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## **THE CREATION OF THE STATE: THE FATE OF OLD INSTITUTIONS OF POLITICAL POWER AND THE CREATION OF NEW ONES IN THE KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS, AND SLOVENES FROM 1918–1923**

### **Abstract**

In the first years of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, the foundations were laid for a political crisis that later marked its entire existence until its collapse at the outset of World War II. One of the basic causes for this situation was the centralist policy implemented by the dominant political actors, despite the complexities and heterogeneity of the new state. This study analyses the direction and tempo with which this centralist system was built from 1918 to 1923, with a focus on the western regions which had been a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918, and whose political representatives most strongly opposed centralisation.

**Keywords:** Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, history of institutions, development of state administration, centralisation

## INTRODUCTION

The autonomous Croatian parliament severed all legal ties with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy on 29 October 1918, transferring the control of all state politics to the National Council of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs in agreement with Slovenian and Serbian political representatives from the region. This created the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs in November of 1918, which encompassed all regions of the collapsing monarchy with a majority Southern Slav population. The National Council of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs, the main legislative and executive body of the state, then founded regional governments in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Dalmatia, and the region of Banska Hrvatska.<sup>1</sup> The existing Austro-Hungarian state administrative apparatus was used to found these regional governments, which took control of the management of all affairs in their respective territories.<sup>2</sup> However, the State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs had defined itself from the very outset as a short-term, provisional state; its leaders immediately began announcing speedy unification with the kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro.<sup>3</sup> This unification came on 1 December 1918, when the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was proclaimed (hereinafter: Kingdom of SCS).<sup>4</sup> The first government of the Kingdom of SCS was founded in mid-December 1918. Later, regional governments from the territory of the former State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs were replaced with new ones, albeit with significantly less authority as the majority of tasks had been placed under the authority of ministries in Belgrade.<sup>5</sup> This act established a pattern for relationships between central state authorities and regional administrative bodies; these relationships would characterise the newly-created state throughout its existence through a policy of pronounced centralisation.

This study focuses on the dynamics with which centralisation was implemented in the first years after the founding of the Kingdom of SCS, with a special view to its western regions. Centralisation was not fully possible immediately

<sup>1</sup> Banska Hrvatska (also called Croatia-Slavonia) included an area that was under the control of the autonomous Croatian government (led by the *Ban*) and parliament until 1918, including the geographical regions of Slavonia, continental Croatia, and Lika.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Beuc, *Povijest institucija državne vlasti u Hrvatskoj (1527–1945)* (Zagreb: Arhiv Hrvatske, 1969), 325–327.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the National Council and the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, see: Zlatko Matijević, “Guske u magli: Djelovanje članova Središnjeg odbora Narodnog vijeća Slovenaca, Hrvata i Srba u Zagrebu (listopad 1918. – siječanj 1919.),” in *Godina 1918: Prethodnice, zbivanja, posljedice*, ed. Zlatko Matijević (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2010), 105–128; Bogdan Krizman, *Hrvatska u Prvom svjetskom ratu: Hrvatsko-srpski politički odnosi* (Zagreb: Globus, 1989); Đorđe Stanković, *Srbija i stvaranje Jugoslavije* (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Neda Engelsfeld, *Povijest hrvatske države i prava* (Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Pravni fakultet, 2002), 296.

<sup>5</sup> Neda Engelsfeld, *Prvi parlament Kraljevstva Srba Hrvata i Slovenaca* (Zagreb: Globus, Pravni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 1989), 58–60; Beuc, *Povijest institucija državne vlasti*, 332.

upon the state's creation due to the level of development of the regional administration in the state's western regions in 1918, as well as to the complicated internal and external political situation. This process lasted for years and engendered strong resistance, mainly from non-Serb political parties. On the other hand, authorities in the Kingdom of SCS propagated the idea of centralised state administration despite their awareness of the complexity of the new state in every regard (state laws, legal, national, economic, cultural, religious) and of all benefits of the existing administration in the western parts of the state as opposed to the unified, centralised administration they intended to implement. They believed that national unity and firm governance were preconditions to the development of a unified and powerful state. Forceful centralisation was intended to annul pre-existing, specific identities, but resulted in inter-ethnic tensions, poor state functioning in conditions of constant political crisis, and slow economic growth.

