's list won 1 643 738, or 54% of all votes, and the opposition won 1 364 524, or 44% of all votes. It was obvious that, despite winning the election, Stojadinović's position was compromised, which was reason enough for Prince Paul to remove him from power. This act was also one of Maček's conditions in order to proceed with negotiations regarding the Croatian question (Matković 1998: 201). Prince Paul decided to terminate Stojadinović in early 1939, trusting Anton Korošec and Mehmed Spaho with the task. Dragiša Cvetković, then Minister of Social Politics, resigned along with four other ministers, stating that Stojadinović's government was hindering the urgent resolution of the Croatian question (Matković 1998: 201). Stojadinović accepted his ministers' resignations and had plans to nominate their replacements, but Prince Paul requested a resignation of the entire government. Stojadinović then realized he was being pushed out, and the entire government resigned. Prince Paul then gave Dragiša Cvetković the mandate for forming a new government.

Preliminary negotiations and establishing conditions

Naturally, Stojadinović was not satisfied with the outcomes, so he started a campaign of branding and belittling his opponents and their followers, namely Cvetković, whom he called a "Serbian traitor" (Regan 2007: 221). Upon forming the new government on February 6th 1939, Cvetković's main goal was to resolve the Croatian question as soon as possible. The new government was mostly made up of JRZ supporters, while some members were considered as non-partisans. Cvetković's government seemed more eager to tackle the SDK and the issue of the Croatian question, especially due to the fact that many of the newly joined ministers had previously resigned due to disagreements with Stojadinović over this issue (Boban 1974: 9). Prince Paul had formed this new government with Cvetković so that his ideas would be carried out duly. It seemed more like a transient than a permanent government, as Prince Paul wanted to directly negotiate with Maček, and so Cvetković ultimately served as the prince's emissary (Boban 1974: 10). Even though removing Stojadinović and forming a new government had



been clear steps forward, Maček and the HSS were wary of these changes. They were aware that the new government had as many followers of JRZ as the previous did, and that Stojadinović's government had also claimed that the Croatian question was of high priority, as well as that this new government relied on the values of the 1931 constitution they did not support (Boban 1974: 11). However, the new government eventually displayed a significant change in opinions and approaches. They made it clear that it was necessary to handle "important moments in our history's past", and that they wished to "part with the methods of the past", signaling thus the government's and the prince's willingness to adopt new ideas and methods that steer away from state centralism and unitarism (Boban 1974: 10). Later statements from Cvetković, in which he particularly emphasizes the Croatian national identity, contributed to the optimism regarding the new government's intentions, or those of Prince Paul and the court (Boban 1974: 15). The United Opposition did not approve of Cvetković's government. Considering their joint efforts against the JRZ, they viewed the government still made up of JRZ members and disregarding the United Opposition as a legitimate political factor in the country as reason enough to renounce the new leadership (Boban 1974: 19). They did not, however, wish to disrupt a potential agreement between Cvetković and Maček, as they had hoped to be included in the proceedings (Boban 1974: 19). The United Opposition had believed that there were two stages to resolving the Croatian question: the first stage would entail the passing of laws that would reduce the restraints of political life, while the second would bring about a thorough social restructuring (Boban 1974: 19). They knew that they were not as politically relevant, with not enough seats in the parliament, but they maintained their positions, more out of principle than out of faith in their realization.

The circumstances of the negotiations between Maček and Prince Paul were significantly altered following Stojadinović's downfall. Maček was aware that Stojadinović's successor was more compliant and that he could now make his demands more confidently. Prince Paul commented sarcastically on Maček's "offensive" approach while in conversation with an American ambassador, complaining about the politician's fickleness (Boban 1974: 30). Prince Paul stepped back from the negotiations mid-March, partially due to Maček's stubbornness, but also due to Cvetković's consolidating his position in



the parliament by voting the state budget. Maček was dissatisfied with Prince Paul's withdrawal; he wished to keep negotiating directly with the highest political authority in the country, as that would mean that the highest authority would in fact ultimately approve the agreement. For this reason, Maček sent Ivan Šubašić to deliver a request for direct negotiations to Prince Paul, who accepted the request. Prince Paul named Cvetković as a plenipotentiary of the Crown; Cvetković was no longer a representative of a party or government, but a representative of the Crown. Prince Paul had therefore given in to Maček's demands, developing conditions for further negotiations.

