

## What Kind of Yugoslavia? An Analysis of the 1920 and 1923 Elections

Adam Boltik

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Yugoslavia began as a dream among elites in the mid-1800s, who sought to unite all Slavic peoples under one rule, one language, and one culture.<sup>1</sup> The first state that attempted to realize this dream, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, rose out of the ashes of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War in 1918. The new state was an amalgamation of several different nationalities of the Balkan Peninsula, each with a different language, culture, and history, but elites in the region were determined to build a unified state, and with it a unified national identity: the “Yugoslav,” or South Slav. The elections of 1920 were the first step in the creation of a constitution that was to guide this new state, but the results of the election only served to highlight the difficulties of creating a single Yugoslav nation-state—difficulties that ultimately led to violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The same election results can also be used to understand why the region is still unstable today, even though they occurred more than nine decades ago. It is this inability to forge a new unified national identity that requires NATO troops to occupy the region today; a failure that was apparent as early as 1920.

It was the Corfu Declaration of 1917 that provided for the new Yugoslavia’s first elections. As the declaration stipulated, Yugoslavia was to be a

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<sup>1</sup> Prpa-Jovanović, Branka. “The Making of Yugoslavia: 1830-1945” *Burn This House: The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1997. p. 44

parliamentary monarchy, with the ruling family of Serbia taking control, but it was also to give equal preference to all nationalities, religions, and languages. Serb leaders had been looking to form a “Greater Serbia,” but they eventually compromised with Croat and Slovene leaders on the idea of a united South Slav state. The powers behind the Versailles Treaty considered Yugoslavia a product of national “self-determination,” an idea they much admired, and they recognized the state, and Prince Aleksandr (son of the former King of Serbia), as its ruler.

There were three main groups of parties participating in the election of 1920 that would put together an assembly that would draft the country’s first constitution: parties that supported full unification of the nations and states in the region, those that were in favor of a looser federalist state (where the constituent nations of the new Kingdom were granted semi-autonomy), and parties that outright opposed the idea of a unified Yugoslavia. Election results show that most residents of the region did not feel as unified as some of their political leaders would have hoped, and indeed, almost all parties which participated stressed their own national agendas. No party received a majority of the vote, nor did any group of parties (i.e. the unification parties, the autonomous parties, etc.).<sup>2</sup> In fact, the division between these parties was near equal vote-wise, a result which demonstrated the wide differences in support for a unified Yugoslav state. There was no simple majority that could agree on the best way to unite the people of the region into a single state.

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<sup>2</sup> Banac, Ivo. *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984. p. 387-389

There were two main parties that supported complete and total unification of the new nations and states in the region: the Serbian Radical Party, which desired to build a “Greater Serbia,” by ensuring Serb domination of the other tribes of the Balkans, and the Democratic Party, which supported the Corfu Declaration in that the Democrats wanted to see that all ethnicities in the new state were treated equally. Although their agendas were different, their eventual goal was the same. As a result, the Democratic Party was seen as being another arm of the Serb Radical Party, which cost them in the elections.

Parties which looked for autonomy in a federal Yugoslav state were not nearly as popular as either the pro-unification or anti-unification groups. The strongest party in this group was the Yugoslav Muslim Organization, which received all of its votes from the nationally diverse region of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This party pushed the platform of a unified Yugoslav state, albeit a loose federation of states with large national autonomy. Bosnia-Herzegovina was split three ways between the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, population-wise, and while there were parties representing both the Croats and the Serbs, initially the Muslims under the Austro-Hungarian Empire had no party of their own. The Yugoslav Muslim Organization, then, was founded solely for the Muslims, and promoted the idea that all Muslims needed to remain united to defend their rights. Because of this, all of the support for the Yugoslav Muslim Organization came from Bosnia-Herzegovina, where there was a larger concentration of Muslims than anywhere else in the country.

Leaders of parties that rejected the Corfu Declaration and the creation of the new Kingdom entirely played on ideas of national identity and national self-

determination, as they felt that any attempts to unify the people of the region should be stopped. Several of the larger Croatian parties, including the Party of the Right, demanded Croat autonomy within a federated state. Party leaders argued the “Croatian state right” which was recognized by Hungarians and other foreign rulers in 1102, when the Croatian kingdoms were joined together under the rule of Hungary.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the Croatian People’s Peasant Party was adamantly opposed to the idea of a unified Yugoslavia. Its outspoken leader, Stjepan Radić, was dismissive of parties who favored such an approach:

Maybe you will win the Slovenes, I do not know. Maybe you will also win the Serbs. But I am certain you will never win the Croats...because the whole Croat people are equally against your centralism...we Croats do not want any state organization except a confederated federal republic.<sup>4</sup>

The main Serbian nationalist party, the Radical Party<sup>5</sup>, used a similar method of drawing on historical examples to support their claims that their nation, the Serbs, had every right to be completely independent—but their ultimate goal was to insist on a unified state under Serb leadership. Elites from these parties asserted that Serbian nationalism began in the early part of the seventh century A.D., when the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius granted territory to