#### A NEW KINGDOM WITH AN OLD INTERNAL STRUCTURE

The Kingdom of SCS encompassed regions that had developed according to highly divergent cultural, economic, political, and institutional patterns. The territory of today's Slovenia, a part of Istria which came under the rule of the Kingdom of SCS, and Dalmatia had been a part of the Austrian part of the Monarchy until 1918; Banska Hrvatska and today's Vojvodina had belonged to the Hungarian part; Bosnia and Herzegovina had a unique position within the Monarchy, especially after its annexation in 1908. The Kingdom of Montenegro was an independent monarchy until it was occupied by Austro-Hungary in 1916, and then by the Kingdom of Serbia in October 1918. In accordance with this, the Kingdom of SCS unified six distinct legal systems.<sup>6</sup> One of the key issues immediately after the creation of the new state was thus legal equivalence. The first joint government in December of 1918 created the Ministry of the Constitutional Assembly and Legal Equivalence, which was intended to create the necessary conditions for the first elections for the highest parliamentary body in the state – the constitutional assembly. The constitutional assembly was then to draft the first constitution, which would define the basic organisation of power and other key issues in the newly created Kingdom of SCS.

Two opposing principles quickly crystallised regarding legal equivalence and unified state power: federalist and centralist. Proponents of the former advocated preserving pre-existing institutions and regional autonomies. This approach was primarily supported by political representatives of the Croatian, Slovenian, and Bosnian-Herzegovinian parts of the state. They saw the Kingdom of SCS as a state founded on the principle of equality among all its residents. They thus emphasised

<sup>6</sup> These are: the legal system of the former Kingdom of Serbia; the legal system of the Kingdom of Montenegro; the legal system of Banska Hrvatska; the Dalmatian-Istrian-Slovenian legal system; the legal system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the legal system of Međimurje and Vojvodina. See: Engelsfeld, *Povijest hrvatske države i prava*, 363–364.

the necessity to respect the specificities of both pre-existing national and administrative identities. According to them, the state should develop through a degree of internal autonomy, ensured to each of the constituent nations. On the other hand, the majority of politicians in Serbia involved in the People's Radical Party (Narodna radikalna stranka) and the Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka),<sup>7</sup> who were the majority in power, saw the new monarchy as an expansion of the Kingdom of Serbia.<sup>8</sup> These two parties, who were also the main proponents of centralism, saw the main precondition in building a strong unified South Slavic state in the creation of a new, shared set of centralised institutions. These new institutions were intended to replace existing regional and local administrations and self-governments, or to gain much tighter control over them. For the state centre, autonomy of regional and local institutions could become potential nests of resistance to the centralist policy. So, their replacement or stricter control over them would have laid the foundations for a unified, unitary nation-state. In this context, the conflict surrounding the organisation of state administration became an important political issue. Influence over local and regional administration, as a series of bodies tasked by the state to care for the needs of citizens (with whom they were in direct contact on a daily basis), enabled influence over the direction of social development of the whole country. All the issues faced by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Kingdom of Yugoslavia after 1929) during its entire existence were apparent in this struggle for control of state administration.

Representatives of centralist parties dominated in positions of power during the 1920s, especially from the People's Radical Party and the Democratic Party, whose representatives were a part of all 24 governments of the Kingdom of SCS from 1918 to the introduction of a dictatorship in 1929.<sup>9</sup> The leaders of these parties did not shy from obvious violations of the law in implementing centralisation policies, which served in turn to strengthen resistance from the opposition. This counter-effect gradually grew into resistance against the idea of a common state altogether. Statements by particular political platforms soon took on nationalist undertones. The majority of non-Serb citizens thus began to equate centralism with the desire of the Serbian political elite to impose its own system of social norms and values on them.<sup>10</sup> Croatian and Slovenian political parties were the most forceful in demands for greater regional autonomy. Of these parties, the Croatian (Republican) Peasant Party (Hrvatska seljačka stranka) and the Slove-

<sup>7</sup> The (Yugoslav) Democratic Party was formed in 1919 as a party of convinced Yugoslavs from all parts of the state that supported the building of a unitary and centralist monarchy with a strong ruler. Most of its party leadership and electorate, especially from the mid-1920s onwards, came from Serbia. See: Branislav Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke u Jugoslaviji: (1919–1929)* (Beograd: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1979), 46–47.