In addition to his involvement with HSS organizations and their in-state work, Maček was trying to make contact with greater forces through his confidantes. He wanted to discover their plans, the nature of their mutual relationships, and their perception of the current state of Yugoslavia, especially the Croatian question. He contacted London and Paris, but German and Italian views on the Croatian question were arguably of greater significance, considering their immediate vicinity and their growing interest in the state of Yugoslavia. Maček offered to create a "Croatian independent state" that would cooperate with Germany and join the Axis powers (Boban 1965: 106). Germany, however, was reserved on the matter of the Croatian question, as they wished for the status quo in Yugoslavia to remain unchanged, and they preferred not to rouse the Italians, who were famously interested in the Adriatic and Mediterranean territories (Boban 1965: 108). In fact, Germany made promises to Italy to conduct their politics in the Mediterranean in accordance with Italian interests, and that included staying out of Yugoslav politics. Following Germany's reserved response, Maček turned to Italy, once again proposing to create an independent Croatian state that would maintain close relationships with Italy, but only if the Croatian question proved to be insoluble within Yugoslav borders (Boban 1965: 108). Alas, the Italian response was not unlike Germany's, with London and Paris sharing their views. The French and English responses showed that they recognized the difficulties Croats faced, but they chose to support a united Yugoslavia (Boban 1965: 115). This international communication took place before Cvetković-Maček negotiations, as Maček wanted to gauge his position for future negotiations, or how determined he could be in his requests considering the international situation (Boban 1965: 116).



Cvetković-Maček negotiations

Maček and Cvetković first met in Zagreb on April 2nd 1939. The meeting location was carefully selected to emphasize the equality between Zagreb and Belgrade. Negotiations lasted several days, and main points were agreed upon. Cvetković confirmed he was a representative of the Crown, which was one of the conditions for the negotiations to take place. He also expressed his willingness to conduct the negotiations with careful consideration of Maček's viewpoints; hence the agreement was to determine future Croatian territory, its position within Yugoslavia and its authority. The territorial aspect was discussed merely as an exchange of ideas. A new government was to be formed that would carry out the agreement. Maček suggested a conclusion of this first meeting that paved the way for future, detailed negotiations. While negotiations were taking place, several students discovered that the Serbs were using Cvetković to get Croatia to give up Bosnia and Herzegovina and settle for the joining of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia (Horvat 1992: 605). To express their discontent, they published the *Declaration on Bosnia and Herzegovina*, wherein they highlighted Croatian natural and historical right to Bosnia and Herzegovina as part of Croatia. This was supported by an 1878 Croatian National Parliament address requesting a joining of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, as well as by three 1917 parliament addresses repeating the request (Horvat 1992: 605-606). The declaration was censored, and the only magazine that would publish it was *Ustaše*, published in secret at the time (Horvat 1992: 607). The content of the declaration showed a clear disregard of the existence of the Bosnian nation, and a belief that the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina were simply Croatians of a different religion (Horvat 1992: 606). The students were, however, supporters of Pavelić and the *ustashe* movement, evident from the fact that their declaration was only published by pro-*ustasha* magazines, most of them abroad (Horvat 1992: 607). Furthermore, Grga Ereš and Branko Rukavina, who were some of the protagonists of these events, would later serve the Independent State of Croatia.¹ All pro-*ustasha* individuals and organizations eventually turned against the Agreement, calling it Maček's betrayal of Croatia. This shows the complexity of the issue of nationality

1 See more: Jonjić, T. (2011). About the Attempt to Establish a Croatian Committee in Switzerland in 1943: The Diplomatic Reports of Josip Milković of Senj. *Senjski zbornik*, 38 (1), 217-332; Kovačić, D. (2014). The Repressive Measures of the Police Authorities of the Independent State of Croatia towards Members of the Croatian Peasant Party in WWII. *Radovi*, 46(1), 305-323.



within Yugoslavia, as national ideologies frequently clashed, disregarding all other nations they considered to be non-existent. The aforementioned student declaration blatantly negated the existence of the Bosnian nation, claiming a large part of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina much like Serbian intellectuals and leaders denied the existence of Montenegrin and Macedonian nationalities, claiming their territories. It is evident that in multinational Yugoslavia each political party was mostly made up of a single nation, which made them national parties, turning all politics into a clash of different national interests in a country that claimed to have one single, Yugoslav nationality.