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<sup>3</sup> Prpa-Jovanović, Branak. *Op. cit.* p. 45

<sup>4</sup> Radić, Stjepan. Quoted in Banac, Ivo. *Op. cit.* p.226

<sup>5</sup> Banac, Ivo. *Op. cit.* p.160: Although the Radicals wanted to avoid being identified with a unified Yugoslavia, the Radical Party’s goal of a Serbian hegemony necessitated the Party’s acceptance of unification. Banac groups the Radical Party with the Democrats when he discusses pro-unification parties.

the peoples in the land of “Serblia.”<sup>6</sup> In an article by a prominent pro-Serb, the author insisted that

The Serbs came into being...after a certain primary tribe, called Serb, separated itself from the other tribes by virtue of its number, power, and the intelligence of its elders and leaders...the more the original Serb tribe succeeded in drawing the other neighboring, less powerful, and less important tribes into its [political] community.<sup>7</sup>

There were non-Serb nationalist parties as well, and their leaders also pointed to historical evidence that their constituencies should be autonomous and not subjected to a Serb-led hegemonic state. Thus Montenegrins were told that their people had separated from the Serbs after the death of Serbian Emperor Dušan in 1355.<sup>8</sup> Slovenian nationalists pointed to the “Slavonic Empire” of Samo in 627 as the beginning of their history as a people and as the rationale for political autonomy in the present.<sup>9</sup>

The results of the 1920 elections show that support for a unified Yugoslavia was limited mainly to areas with a Serb majority population that accepted the idea of a Serbian-led state. Most of Montenegro supported these parties, while only about half of the area of Macedonia favored any of the three “unified” parties. Meanwhile, opposition to a unified Yugoslavia was rooted in Croatia-Slavonia (where the nationalist HPSS was located, and focused its campaign), as well as parts of Macedonia and a small part of Montenegro. Many

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<sup>6</sup> Darby, H.C., *et al. A Short History of Yugoslavia: From Early Times to 1966*. London, England: Cambridge University Press, 1966. p.87

<sup>7</sup> Reference to the Croats and Slovenian tribes. Quoted in Banac, Ivo. *Op. Cit.* p. 162

<sup>8</sup> Darby, H.C., *et al. Op. cit.* p. 73

<sup>9</sup> Darby, H.C., *et al. Op cit.* p. 13

voters in these areas feared (and rightfully so) that the pro-Serb Radical Party would bring Serb domination. Almost all support for a federalist Yugoslavia came from Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>10</sup>; the Muslims here overwhelmingly supported the Yugoslav Muslim Organization, which pushed for autonomous states in a federation. This election map shows that, for the most part, voting fell along national lines.

When this information is compared to Yugoslav census data, the areas where a pro-unified Yugoslavia (either unified or federalist) was favored had a higher percentage of peoples who declared themselves “Yugoslav” as opposed to other national identities, most likely due to the lack of a nationalist party (or any sort of attachment to a distinct nationalist identity at all) in the region, especially in Bosnia.<sup>11</sup> Muslims in Bosnia, who had often been persecuted due to their beliefs, readily accepted the idea of a “Yugoslav” identity as a means of fitting in with their Croat and Serb neighbors.

After the 1920 elections, work on the constitution could get under way. The Constitutional Council was led by a majority coalition between the Serb National Radical Party and the Democratic Party, the two biggest winners in the 1920 elections, and the two parties that supported a fully unified Yugoslavia. The final constitution, which practically ensured Serb dominance, was ratified in June of 1921 with a slim simple majority. The nationalist HPSS was unable to vote on the Constitution, as they refused to declare their allegiance to a Serbian ruler;

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<sup>10</sup> Map generated by the author using information on maps in Ivo Banac’s *The National Question in Yugoslavia*. *Op. cit.* p. 157, 176, 190, 228, 331, 350, 354, 369

<sup>11</sup> In Bosnia-Herzegovina, 5.1% responded “Yugoslav.” In Croatia, 1.5%; Macedonia, 0.15%; Montenegro, 2.13%; Serbia (incl. Kosovo and Vojvodina), 1.67%; in Slovenia, 0.4%. Note that Bosnia-Herzegovina had no national party. Woodward, Susan. *Balkan Tragedy*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995 p.33-34

King Aleksandr refused to allow the HPSS to sit in on the voting session. With 161 of the Assembly's members not participating in the vote, only 35 members voted against the constitution, which delivered a "triumph" in Serb national ideology.<sup>12</sup> Only by appealing to the autonomy-supporting Yugoslav Muslim Organization through minor issues such as land reform were the unification parties able to pass their constitution. The battle in passing this Constitution underscored the national fissures demonstrated in the 1920 elections; the vote on the constitution was divided almost entirely along national lines.