<sup>8</sup> Engelsfeld, *Prvi parlament Kraljevstva*, 272.

<sup>9</sup> Stipica Grgić, "The Kingdom of Diversity and Paternalism: the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes/Yugoslavia, 1918–1941," in *Interwar East Central Europe, 1918–1941: The Failure of Democracy-building, the Fate of Minorities*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Abingdon, Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2020), 222.

<sup>10</sup> Grgić, *The Kingdom of Diversity and Paternalism*, 224.

nian People's Party (Slovenska narodna stranka) quickly crystallised as Croatian and Slovenian national movements.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, a notable similarity is apparent between the Kingdom of SCS and Czechoslovakia in the first years after World War I. In Czechoslovakia, the ruling elite backed out on promises to give a measure of autonomy to the regions, which became one of the first steps on the path towards internal conflict and the later dissolution of the state.<sup>12</sup> Similar conflicts were also noted within generally more homogeneous states neighbouring the Kingdom of SCS. For example, “for more than a decade after the unification of Transylvania with the Romanian Kingdom, a multidimensional discussion was pursued between the Bucharest establishment (advocating centralism), the Transylvanian Romanian elite (who tried to preserve regional specificity but at the same time competed for resources with the ethnic minorities), and the leaders of minorities who sought to assert their own rights and identities in the new state”.<sup>13</sup> Centralist political parties in the Kingdom of SCS insisted on this type of state order despite being aware of the developmental level of the administrative apparatus in areas under Austro-Hungarian control until 1918. This is apparent in the first specific proposal for the future state's internal organisation made in September of 1918, prior to the end of World War I and unification. Nikola Pašić, the Kingdom of Serbia's prime minister, ordered eminent Dalmatian politician and lawyer Lujo Bakotić to draft a provisional design for the future state's internal organisation.<sup>14</sup> Bakotić completed this project in October of 1918, but as a result of unification on 1 December 1918, the plan was never formally approved as it had been created by the government of the Kingdom of Serbia, which no longer existed. Bakotić's project foresaw that, upon unification, all officials of state, regional, district, and municipality services who wished to remain in service to the new state would be allowed to keep the positions in which they had served until then.<sup>15</sup> “The Serbian government believes it best to interfere as little as possible in the situation in the moment peace is concluded”, especially that of administration, until a common constitution and laws would allow “the entire administration of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes to be unified”.<sup>16</sup> The same officials would remain in the newly created state, although the project noted that foreign officials, mostly Germans and Hungarians, “would likely not want to remain in their positions”. The format of administration in Dalmatia and Slovenia was praised as the foundation for a well-functioning state administration and its relationship towards the

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<sup>11</sup> Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke*, 283–287.

<sup>12</sup> Eva Broklová, “Czechs and Slovaks 1918–1938,” *Czech Sociological Review* 1 (1993): 23–42.

<sup>13</sup> *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe: Volume II*, ed. Balasz Trencsenyi, Michal Kopeček, Luka Lisjak Gabrijelčič, Maria Falina, Mónika Baár, Maciej Janowski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 39.

<sup>14</sup> On whether the Kingdom of SCS was a new state or an old state (i.e., the expansion of the former Kingdom of Serbia) from the perspective of international law, see: Ivan Žolger, *Da li je naša kraljevina nova ili stara država?* (Ljubljana: Slovenski pravnik, 1923).

<sup>15</sup> Đorđe Stanković, *Istorijski stereotipi i naučno znanje* (Beograd: Plato, 2004), 104.

<sup>16</sup> Stanković, *Istorijski stereotipi i naučno znanje*, 104.

citizenry.<sup>17</sup> Nikola Pašić was also aware of this: he even publicly noted this during debate in the Constitutional Assembly in 1920 in his address to Slovenian People's Party representative Franc Smodej, saying that the Slovenians had a good state administration during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, "but now you are destroying it and want to introduce a new one. You will lose your good administration, and we cannot compensate you for this from Serbia (...)".<sup>18</sup> Although Bakotić's suggestion was never formally adopted, it was largely implemented in practice, as there was no mass firing of officials in the majority of the annexed former Austro-Hungarian territory after the 1918 unification, meaning the existing administrative apparatus allowed the implementation of a transition of power.<sup>19</sup>