The initial Cvetković-Maček negotiations caused a rift between the SDK and the United Opposition. Maček failed to, as had been agreed in Farkušić and as the United Opposition had expected, ask for reforms that would enable a more lax political life. Instead, his primary request was defining Croatia's territory and authority. The United Opposition took this as an affront, believing they were not probably informed about the negotiating process and that Maček acted unfairly (Boban 1974: 39). Maček's avoiding tactic was employed by Prince Paul as well; he feared the Germans and the Italians would not support the United Opposition joining the government, as it famously opposed the foreign politics of Yugoslavia at the time and its leaning towards the Axis powers (Boban 1974: 40). Also, asking for a greater democratization of the political life would not bode well with German and Italian authoritarian regimes surrounding Yugoslavia. Moreover, the Cvetković-Maček Agreement was supposed to hurry things along, and the United Opposition's heterogeneous, indecisive and disjointed character proved a hindrance.

Cvetković and Maček's next meeting was held in Zagreb on April 15th the same year. As the previous meeting had centered on general ideas and methods, this time specific negotiations regarding the future Croatian territory within Yugoslavia took place. Cvetković suggested the joining of the Sava (Savska) Banovina, the Littoral (Primorska) Banovina and the Dubrovnik city and district, adding that border details would be settled during the final restructuring (Boban 1974: 44). Maček refused, dissatisfied with the territorial concessions, and suggested three counteroffers (Boban 1974: 46). The most problematic territories Maček sought to claim were "Turkish Croatia" and Srijem, as these regions had a significant number of Serbs, and the Serbian national ideologies also claimed them. The second meeting once again



yielded no final results, although an agreement was reached that the powers of certain ministries, still unspecified, would be transferred to the future Croatian unit. It was also agreed that a new government would be formed to carry out the Agreement and create an environment for a final restructuring (Boban 1974: 44). While waiting for Cvetković to address the proposals, Maček sought the support and approval from the United Opposition. He asked to negotiate with Cvetković in their name and for them to approve his territorial suggestions (Boban 1974: 45). The United Opposition responded that the Croatian question was being raised above the total restructuring they were advocating, which is why they could not support Maček's proposals. Maček's opportunism created an unbridgeable gap.

Cvetković arrived in Zagreb for the third time on April 22nd, having made a decision regarding Maček's territorial proposals, and they agreed to conduct a plebiscite in the claimed regions. The Sava Banovina, Littoral Banovina and Dubrovnik city and district would immediately be unified pursuant to Article 116 of the constitution. The Banovina of Croatia would take over as executive authority, while foreign politics, military and the supreme council would be a shared domain with the central government. In order to perform a final restructuring, a new government was to be formed to carry out the task. Even though it had seemed as if the agreement would be sanctioned by April 27th, the Committee rejected it, claiming they were still studying the determinants of the agreement. In addition to the plebiscite segment, the Committee had to consider Mehmed Spaho's disagreement, as he was leader of the JMO, a constituent of the ruling JRZ, as well as those parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina with Serbian members opposing the proposed territorial claims (Boban 1974: 49). The military circles also expressed dissatisfaction with the agreement as they deemed it harmful for the country's defense powers. While negotiations were taking place, Hitler's Germany was in the process of occupying Czechoslovakia, and Albania was falling under Italian occupation. For military leaders, the Cvetković-Maček Agreement was potentially a sign of federalization, or disintegration of Yugoslavia, making the country an easy target (Matković 1998: 204). The prince was warned of a possible Serbian revolt in a significant number of counties that were to be annexed to the Croatian unit, as they were not entirely populated by Croats, which would raise the Serbian question in the country (Boban 1974: 50-51).