The new Constitution caused a stir across the kingdom, and it fueled nationalist arguments across the Kingdom. For example, Slovenian intellectuals who were at first supporting the efforts of the Constituent Assembly in framing a constitution, and denouncing Slovenian "separate political manifestations," attacked it and claimed that any unification would be impossible and that Slovenia must remain autonomous within Yugoslavia. The Croats responded in a similar fashion; they would not tolerate what they saw as a Serb-dominated society.<sup>13</sup>

A telling aspect of the Constitution was its claim that the Kingdom was made up of three "tribes" rather than a single unified culture. Ironically, then, the unitarist National Radical Party was acknowledging that a truly unified Yugoslavia could never exist. This idea that the Kingdom was made up of the three separate nations (Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes) also fed the nationalist

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<sup>12</sup> Banac, Ivo. *Op. cit.* p.403

<sup>13</sup> Prpa-Jovanović, Branka. *Op. cit.* p.53

parties who attempted to show that the new Constitution was merely an example of Serb dominance.

By the time the National Assembly elections of 1923 rolled around, differences between parties—and the visions of Yugoslavia they espoused—had deepened. Many of the parties which fielded candidates in the 1920 elections did so again in 1923, as the National Assembly was to serve as the permanent parliament of the Kingdom. But only two parties made any significant gains: the Serb National Radical Party and the Croatian Republican Peasant Party, both of which almost doubled their votes. By 1923, both parties were nationalist, recognizing that the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was in fact an amalgamation of three separate nations rather than a united one. The Radicals had decided that their earlier attempts to appease the citizens Croatia into accepting the new Yugoslav identity were fruitless and the Radicals moved to support their autonomy, and sometimes outright independence.<sup>14</sup> While this was a similar stance to that of the 1920 elections, the Radicals were then willing to accept the existence of Croatia within their hegemony, but had since become opposed to Croatian national movements, especially that of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party. As an attack against the growing popularity of Croatian autonomy movements between the elections, Serbs everywhere gave their support to the pro-Serb Radicals.

Support for the Croatian Republican Peasant Party increased strongly due to the nation's response to the new Constitution, which greatly favored the Serbs.

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<sup>14</sup> Meštrović, Matthew. "The Elections of 1923 in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes," *Journal of Croatian Studies*. New York, New York: Croatian Academy of America, 1960 p.47

In fact, the Croatian Republican Peasant Party received 90% of the Croatian vote. Instead of representing Croatian farmers and workers, as it had in 1920, the party now represented the Croatian people as a whole, becoming a symbol of Croatian national identity throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>15</sup>

The Democratic Party, the party which originally supported the Corfu Declaration, and the only party advocating equality between the nationalities in the region, lost power in the National Assembly. One of the main reasons for the relative lack of support for the Democrats was the leadership,<sup>16</sup> but with the growing rifts between nations, fewer people felt that a truly unified state could be possible.

The 1923 elections reflected the shift of public opinion away from the possibility of a unified Yugoslav nation and state. As long as the Vidovdan Constitution provided for “three tribes” of Yugoslavia (Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes), the nationalist parties could rally their respective constituents to reject what they saw as a Serb-dominated Kingdom.

Thus the dream of a unified Yugoslav state and culture had already begun to die by the elections of 1920 and 1923. Culturally, no more than 5 per cent of the population in any one region identified themselves as “Yugoslav” (Bosnia-Herzegovina boasted 5 percent, but other regions reported that less than 2 percent of the population responded “Yugoslav” when asked about their ethnicity). Most of the parties fielding candidates in the national elections of 1920 and 1923 were nationalist parties, regardless of their stances on a unified state:

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<sup>15</sup> Meštrović, Matthew. *Op. cit.* p. 48

<sup>16</sup> Meštrović, Matthew. *Op. cit.* p. 48

the Radicals (garnering nearly 18 percent of the vote in 1920, and a plurality of nearly 27 percent in 1923) were pushing for a Serb-dominated state, for example, and the Croat Peasant Party was the *de facto* “party of Croatia,” supporting autonomy for the region. These two parties alone accounted for large numbers of the citizenry in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (32.1 per cent of the population in 1920, and 48.4 per cent in 1923). In each individual region, where different nationalities had majorities (Serbs in Serbia and Montenegro, Croats in Croatia, Slovenes in Slovenia, etc.), ethnic-based parties were able to command large majorities, as displayed in the map of the 1920 elections. The Democratic Party was the only true unification party that sought to treat all nationalities within the Kingdom as equal, regardless of population, but the party’s success in Serbia led non-Serbs to equate it with the nationalist, pro-Serb, Radical Party.

As the 1920s wore on, Yugoslavia’s national and political divisions grew, and threatened to tear apart the state. In 1929, after the assassination of a prominent Croat politician on the floor of parliament, King Aleksandr took complete control. He suspended the Vidovdan Constitution, dissolved the parliament, and declared the formation of the “Kingdom of Yugoslavia,” outlawing all national identities except for “Yugoslav.” But if a unified state of the south Slavic peoples officially existed after 1929, it was only because of Aleksandr’s iron hand—and, perhaps, that of his successor, Tito. On the ground, the country’s divisions persisted, and after 1989, even “iron hands” weren’t enough to keep the country together.