On this same occasion, in addition to praising the existing Slovenian administration, Pašić also said he believed laws should be gradually harmonised so that "no shocks are felt in state administration".<sup>20</sup> However, regional governments and local administration had already been named by the government in Belgrade and their work was strictly supervised.<sup>21</sup> For example, autonomous representative bodies such as the Croatian Parliament – which had a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages and which represented an important factor in building Croatia's unique legal and institutional features – were never convened. In late 1919, councils in cities and (rural) municipalities were dissolved with the explanation that they had been chosen prior to unification, and no longer represented the true will of the people.<sup>22</sup> In continental Croatia the Croatian *Ban*, who was named by the ruler at the suggestion of the government, named commissioners to city and rural municipalities at his own discretion, replacing legally elected mayors and municipal councillors.<sup>23</sup> Thus, changes took place even without the adoption of a legal framework. Amidst the complex internal and external political circumstances that characterised the first months after the Great War, the government of the new state, in fear of the appearance of potential new hotspots of resistance, attempted to reduce public conflict with the opposition and strove to implement centralisation "quietly".

However, even this gradual centralisation did not go unnoticed. In the temporary parliament of the Kingdom of SCS (which operated from 1919 to 1920), in early 1919, a group of Croatian representatives submitted a memorandum in which they protested against the decision of particular ministries to abolish offices of state government that had operated on the periphery of the state, as this "took from the people the most expedient way to meet their national needs". They also protested the naming of high state officials for Croatia without consulting the

<sup>17</sup> Stanković, *Istorijski stereotipi i naučno znanje*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> Stanković, *Istorijski stereotipi i naučno znanje*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Bičanić, *Ekonomska podloga hrvatskog pitanja* (Zagreb: dr. Vladko Maček, 1938), 67.

<sup>20</sup> Stanković, *Istorijski stereotipi i naučno znanje*, 110.

<sup>21</sup> Bosiljka Janjatović, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj 1918. – 1935.* (Zagreb: Hrvatski institut za povijest – Dom i svijet, 2002), 20–23.

<sup>22</sup> "Naredba bana Hrvatske i Slavonije od 24. studenog 1919. o raspustu gradskih zastupstava i općinskih odbora u Hrvatskoj i Slavoniji," *Narodne novine* (November 24, 1919): 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Naredba bana Hrvatske i Slavonije*, 1.

major political parties active in those regions, as well as statements made by particular ministers announcing that the authority of autonomous regional parliaments would be reduced.<sup>24</sup> Politicians who advocated the decentralisation path for the Kingdom of SCS sought an end to the dominance of particular parties or nations over others prior to the drafting of the country's first constitution. They insisted on consensus regarding all important issues in the state's further development, as only this would satisfy "the views and interest of all parts of the nation, so that none feels repressed or neglected".<sup>25</sup>

Resistance to the new government also spread quickly to the masses. Dissatisfaction was made even greater by the poor economic situation, as well as by poor moves by the government. Foreign observers, even those exceptionally in favour of the new state such as United States Army Lieutenant LeRoy King, noted in early 1919 that the sudden actions of what had been until recently the army of the Kingdom of Serbia, who had spread throughout the territory of the entire state in recent months, had caused great dissatisfaction among Croatian peasants. "While the Government officials all take pains to protest ('too well') that the Serbs and Croats are one people, it is absurd to say so. The social 'Climate' is quite different. [...] This growing unpopularity of the Serbian Army will easily be transformed into dislike of the Serbian people and influence".<sup>26</sup> In some cases, this dissatisfaction quickly grew into open conflict. For example, in early 1920, the government decided to terminate a collective agreement it had signed just a year earlier with the railway workers' union, which resulted in weeks of massive strikes and paralysed rail traffic throughout the state territory. In the autumn of 1920, villagers in the area around Zagreb revolted against a military order to count and brand all draft animals (horses and oxen), which would be placed at the army's disposition in the case of mobilisation. This had not been the practice in Croatian regions, and the villagers feared their livestock would be requisitioned from them, or that branding would cause them to lose their value. Weeks of conflict with police and military authorities resulted in multiple deaths and injuries. In fear of the potential spread of violence, the government decided to halt the further branding of livestock.<sup>27</sup> More bloodshed came in late 1920 near Tuzla in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where a government decision to reduce miners' wages resulted in thousands of local miners revolting, requiring military intervention to quell the unrest.<sup>28</sup> However, the ruling parties did not perceive these and other similar events as a sign of their growing unpopularity; instead, this only strengthened their belief that the internal stability of the state could only be attained through firm centralism and unitarism.