Negotiations proceeded, albeit through intermediaries, setting the scene for new, direct negotiations in late June of 1939. This meeting was to finalize the matter of territory of the Banovina of Croatia, while the following meeting would concern the transfer of powers. It was in this meeting that Cvetković agreed that the Banovina of Croatia would be an autonomous region. After rejecting the previous agreement, Prince Paul had become aware of international relations during his visits to Rome, Berlin and London and, realizing the looming threat of war, accepted the latest agreement to settle the Croatian question and stabilize the country (Boban 1974: 64). Cvetković and Maček were granted an audience with the prince on August 24th 1939 at Brdo kod Kranja, where the agreement known as Cvetković-Maček Agreement was approved. The agreement was signed on August 26th 1939 (Matković 1998: 205). Because this was a political act not confirmed by a legislative body, Prince Paul had to issue a decree on the Banovina of Croatia pursuant to Article 116 of the Granted Constitution, which requires that the king (in this case, Prince Paul) can act independently of the constitution or the law in those situations where the public interest is harmed. The Croatian question was thus presented as such a pressing issue that not resolving it could jeopardize the entire country of Yugoslavia (Perić 2007: 94). The degree was signed by the regency and all government members, after which Prince Paul dissolved the Committee, terminating all national representatives (Šlabek 1991: 41). The founding of the Banovina of Croatia marked the end of unitarism and centralism, replacing the name of the Triune Kingdom of Croatia, Slavonia and Dalmatia with an ethnic title (Šlabek 1991: 83).

The Banovina of Croatia

The Decree on the Banovina of Croatia determined its territory, powers and structure. The Sava Banovina and the Littoral Banovina were joined with those counties where Croats made up over half of the total population: Dubrovnik, Travnik, Fojnica, Brčko, Gradačac, Dervenda, Šid and Ilok (Perić 2007: 95-96). The decree only mentioned the territory that was agreed on at the time, as the addendum to the Cvetković-Maček Agreement stated that the final decisions would be made during the final restructuring. This addendum implied further territorial and administrative adjustments that would never be realized due to the breakout of the April war (Perić 2007: 95-96). It was the Muslim community who suf-



ferred as a result of territorial changes, as they were not considered a nationality per Agreement, and this posed a long-term question of Muslims within the Banovina of Croatia (Goldstein 2008: 190). The Banovina had autonomous powers over agriculture, commerce, manufacturing, forests, mines, buildings, social politics and national health, physical education, justice system, education and internal affairs. Domains not included in this list fell under central government authorities, although the financial domain was not clearly assigned, while another addendum stated that neither the authorities nor the territory of the Banovina of Croatia cannot be altered without the Banovina's approval (Perić 2007: 96). Legislature powers were executed by the king and the Croatian parliament, and all legislative texts voted in by the parliament required both the ban's and the king's signature. Members of Parliament were elected through a "general, equal and direct secret vote" for 3-year terms, and voting rights were reserved for all men over the age of 24 (Perić 2007: 96). However, no parliament elections or even meetings were held during the life of the Banovina of Croatia. Laws passed in the Committee were enforced in the Banovina of Croatia, and in case of interference between laws of the Banovina and of central legislation, the dispute would be resolved at a special constitutional court (Matković 1998: 207). The ban, named by the king (in this case, Prince Paul), was the supreme administrative authority. The first and the only ban was Ivan Šubašić, on the king's insistence (Perić 2007: 96). There were 11 departments under the ban's authority; chiefs of departments were instituted by the ban and were completely independent (Perić 2007: 96). The judiciary was also independent, and there was no higher instance than the banovina courts.

The Banovina of Croatia was, in an administrative and territorial sense, divided into 25 cities, 99 districts with four branch offices and around 700 municipalities (Regan 2008: 399). Even though there were no elections for the Croatian parliament, the SDK had decided to hold municipal elections to change the composition of the municipal councils, often the backbones of regimes (Matković 1994: 412). The elections were held in 625 rural municipalities; the HNS won the majority in 425 municipalities, and the Independent Democratic Party (hereinafter "SDS") won in 133 municipalities. In total, the SDK won in 564 municipalities (Matković 1999: 413-414).

