

The Challenges of Writing a Communist Official's Biography: A Review of the Latest Biography of Branko Mikulić¹

Dženita Sarač-Rujanac, Branko Mikulić: politička biografija 1965–1989., Sarajevo: Institut za historiju Univerziteta, 2020, 557 pp.

Biography is undoubtedly an exceptionally popular but equally difficult genre within historiographical production, and it is doubly true of political biography. While making a considerable effort to capture the chosen personality's life, the researcher is confronted from the outset with the challenge of how to place a complex set of individual and even private facts in a broader social and historical context to achieve a reliable yet vivid portrayal of "the man and his times". Any attempted erudite biography logically entails methodical and methodological pitfalls that directly reflect not only the nature of the relevant source base but also the current level of scholarly treatment of the whole range of issues that directly affect the life of the chosen individual. Therefore, it is not surprising that the decision to write a political biography in the field of contemporary history brings many more or less classic risks, including the partial or even complete unavailability of some primary sources or the lack of distance from the described person's legacy, which for many remains in living memory, whether in a positive or negative sense. However, even the most modest attempt to outline the political biography of a prominent figure, such as Branko Mikulić, is pioneering and potentially impactful, given the scant results of to-date research.

Many of the aforementioned strengths and pitfalls of the biographical genre heavily affected also the latest political biography of Branko Mikulić, a leading politician and communist official who served in several key positions of power in Bosnia and Herzegovina and socialist Yugoslavia in the second half of the 20th century. The author, Dženita Sarač-Rujanac, currently working at the Institute for History at the University of Sarajevo, has chosen Mikulić's political career as her dissertation topic, which may be regarded as an ambitious and highly challenging task. The book under review is a published and expanded version of the thesis, successfully defended in 2016 at the Faculty of Philosophy in Sarajevo. This fact alone is reflected in the overall character of the reviewed title and raises only a seemingly superficial question: do the high demands (quite rightly) placed on biography as one of the most attractive and, at the same time, most demanding historical forms allow it to become the subject of such a time-limited and, from a practical point of view, considerably limited research?

Before we proceed to individual comments and remarks, it is necessary to point out that the author approached the biography of Branko Mikulić with an earnest and careful approach and attempted to capture as many problems related to the work of this communist leader as possible. In the end, the book's length exceeded five hundred pages, allowing the author to deal with some intriguing and half-forgotten details from when Mikulić

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was one of the highest-ranking officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia. It charts his career from the mid-1960s until the late 1980s when he was forced to resign as federal prime minister under escalated circumstances. Spanning nearly a quarter of a century of active involvement in the highest levels of Bosnian and Yugoslav politics, it brings several complex challenges. Along with Mikulić's rise to power and his moves up the party and state ladder, the author had to track the often opaque and difficult-to-identify changes in Yugoslav politics and society over two and a half decades. However, this seemingly logical and important level of interpretation, which should be part of any scholarly biography not limited to simple biographical data or a personal story without a broader context, proved to be a stumbling block when confronted with the dynamically changing conditions in Tito's and post-Tito Yugoslavia. The author encountered it repeatedly in the book, although she sometimes tried to compensate for it with genuinely revealing factual information mainly based on archival research.

D. Sarač-Rujanac seems to know how the political biography of a man belonging to Tito's favourites could be inscrutable. She based her research primarily on documents from Mikulić's personal fond located in the Archive of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo. The voluminous documentation, divided into 77 boxes, contains records of Mikulić's speeches, working notes and illustrative transcripts of stenographic records of his discussion contributions made at republican or federal political board meetings. The author thus worked with a relevant source base gathered within a single archival unit. This allowed her to get acquainted with Mikulić's opinions on various issues and capture his political rhetoric, preferred topics, etc. Looking at such an extensive personal fond, a researcher may hastily conclude that one has enough detailed and temporally dispersed data to compile as comprehensive profile of a politician of Mikulić's stature as possible. However, D. Sarač-Rujanac endeavours not to overestimate this obvious advantage and even to contradict it in the thesis introduction (it should be added that this approach is correct). She eruditely points out the limited testimonial value of individual documents, which she said could hardly reflect the "real atmosphere" of the ruling establishment meetings (p. 22). The author also rightly warns against the fragmentary nature of the obtained data, which lacks completely the proper context (p. 23), requiring a much more challenging attempt on the part of the historian to reconstruct and understand the transformations that the described person underwent (p. 12). However, the author follows these highly relevant remarks, properly reflecting the primary source and the interpretative limits of the topic only very loosely, or even not at all, in the rest of her text. Although the well-formulated and comprehensible comments from the publication's introduction certainly do not indulge in mindless repetition of theoretical and methodological rules, they appear to be only an adornment of the book rather than a guide to the author's research.