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<sup>24</sup> Engelsfeld, *Prvi parlament Kraljevstva SHS*, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Jere (Jerome) Jareb, "LeRoy King's Reports from Croatia March to May 1919," *Journal of Croatian Studies* 1 (1960): 85.

<sup>27</sup> Ivo Banac, *The National Question In Yugoslavia: Origins, History, Politics* (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 248–259.

<sup>28</sup> *Generalni štrajk rudara Bosne i Hercegovine i husinska buna 1920: građa*, ed. Božo Madžar (Tuzla: Univerzal, 1984), 7, 17–18.

THE FIRST CONSTITUTION OF THE KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS, AND SLOVENES  
AND THE DEFINITION OF REGIONAL ADMINISTRATION

The first constitution of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was to be drafted by the Constitutional Assembly. However, as no law existed by which representatives would be elected to the assembly, a Temporary National Assembly was convened in early 1919, which acted until elections for the Constitutional Assembly in 1920.<sup>29</sup> Many negative political phenomena appeared during the work of the Temporary National Assembly that would also mark later periods. The legislative activity of parliament was overshadowed by the government's activity in issuing decrees, through which it often regulated current issues. The government illegally took over parliament's legislative powers, thus creating legal insecurity and tarnishing its authority. "By interfering in the jurisdiction of legislators, the executive government [...] appropriated the authority of the Temporary National Assembly".<sup>30</sup>

The manner in which representatives were chosen for the temporary national assembly and the law by which national representatives were elected to the Constitutional Assembly, which the National Assembly later adopted, practically ensured the People's Radical Party and Democratic Party victory at elections.<sup>31</sup> This law prescribed an election process that favoured the strongest political parties; it also established smaller (in terms of the number of voters) electoral districts in Serbia than in the former Austro-Hungarian parts of the new country (State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs), and included a relatively small number of representatives in the Constitutional Assembly, most of which favoured centralist forces.<sup>32</sup>

Elections for the Constitutional Assembly were held 28 November 1920; it began operating on 12 December 1920. The organisation of the state's future internal administration was one of the key topics. There were highly divergent opinions on the issue, which can be divided into the two basic principles mentioned earlier: pronounced centralisation and regional autonomy. A federalist system was advocated mainly by Croatian and Slovenian politicians. For example, Ante Trumbić, the first Foreign Affairs Minister of the Kingdom of SCS, advocated retaining

<sup>29</sup> Representatives to the Constitutional Assembly from the area of the State of SCS were invited from the ranks of previously eminent politicians; power of attorney was issued to them by the Presidency of the National Council of SCS. In Serbia and Vojvodina, representatives were appointed by assemblies, while elections were implemented in Macedonia through commissioners. The Assembly had 84 representatives from Serbia, 62 from Croatia including Rijeka and Međimurje, 42 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 32 from Slovenia, 24 each from Vojvodina and Macedonia, 12 each from Dalmatia and Montenegro, and four from Istria, for a total of 296.

<sup>30</sup> Engelsfeld, *Povijest hrvatske države i prava*, 304–305.

<sup>31</sup> Ferdo Čulinović, *Državnopravna historija jugoslavenskih zemalja XIX. i XX. vijeka* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1959), 244; Janjatović, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> An illustration of the impact of the size of electoral units is apparent in the fact that roughly 3,000 votes were needed to elect a representative in Serbia, while roughly 4,700 votes were needed in Croatia. See: Engelsfeld, *Prvi parlament Kraljevstva SHS*, 251–261; Janjatović, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj*, 26.



existing self-governing regions and turning them into administrative units by decentralising the government.<sup>33</sup> Leading Dalmatian pro-Yugoslav politician Josip Smodlaka suggested dividing the state into 12 units based on economic, geographic, and transport criteria, while the 'People's Club' (Narodni klub) suggested a division into six regions.<sup>34</sup> However, even in the ranks of the People's Radical Party, which was the most emphatic proponent of centralisation, dissonance existed on this issue. While the majority of the party headed by Nikola Pašić demanded the strongest possible centralisation, a draft constitution written by Stojan Protić, first prime minister of the Kingdom of SCS, suggested a decentralised state administration and a division into 11 traditional regions. Protić justified this division by providing examples from numerous other European countries.<sup>35</sup>