As for politics and economy, the Banovina of Croatia and the Kingdom and Yugoslavia were under growing German influence. Following the eco-



conomic sanctions on Italy, Germany had become Yugoslavia's biggest trading partner, and this was even more prominent after the Anschluss and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia. In this trading "partnership", the underdeveloped Yugoslavia was the source of raw materials and agricultural products, while the advanced Germany provided manufactured goods. This was a carefully crafted German plan to influence countries' foreign politics through trading relations (Goldstein 2008: 194). Germany was responsible for 40% of Yugoslav import and 50% export, and threatening to end these relations helped influence the politics of the banovina and Yugoslavia (Kolar-Dimitrijević 1990: 172-173). The German influence was evident, especially considering the fact that Jews who had fled to Yugoslavia were banned from employment and from food trade (Kolar-Dimitrijević 1990: 188). They were also prohibited to enroll in colleges and schools (Goldstein 2008: 194). The Nationalist Socialist propaganda was led by *Kulturbund*, the society of the German minority in Yugoslavia. Joining *Kulturbund* required pledging allegiance to a swastika flag and vowing never to marry Hungarian, Jewish or Serbian women (Goldstein 2008: 194-195). The Nazi sentiments became more pronounced following the Anschluss and the Munich Agreement, and slogans such as *Ein Volk, Eine Wille, Ein Weg* ("One people, one will, one way") became commonplace (Goldstein 2008: 195).

Reactions to the founding of the Banovina of Croatia

The Cvetković-Maček Agreement and the founding of the Banovina of Croatia provoked heated reactions from the majority of Serbian politicians and some Croatian politicians as well. Those Serbian parties that had participated in the Farkušić Agreement reacted negatively to the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, stating it went against the Farkušić Agreement since it never considered the opinions of most Slovenes and Serbs (Matković 1998: 209). Furthermore, they viewed Maček's collaboration with the JRZ whom he had previously fought against was a violation of the agreement, and that this collaboration would jeopardize Serbian national interests. Yugoslav interests would also be in danger, as Croatian territorial gains would spur Croatian nationalism, therefore spurring Serbian nationalism, ultimately harming the idea of the Yugoslav country (Matković 1998: 211).

The Democratic Party was the most vocal in criticizing the Agreement. At first, their criticism was moderate: they had accepted the



Agreement, expressing at the same time their dissatisfaction with the Croatian question being separated from the total state restructuring and the creation of other such questions in other parts of the country (Boban 1965: 220). They stressed the importance of parliament elections that would lead to the democratization of the political life by creating a “true national representation” (Boban 1965: 220). However, their stance changed entirely, and the main reason was the possibility of the Banovina of Croatia spreading into the areas they considered Serbian. These concerns were valid, as the Agreement did mention that the final territory of the Banovina of Croatia was yet to be determined. Now that Serbian national interests were doubly jeopardized, the democrats – still intent on new elections – made it their priority to establish a special Serbian unit within Yugoslavia. They accused Cvetković and his party of no longer representing the Serbian people and causing the position of Serbia within Yugoslavia to become precarious (Boban 1965: 222). Their brochure *Democrats on the state of the country* was a fierce attack on the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, containing a request for the creation of a special Serbian unit, and a call for new parliament elections (Matković 1998: 211). The democrats became the most active in spreading the *Serbs United* (“Srbi na okup”) movement, an anti-banovina movement that demanded an establishing of a special Serbian unit within Yugoslavia, built on extremist foundations (Regan 2007: 218). However, Ivan Ribar and some other members of the Democratic Party stood against the extremist ideas, deeming them hegemonic (Matković 1998: 211).