Unfortunately, the author decided to divide Mikulić's biography into two parts. While the first deals with the milestones of his political rise, the second focuses on Mikulić's attitudes towards selected political issues, phenomena and causes and his specific role in them. Thus, the first section basically describes how Mikulić rose in the power hierarchy of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia, respectively. The author focuses on his successively held positions and membership in crucial party and state committees. However, little is learned, for example, about the factors affecting Mikulić's career or details of his personal life. Already in the introduction of the publication, D. Sarač-Rujanac declined the possible interpretation based on private or even scandalous facts from Mikulić's life

(p. 12) and declared her intention to write his *political* biography; nevertheless, the reader finds an absence of some relevant data surprising. Mikulić's family background is presented only in a brief outline. In this context, the fate of Mikulić's father (Jura) appears to be interesting, even decisive in many respects. He was involved in the newly established Communist Party of Yugoslavia. After its ban in 1920, he joined the Croatian Peasant Party, a political entity advocating the affirmation of Croatian national interests and the federalisation of the Yugoslav kingdom. During World War II, Jura Mikulić joined Tito's forces not only as a regular soldier but as a delegate in the partisan parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ZAVNOBiH) and Yugoslavia (AVNOJ). Although the author subsequently discusses how his son Branko gained his first experience of political activity (as a local party functionary in Bugojno), we learn nothing about the education he received and the specific development of his professional maturation – except a passing reference of him gaining an economic education (p. 50).

D. Sarač-Rujanac considers 1965 a critical milestone in Mikulić's career, as that's when he became the secretary of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SKBiH). Only a year later, he took over as the Republic's Prime Minister. This rise took place in the context of a generational change when former leaders of the partisan resistance stepped down from key positions of power in Bosnia and Herzegovina (notably Đuro Pucar-Stari, who left the SKBiH leadership in March 1965 after more than two decades). Despite that, the author focuses mainly on Mikulić's stands and comments on the matter at hand rather than providing a broader analysis of the circumstances surrounding these personnel changes. At this time, Bosnia and Herzegovina was undergoing a process of authentic affirmation as a distinct federal unit of the Yugoslav federation. Although it had been *nominally* so since World War II, it was only in the second half of the 1960s that its specific identity began to deepen alongside decentralisation and other reforms. These trends led both to the empowerment of the republican authorities and institutions and the recognition of Muslims as a separate national category. The Bosnian rising leaders, including B. Mikulić, Hamdija Pozderac and Džemal Bijedić, was able to take advantage of these changes. They benefited from the significantly strengthened prerogative of the republican bodies as well as from their ability to increase their own formal and informal influence actively. Despite their continued, not merely tactical, loyalty to the Yugoslav leader J. B. Tito, the Bosnian leadership became much more confident in clashes with the Belgrade centre, i.e. mainly with the federal government and other institutions. Logically, these facts must be reflected in Mikulić's worldview, although D. Sarač-Rujanac never mentions it in detail. However, the Bosnian ruling establishment also struggled with many difficulties related to the modernisation of Bosnian society, the development of the backward economy and infrastructure, and the struggle against the persistent traditionalism and conservatism typical of rural areas. The biography mainly delves into Bosnia and Herzegovina's socio-economic development in the respective passages but fails to establish clear connections to Mikulić's political biography. Thus, the reader is introduced to the issues Mikulić addressed as part of his agenda; nevertheless, it is no longer clear how relevant they are and, more importantly, how and to what extent they directly influenced Mikulić's later career.