Protić founded his opinion on a report by a five-member commission consisting of eminent legal experts Slobodan Jovanović, Ladislav Polić, Kosta Kumandi, Lazar Marković, and Bogumil Vošnjak, whom he had chosen earlier to study the state of administration and research legal systems in regions that had been under the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. This team of lawyers travelled across the state, noting significant differences between the administrative systems of Croatia-Slavonia, as well as that of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. All three regions had been a part of Austro-Hungary, however they differed significantly in their socio-economic development, which was also reflected in the significant legal and administrative differences between them. In Croatia and Slavonia, administration was divided from top to bottom into counties, which served as units of administration and self-government, districts, which served as purely administrative units, and municipalities under them, which served as the lowest forms of self-government, closest to the citizens. Slovenia was divided into districts as administrative units and municipalities as units of self-government; Dalmatia had a similar division. Bosnia and Herzegovina was divided into counties as administrative units, districts (which could be both units of administration and self-government), and municipalities as units of self-government (although they never became units of self-government under Austro-Hungarian rule). As regards self-government bureaucracy, the commission assessed that the staff of Croatia's municipalities was well-educated and organised, that the bureaucracy in Bosnia was nearly non-existent, and that professional bureaucrats existed in Slovenia only in urban areas.<sup>36</sup> In comparison, state administration in the Kingdom of Serbia before 1918 was divided into counties, districts, and municipalities as the lowest level of administration, and was significantly more centralised.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ante Trumbić, *Govor d-r Ante Trumbića u sednici Ustavotvorne skupštine u Beogradu 23. i 25. aprila 1921.* (Beograd: Državna štamparija, 1921), 57.

<sup>34</sup> For a description of numerous draft constitutions, see: Engelsfeld, *Povijest hrvatske države i prava*, 313–317.

<sup>35</sup> *Nacrt ustava po predlogu Stojana M. Protića: definitivni tekst, posle diskusije sa komisijom* (Beograd: Geca Kon, 1920), 1–2.

<sup>36</sup> Branislav Gligorijević, "Unutrašnje (administrativne) granice Jugoslavije između dva svjetska rata 1918.–1941.," *Istorija 20. veka* 10, no. 1–2 (1992): 28.

<sup>37</sup> Gligorijević, *Unutrašnje (administrativne) granice Jugoslavije*, 28.

As regards the relationship between regional administration and state government, the commission noted the idiosyncrasy of the former Banska Hrvatska/Croatia-Slavonia, whose regional administration was “not under a single ministry, but rather subject directly to the king” in matters of autonomy. Thus, “Croatia and Slavonia have a much more independent position towards Belgrade” than other regions due to their longer tradition of administration and its level of organisation. The commission also noted that Slovenia had created a greater degree of independence in relation to the period when it was under Austrian rule.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, the commission’s members noted that all heads of regional governments at the time were members of centralist parties named by the new government.<sup>39</sup> They thus considered all three regional administrations to be under the exclusive purview of the central government in Belgrade, and that they were subject to neither political (democratic) nor legal (legal-administrative) supervision. Regional parliaments were not convened, and administrative courts were not yet established.<sup>40</sup>

The commission’s report concluded that the speedy introduction of unified administration without a transitional period would result in great difficulties. They also believed it would be impossible to organise state administration properly on a centralist basis.<sup>41</sup> They thus held that the best plan was to “leave the regional management in the hands of the local bureaucracy”, with some oversight of the regional assemblies. They demanded laws to ensure their continuity and independence in work. “The heads of regional governments must undoubtedly be named by the central government, however, many find it would be highly unpleasant were it to change with each crisis [of government] in Belgrade”.<sup>42</sup> They also suggested transferring the right to pass autonomous decrees and statutes to regional parliaments, so that those most familiar with local circumstances could make decisions at the regional or local level.<sup>43</sup> Although this report clearly supported leaving administrative systems in place in the western parts of the state, which were organised in various ways but were undoubtedly well developed, this did not happen. Stojan Protić found himself in the minority within the People’s Radical Party, which he quickly resigned from before withdrawing from politics entirely.<sup>44</sup>

The majority of the People’s Radical Party and the Democratic Party saw federalism as an anti-state phenomenon, believing it undermined the foundations of the state’s future development.<sup>45</sup> They did not see how (con)federal units could be created, especially since a significant number of Serbs lived in the western part of the Kingdom of SCS (which had not been a part of the Kingdom of Serbia prior

<sup>38</sup> “Izveštaj komisije za proučavanje pokrajinskog uređenja Ministru pripreme za Ustavotvornu skupštinu i izjednačavanje zakonodavstva Stojanu Protiću od 23. srpnja 1920.”, Archives of Yugoslavia (Belgrade), series: *Narodna skupština Kraljevine Jugoslavije* (no. 72), box: 1–2.