Stojadinović was also against the Agreement. After he had been dismissed, he managed to bring together those members of the JRZ who opposed Cvetković’s politics and his role as party leader. Stojadinović stressed how the Agreement went against the 1921 and 1931 constitutions, and how the founding of the Banovina of Croatia had created a state within a state, jeopardizing Serbian interests, which is why all Serbs should be united into a single political unit to protect these interests (Matković 1998: 213). He was joined by around 80 parliament delegates and 20 senators who formed the Serbian Radical Party in 1940, but the party was never formally approved (Boban 1965: 247). Their program stated that the Agreement had been a “performance of (...) a coup d’etat”, that the idea of unity – only formally supported – had been abandoned, that they didn’t agree with the borders of the Banovina of Croatia, and that all Serbs should be united (Boban 1965: 247). Even



though the radicals gathered around Stojadinović claimed to stand for Yugoslavism, they acted as an extremist Serbian national party. They believed Yugoslavism was ideal for “future, better times”, while presently the focus should remain on protecting Serbian interests jeopardized by the Agreement and on uniting all Serbian regions and areas, as they were supposedly the core of Yugoslavism and the future source of a renewed Yugoslav unity (Boban 1965: 248). However, their Yugoslavism relied on centralism and unitarism, morphing into Serbian extremism when state equality and other Yugoslav nations were concerned (Boban 1965: 248). Stojadinović’s actions hindering the attempts of the government and the court to consolidate the country made him a real threat, as did his leaning towards Germany and Italy. He was therefore confined, and in 1941 extradited to the English (Boban 1965: 249).

The Communist Party of Yugoslavia (hereinafter “KPJ”) also opposed the Agreement. This came as no surprise, as the KPJ had been against Cvetković’s government on account of his “anti-democratic and reactionary methods” (Boban 1965: 277). They believed that the Agreement being limited only to the Croatian question and not including other nations was its main flaw, and that the “real” Croatian question – the question of “the peasant, the land, and of complete national democracy” – remained unanswered (Boban 1965: 277). They did, however, conclude that the Agreement could serve as a foundation for a more thorough democratization of the entire system, and that the HSS, whom they supported, could lead the process. But, seeing how the events following the Agreement led to even more reactionary politics of both Serbian and Croatian parties, they took a more assertive approach. They condemned the entire political system, declared a “war” on Croatian and Serbian civil parties, and described the Agreement as a protection of the Croatian and Serbian bourgeoisie and their interests from “possible revolutionary upheavals”, accusing it of “deceiving the working masses and the oppressed people” (Boban 1965: 278).

The most vocal opponents of the Agreement were the members of the Serbian culture club, the leading body of the *Serbs United* movement. The club wanted to gather all Serbs who were unhappy with the post-Agreement status quo and to unite the divided Serbian parties to confront the common enemy, the Agreement. They claimed the Agreement jeopardized Serbian national interests and should therefore be discarded and everything should go back to how it was prior to the Agreement; if that was not



possible, a fight to preserve Serbia and Serbdom would be necessary (Boban 1965: 250). They demanded of the Banovina to recognize the political autonomy of Serbs in 19 districts or to allow them to join other banovinas that would be part of a Serbian unit (Regan 2008: 405). For this purpose, a newsletter titled *The Serbian Voice* ("Srpski glas") was started and distributed in Belgrade, aided by the Serbian Orthodox Church (Regan 2008: 414). Slobodan Jovanović was president of the club, and one of his substitutes Dragiša Vasić would later become one of the lead ideologists of the *chetnik* movement and a close associate of Dražo Mihajlović (Regan 2008: 401). Additionally, in 1939 the dissatisfied Serbs founded *Krajina – the society for cultural and economic rise of the people* ("Krajina – udruženje za kulturno i privredno podizanje naroda") (Goldstein 2008: 196). The aim of the society was to establish a new administrative and territorial unit called Krajina ("frontier") made up of 25 districts of the Vrbaska, Sava and Littoral Banovina with a Serbian majority. The society were mostly members of various banned *chetnik* organizations (Goldstein 2008: 196).