In this descriptive, sometimes even shallow way, D. Sarač-Rujanac follows Mikulić's career almost throughout the book's first half. In this part, it is more or less indifferent whether we follow Mikulić in the role of the head of the SKBiH (1969 – 1978), a member

of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (SKJ, 1978 – 1982), briefly served as the President of the Presidency of Socialist Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1982 – 1983), or sat on the Presidency of the SFRY (1984 – 1986). The author often refers to Mikulić as “occupied with/assumed/commenting on” issues discussed by the relevant party or state committees, without providing a detailed analysis of his opinions’ relevance or (in)significance. It seems that D. Sarač-Rujanac slavishly adapted her interpretation to the form of her primary source, i.e. Mikulić’s personal fond, which heavily influenced the structure and content of the book’s first half. On the one hand, this allowed her to capture his views (or rather glosses) on many topics. Still, this approach limits the interaction with other contemporary actors and the explanation of the nature and relevance of the issues described, making the text increasingly monotonous and somewhat one-sided. Although the author attempts to compare and supplement the data obtained from Mikulić’s personal fund with documents stored in the Yugoslav Archives in Belgrade, i.e. mainly with the records of the meetings of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the SKJ and the Presidium of the SFRY, it only slightly enriches, explains, or contextualises the interpretation. Given the shortcomings mentioned above, the references to these funds appear purposeful or at least partial.

It may seem like the descriptive parts of the book directly reflect the absence of any significant or interesting twists in Mikulić’s political career. However, the opposite is true, although archival research offers very limited insight into its less apparent aspects. D. Sarač-Rujanac, for example, records the significant moment Mikulić became the first chairman of the SKJ Central Committee in October 1978, effectively representing Tito (though only on a protocol basis) at meetings of this crucial body (pp. 88-91). However, she does not mention or ask why this decision was made or to what extent it reflected that Mikulić was one of Tito’s apparent favourites. Yet, on the eve of Tito’s departure, this fact could have played a key role in providing Mikulić with promising or at least stable prospects for the next *post-Tito* period. As already mentioned, it cannot be expected that the author can clarify the contexts based on the available sources. Nevertheless, she could at least mention such essential aspects of Mikulić’s biography and problematise them a bit.

At the end of the book’s first part, the author focuses on the period 1986 – 1989, during which Mikulić served as the head of the federal government. This chapter differs from the previous text for several reasons. D. Sarač-Rujanac connects the biographical line with the historical context more naturally. Although the author does not explicitly comment on this or state it explicitly, it seems two facts play a significant role. First, the Yugoslav crisis deepened in the last third of the 1980s to such an extent that many (mainly economic) issues resonated in the public space, allowing for much greater openness and a dynamic societal debate. Secondly, Mikulić, as the Federal prime minister (officially President of the Federal Executive Council), headed for the first time in his career a body in which the principle of collective leadership was not rigidly applied. The Yugoslav political discourse referred to this principle as “collective work methods” to distinguish it from the more common term “collective leadership” associated with the Soviet system and its Eastern European equivalents. Although the principle had been formally implemented since the second half of the 1960s, it could only be put into actual everyday practice after Tito’s death in 1980. The departure of the undisputed and, most importantly, the only leader of socialist Yugoslavia started a nearly decade-long period in which “collective work” and the associated annual rotation of party and state leaders became one of the fundamental

pillars of the political system. However, this practice did not affect the Federal Government, as it was applied differently there. For the person in charge of forming the Federal Government, a four-year term was automatically assumed, even with the possibility of an extension. Moreover, the Prime Minister of the Federal government was indeed the critical figure who managed the cabinet's running and essentially personified its policies, as well as its weaknesses, which proved crucial in Mikulić's case.