<sup>39</sup> Janjatović, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> *Izveštaj komisije za proučavanje pokrajinskog uređenja*.

<sup>41</sup> *Izveštaj komisije za proučavanje pokrajinskog uređenja*.

<sup>42</sup> *Izveštaj komisije za proučavanje pokrajinskog uređenja*.

<sup>43</sup> *Izveštaj komisije za proučavanje pokrajinskog uređenja*.

<sup>44</sup> Banac, *The National Question In Yugoslavia*, 384–386.

<sup>45</sup> Engelsfeld, *Povijest hrvatske države i prava*, 323.

to World War I). If these historical regions, administrative units with the borders set before 1918, were preserved the Serbs would be split, broken, and become a minority in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vojvodina<sup>46</sup>. So, they advocated the concept of a principally unitary state.<sup>47</sup> They believed the state must transfer the majority of power to central state bodies. Regional and local authorities – at least during the state-building process – were not allowed to compete with them nor to be the centres around which future federal units would be built; they could potentially serve only as a limiting corrective factor in the case of excessive state centralisation.<sup>48</sup>

On 28 June 1921, the Constitutional Assembly adopted the new constitution, known as the Vidovdan Constitution after the holiday on which it was adopted. In the end, 161 representatives abstained from voting on the constitution and an additional 35 voted against it. A total of 223 representatives voted to adopt the constitution; this number also included those who were for decentralisation or sort of federalism in principle, but who were offered various concessions in exchange for their support. The constitution was adopted with a simple majority vote, which was not in accordance with the provisions of earlier founding political documents regulating the unification of the South Slavic people. The 1917 Corfu Declaration and the 1918 Order of the National Council defined the process by which the first constitution was to be adopted in the new state union – by a *qualified majority*.<sup>49</sup>

The 1921 constitution described the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes as a constitutional and parliamentary monarchy. Legislative power was held by the National Assembly, while executive power was held by the government, which answered to the National Assembly and the king. However, despite these provisions, the constitutional order in the Kingdom of SCS was only outwardly parliamentary, as the National Assembly was also subordinate to the king, who had the power to both convene and dissolve it, and without whose approval laws were not valid. The king confirmed the government and named ministers, some of whom later did not have the support of the majority of elected representatives in parliament. According to the constitution, the monarch answered to no one for his actions and no complaint could be brought against him. Numerous articles in the constitution showed the supremacy of the state centre over the periphery, as well as an insistence on describing the Kingdom of SCS as a unitary

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<sup>46</sup> Gligorijević, *Unutrašnje (administrativne) granice Jugoslavije*, 28.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the acceptance or rejection of the Yugoslav idea, see: Nikola Dugandžija, *Jugoslavenstvo* (Beograd: Mladost, 1986), 86–100.

<sup>48</sup> Nadežda Jovanović, *Politički sukobi u Jugoslaviji 1925–1928* (Beograd: Rad, 1974), 181–182; Slobodan Jovanović, *Političke i pravne rasprave I–III* (Beograd: Beogradski izdavačko-grafički zavod – Srpska književna zadruga, 1990), 430–431.