Even though the Serbian opposition was significant, it is important to note that the Agreement never would have happened without the aid of *prečanski Srbi* ("Serbs outside of Serbia"). They were mostly SDS members, and so the party represented the majority of Serbs in the Banovina of Croatia. As the founder and president of the party Svetozar Pribičević had ultimately accepted federalism and acknowledged the Croatian national identity, it came as no surprise that they would support the Agreement. Moreover, the SDS had been part of a stable coalition with the HSS since 1927, becoming the only party to consistently defend the Croatian national identity and the right to express it, although solely within Yugoslavia (Goldstein 1998: 191). Not long after the Agreement was concluded, they published in their newsletter that "the Serbs in Croatia have it better than they ever did under the dictatorship" (Ponoš 2020: 319). Another noteworthy fact is that the SDS entered the new government together with the HSS, and that their members began taking over the positions in the Banovina previously occupied by members of the JRZ. This made the SDS the most influential political factor among Serbs in the Banovina, which makes their support of the Agreement understandable (Ponoš 2020: 319).

JMO also had some complaints. The relations between Spaho and Cvetković were at first stable, worsening when Cvetković gave concessions to Maček in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Boban 1965: 258). Spaho was extremely against Maček's demands in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Maček



was trying to diminish the JMO's and Spaho's influence during the conclusion of the Agreement. Spaho's sudden death in June of 1939 took the edge off JMO against Maček's demands in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as the party was rife with internal conflicts regarding its successor. Spaho was ultimately succeeded by Džafer Kulenović, who did not take Cvetković's concessions as seriously. He accepted the borders of the Banovina of Croatia, but he emphasized their temporary nature that was stated in the Agreement. Kulenović demanded that Bosnia and Herzegovina, like Croatia, Serbia and Slovenia, be established as a separate unit within Yugoslavia, joined by those regions that were added to the Banovina of Croatia because their Muslim population's wish for a separate unit was never considered (Boban 1965: 259). However, due to very good relations that had been established between Cvetković and Maček, the former did not have to appease Kulenović as much. On the contrary, the JMO was losing its political significance amid the bonding of the HSK and the JRZ, resulting in Kulenović taking a colder approach to Cvetković and even jeopardizing the collaborative relationship between the JMO and the JRZ (Boban 1965: 260).

Among those disagreeing with the Agreement were right-wing HSS politicians gathered around Janko Tortić. They believed Croatia had been short-changed, and that Maček had been too lenient with the Serbian side (Šlabek 1991: 27). This section of the HSS, dissatisfied with Croatia's gains, would later join the *ustasha* movement in the Independent State of Croatia. The *ustashe* led by Mile Budak and the press were the sources of the majority of objections, though. They emphasized that Maček failed to unite all Croatian lands with the Agreement, betraying thus the idea of an independent Croatian state; they called him a "sell-out to the Serbs" and accused him of "capitulating" to Serbian interests (Ramet 2011: 151). In their press, the *ustashe* completely rejected the Agreement and wrote pejoratively about current politicians: Šubašić was criticized for being a volunteer in Thessaloniki, Maček and Cvetković were described in derogatory terms, etc. On the topic of the Agreement, the *ustasha* magazine *Independence* ("Nezavisnost") stated that Maček "instead of establishing and acknowledging Croatian sovereignty, realized a miniature administrative autonomy, having no real or formal guarantee that this autonomy would be recognized" (Ramet 2011: 151). Even though there were complaints from the Croatian side, they were limited to radical organizations such as *ustashe*, as most Croatians welcomed the founding of the Banovina of Croatia, considering it a reaffirmation of Croatian national uniqueness manifested



in an administrative and territorial unit within Yugoslavia. The wish to unite Dalmatia and the Banovina of Croatia would also be granted, as well as the wishes that had been perpetuated throughout 19th and 20th century Croatian politics, now granted by way of joining the Sava Banovina and the Littoral Banovina into a separate unit under autonomous Croatian administration.