At the very end of his active political career, Mikulić was one of the central and, above all, stable figures of Yugoslav politics. Although it brought some apparent advantages, it also caused severe challenges or risks as the Federal Government (and its president in particular) was responsible for a closely watched yet highly complicated and dismal economic agenda. The Yugoslav economy became mired in serious problems in the final period of the Tito era. By the end of the 1980s, it had reached such a deep crisis that it could no longer be resolved without more radical reform interventions. In the respective passages, D. Sarač-Rujanac details how the Mikulić cabinet responded to this alarming state of affairs. However, his proposed reform package assumed that the coherence of Yugoslavia as a single economic space would be strengthened. This was repeatedly protested by representatives of Slovenia and Croatia, most often during sessions of the federal parliament, turning them into a marathon of protracted, stubborn and increasingly less constructive meetings. One of Slovenian leading communists, Franc Popit, even openly described Mikulić as a counter-revolutionary because he allegedly sought to restore a bureaucratic centralism that was entirely at odds with the spirit of socialist self-government. Moreover, such skirmishes and disputes between communist leaders, no longer concealed from the public, were closely watched by the media, which regularly and often uncompromisingly criticised Mikulić. They even raised undisguised doubts about whether the reports of Mikulić's health issues were not instead a cover-up manoeuvre or an excuse for a politician who was, due to harsh criticism of the government, almost hopelessly cornered. This well illustrates the media's shift in the second half of the 1980s.

The chapter on Mikulić's premiership is one of the more engaging and comprehensive parts of Sarač-Rujanac's book. Unlike in the previous passages, the author can focus on Mikulić as one of the leading figures of Yugoslav politics, which basically allows her to unify the biographical line with the description of the then problems. She could also rely much more heavily on the contemporary press, which commented on almost every Mikulić's move. However, it should be noted that the media paid such extraordinary attention to Mikulić not only due to criticism of his governmental policy. It also reflected the enormous interest in economic reform, as well as the high expectations associated with it. Unfortunately, the author does not analyse this level much, although it resonated with diverse opinions and ideas of experts on the future of the model of self-managed socialism. Moreover, given the twists and turns of Mikulić's political career, his premiership also offers a significant question, much as challenging to grasp regarding research.

Up until the mid-1980s, Mikulić, whether as a high official in Bosnia and Herzegovina or as its representative in one of the federal or party bodies, could profile himself as a politician who cared mainly about the interests of his republic despite his obvious pro-Yugoslav orientation. Although there was no sign of particularism or even latent nationalism in Mikulić's case (as in the case of many of his colleagues), he logically considered Bosnia and Herzegovina as his political base.

As already mentioned, he also experienced repeated disputes and misunderstandings with the “Belgrade centre”, most often the federal government, when he was building up his career from the second half of the 1960s onwards. However, Mikulić’s position changed radically in May 1986 when he took over the post of federal prime minister. Suddenly, he came under fire, as his attempts to consolidate the Yugoslav system were allegedly effectively trying to curtail the economic prerogatives of the republic’s elites and, in effect, reverse the decentralising process, ongoing since the 1960s. On the other hand, Mikulić pointed out that the representatives of the republics (especially Slovenia and Croatia) were unconstructively sabotaging any attempts at economic reform, which they allegedly considered not as an effective way out of the crisis, but as a threat to their powers and influence over national politics. It would certainly be worth considering how Mikulić dealt with this - to some extent paradoxical - situation and whether he did not reflect it, at least implicitly. The two and a half years he served as the prime minister must have affected both Mikulić’s political practice and worldview, only to be underscored by the inglorious and humiliating departure from the government at the end of December 1988, which happened under the pressure of criticism and repeated failures in the pursuit of the government’s ideas.

D. Sarač-Rujanac conceived the book’s second based on thematic areas in which she examined Mikulić’s attitude to selected problems of Bosnian and Yugoslav society. She often returns to the facts mentioned before, which she could not avoid due to the chosen structure of the book. The text thus expands to include a detailed but often equally descriptive account of Mikulić’s activities and views on the Muslim nation’s affirmation, the Croatian Spring that threatened ethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the early 1970s, the Kosovo crisis, or the famous Sarajevo Olympics of 1984, which is considered one of the prestigious highlights of Mikulić’s career. If we compare this section as a whole with the book’s first part, which takes the reader through a list of sometimes almost official phrases, we must ask whether the division of Mikulić’s biography into two parts – chronological and thematic – has any substantial justification. The second part offers many truly revealing findings about Bosnian and Yugoslav realities, especially for the 1980s. Although some of them (e.g. the analysis of the Kosovo crisis) are not closely or significantly related to Mikulić’s life story as such, they still contribute to the exploration of the worldview of the Yugoslav communist elite in the late socialism. Logically, Mikulić was a leading and influential figure on the political scene in the post-Tito period. Thus, his contemporaries did not perceive him as a colourless apparatchik, i.e. one of the many members of an amorphous collective leadership. The author illustrates this perception with the case of Vojislav Šešelj, the analysis of which the readers will appreciate. In 1984, Šešelj, a lecturer at Sarajevo University, accused Mikulić and other Bosnian officials of deliberately and disproportionately promoting the development of Muslim national consciousness to the detriment of the Serb ethnic group and other nations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also thanks to this case, which ultimately ended in Šešelj’s expulsion from the party and an eight-year prison sentence, that the author finally succeeded in portraying Mikulić as an active and prominent actor of the time.

The passages describing how Mikulić was involved in deposing a group of meritorious party men led by Avda Hume give a similar impression. In the early 1970s, these members of the partisan generation were accused of opposing the party policy because of their critical views. The case happened during the “crisis period” of Tito’s Yugoslavia when purges of

leading positions in Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia and Macedonia occurred between 1971 and 1973 under the slogan of fighting the counter-revolution. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the showdown did not involve the top of power but a circle of respected party veterans. Mikulić and the rest of the Bosnian leadership advocated a sharp break with these leaders of the national liberation movement and long-standing officials. D. Sarač-Rujanac successfully reveals the forms of Mikulić's boundless loyalty to Tito and, above all, to the "orthodox" political course, which excluded any discussion of the socialist regime's fundamental axioms. Humo criticised, among others, the nationality policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina that did not allow the free formation of institutions on a national basis, became thus the target of ruthless public criticism and was forced to retreat into seclusion. In these cases, Mikulić did not - like his associates - show any sentiment, although he did not publicly deny Humo his past credit.

Mikulić's political biography by D. Sarač-Rujanac is undoubtedly a valuable and highly detailed contribution to the history of post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina and socialist Yugoslavia. Especially the second part of the book presents a dense and often truly revealing account mapping Mikulić's career on the background of crucial points in Bosnian and Yugoslav politics. The fact that the text repeatedly becomes more of a description than a deeper and more thoughtful analysis of the selected issues can be ascribed to several reasons: the still insufficient level of scientific elaboration of the subject, the difficulty of the chosen topic, and the high demands placed on the biographical genre. After reading more than five hundred pages, the reader will get a highly detailed overview of how Mikulić commented on various issues - from the socio-economic development of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the complex reform of the Yugoslav economy. However, the reader no longer learns to what extent the twists and turns of Mikulić's political career reflected the qualitative changes in Bosnian and Yugoslav politics. Thus, Tito's erstwhile favourite remains a man who rose to the very top of the power hierarchy. However, it is not clear whether this was a unique story of an active and capable individual skilfully exploiting the circumstances and conditions of the time to strengthen his position or an example of a more or less accidental and surprisingly long journey of one apparatchik through the political arena of the time.

Boris Mosković

Historiografsko djelo o životu jedne od najslavnijih sportašica

Stejarel Olaru, Nadia Comăneci i Securitate: priča o sportu, tajnoj službi i bijegu u slobodu (preveli s rumunjskog Ana Brnardić Oproiu i Adrian Oproiu), Zagreb: Naklada Ljevak, 2024, 341 str.

Iako se u hrvatskoj historiografiji razmjerno malo govori o povijesti Rumunjske, onima koji se bave poviješću sporta dobro je poznato ime Nadije Comăneci. „Božica iz Montreala“, prozvana „sportašicom 20. stoljeća“ i uvrštena među najslavnijih sto žena prošlog

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