Conclusion

All nations besides the Serbs within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia had been perpetually neglected in terms of political representation and freedoms, and their national identities trampled, as was manifested through state centralism and Yugoslav unitarism or integrationism. One nation's hegemony – in this case Serbian – in a multinational country would ultimately lead to an unstable political system, spreading to other spheres of state life. The hegemonic system survived in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes – later Yugoslavia – due to international relations that seemed as if the Axis powers, meaning the Kingdom of Serbia as well, would win the First World War. However, Yugoslavia was soon surrounded by hostile countries as international dynamics shifted, and Mussolini and Hitler rose to power, their supporters in countries like Hungary becoming more influential. At that point in time, the governing bodies had been neglecting the issues of nationality within the country, which contributed to the formation of various organizations offering quick, radical solutions to national issues; organizations such as the *ustashe* and *chetniks* were growing in popularity. The Cvetković-Maček Agreement was an attempt at solving this issue – the matter of the “Croatian question” – within a wider national context. Resolving this issue would soothe the growing dissatisfaction that could be used against the Kingdom of Yugoslavia amid tense international relations, as was evident from Maček's communication with Berlin and Rome, wherein he suggested the formation of an independent Croatian state. Maček's conversation with the Czech diplomat in 1937 thus seems like a bad omen. Maček told the diplomat that “peasants are coming up (...) and asking when we will give them weapons to take Belgrade” (Goldstein 2008: 172) or, in other words, that in the case of war, the battle would be against the survival of Yugoslavia (Bilandžić 1999: 103).

The contents of the Agreement brought to light the failed national attempt by the creators of the first Yugoslavia, who believed in the idea that



South Slavic nations are one nation with three different tribes and names. They believed in this idea of Yugoslavism and modeled their actions from it. According to them, the difference between the tribes were historically conditioned and a result of different historical circumstances; in short, that they are “artificial” and can be resolved or erased through a life together in one country. They did not recognize the existence of different South Slavic nations. Their ideas did not yield desired results, and it was evident that a Yugoslav nation could not be created. In this context, the Agreement represented a clear break with the idea of Yugoslavia, acknowledging the Croatian national identity and awarding them a great deal of autonomy within the country. Not only did the Agreement recognize Croatian autonomy and national identity – so did the government and the court, in agreement with Croatian politicians.

Despite this, the Agreement was criticized by Croatian and Serbian organizations and parties. The majority of the criticism was directed at territorial decisions and the agreed autonomies of the Banovina of Croatia. While Croatian critics considered Croatia was short-changed in the Agreement, Serbian critics argued that Croatia was awarded too much autonomy and territory. Moreover, nobody considered the Agreement a finished deal – even the Agreement itself emphasizes its temporariness. Cvetković expected to create a Serbian unit not unlike the Banovina of Croatia, and Maček hoped for territorial expansion and a rise in autonomies compared to Belgrade. Therefore, both sides expected alterations to the Agreement that would be detrimental to the other side, and it was equally unlikely that either side would willingly abandon their hopes. These uncertainties stemming from the Agreement added to the growing tensions between Croatian and Serbian politicians and intellectuals. Instead of creating a suitable atmosphere for a further resolution of the question of nationality, the Agreement had paradoxically created an even worse environment wherein it became the target of various attacks due to its partiality, vagueness and temporariness. It is, however, important to note that, despite all its flaws, the Agreement would not have happened without Serbs outside of Serbia (“prečanski Srbi”) and their support of the HSS. The *prečanski* Serbs were mostly members of the SDS, a Serbian party that was a long-time coalition partner of the HSS. This coalition was formed as a result of reaching a Croatian-Serbian political consensus – an important factor in the Agreement that is easily identifiable if one considers the fact that the only Serbian party that defended the Agreement decidedly had been the



SDS. Therefore, the Agreement and its break with Yugoslavism marked a new possible direction of state politics, serving as a potential blueprint for future agreements with other nations on the way towards the federalization of Yugoslavia (as would be the case with the other Yugoslavia, built on the ruins of WWII), or at least a blueprint for those solutions that would guarantee more political and cultural autonomy to the nations of monarchist Yugoslavia. It is crucial to keep in mind, though, that the existence of Montenegrin, Macedonian and Bosnian nations was not recognized, so any agreements resembling the Cvetković-Maček Agreement would still be limited to Slovenian and Serbian nations.

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