<sup>49</sup> Čulinović, *Državnopravna historija*, 266; Janjatović, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj*, 27; Ljubo Boban, *Hrvatske granice od 1918. do 1993. godine* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1995), 8, 14. Article 14 of the Corfu Declaration stated that the constitution should be adopted by a “numerically qualified majority (brojno kvalifikovanom većinom).” See: Branko Petranović, Momčilo Zečević, *Jugoslovenski federalizam: ideje i stvarnost*, vol. 1 (Beograd: Prosveta, 1987), 37–38.

state consisting of a single nation with three names.<sup>50</sup> All of this had long-term consequences for the political life in the new state, in which political relations were not created by the people, but by the king and his court to a large degree.<sup>51</sup>

The People's Radical Party and the Democratic Party, who had the most seats in the otherwise heterogeneous Assembly, saw the constitution as the realisation of the idea of a unified state with a single citizenship – consisting of one nation with three tribes whose names were listed in the state's name.<sup>52</sup> The idea of state and national unity between Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes demanded the abolition of earlier historical regions as well as their autonomy. As potential sources of separatism, they had to be liquidated; state unity was thus ensured through a complete break with the former self-governing organisation.<sup>53</sup> In 1920, the People's Radical Party's official organ *Zastava* made the following appeal: "Let us renounce all regional separatism, that Austrian poison, and let us create a place that will give us breath, impulse, and life. Let Belgrade with its puritan king point us towards: brotherhood, love and equality, justice and fairness, bearing everyone in mind, working all for one, and one for all".<sup>54</sup> Similar to Czechoslovakia after 1918, where despite initial announcements of autonomous development for "smaller" nations, the majority Czech state leadership decided to create a centralised government and administration for the sake of stability,<sup>55</sup> the political system being built in centralist fashion in the Kingdom of SCS was intended to provide stability to the new, complex state.

### OBLASTI – NEW REGIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS

According to the Vidovdan Constitution, the state's internal organisation was based on *oblasti*. The state was to be divided into 33 *oblasti*, which represented regional centres of administration and self-government. The definition of their borders, authority, and scope of work was left to be legally resolved at a later date. The *oblasti* were to be founded according to natural, cultural, and economic circumstances, however these terms were also not specifically defined by the constitution. In principle, each *oblast* was to be a delimited area in terms of transport and economy with a centre towards which the remainder of the settlements gravitated; in practice, this proved untrue. The true goal of founding these *oblasti* was to centralise the state. Faced with plans to create a smaller number of larger *oblasti* or a large number of smaller *oblasti* (in terms of population), the

<sup>50</sup> Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke*, 282.

<sup>51</sup> Ivan Hrستیć, *Vrijeme promjena: Makarska 1918.–1929*. (Zagreb – Makarska: Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar – Grad Makarska, 2016), 78.

<sup>52</sup> Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke*, 283.

<sup>53</sup> Engelsfeld, *Povijest hrvatske države i prava*, 323; Beuc, *Povijest institucija državne vlasti*, 362.

<sup>54</sup> "Ako želimo reda i zavedimo ga," *Zastava* (May 14, 1920): 1.

<sup>55</sup> Thaddeus V. Gromada, "Pilsudski and the Slovak Autonomists," *Slavic Review* 28 (1969): 446.

government chose the latter. This was intended to break the pre-existing structure and ensure that no particular nation could use any given regional administrative unit as a centre of nationalist resistance.<sup>56</sup>

As regional governments and local administration had been directly named by the government in Belgrade and strictly supervised from 1918 to 1921, while autonomous representative bodies were not convened, the government did not hurry to adopt a more elaborate legal framework for centralisation and *oblast* self-management, which in practice would have involved a particular reduction in central authority. The framework of local and regional self-government was to be prescribed by state laws, which left limited room for the opposition to strengthen its position, regardless how restricted the authority of these units of regional self-government. As a result, the District and *Oblast* Self-Government Act, the General Administration Act, and a decree dividing the state into 33 *oblasti*, which represented a decisive move by the government to liquidate regional administrations and establish *oblasti*, were enacted in 1922, a year after the Vidovdan Constitution was adopted.<sup>57</sup> According to these laws, the manner in which *oblasti* and their borders were drawn affirm the thesis that centralisation and the attempt to divide, among others, Croatian regions within the Kingdom of SCS were the primary goals of this form of state administration. Of the total of 33 *oblasti* created by the aforementioned decree, the Slovenian regions that entered the Kingdom of SCS were divided into the Ljubljana and Maribor *oblast*, to which some Croatian areas were also attached. The Maribor *oblast* also included the Croatian region of Međimurje. Kastav, which had previously belonged to Istria, was appended to the Ljubljana *oblast*. No changes took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina as the existing counties were simply renamed as *oblasti* – Tuzla, Sarajevo, Mostar, Travnik, Vrbas (Banja Luka), and Bihać. This was a concession to the Yugoslav Muslim Organisation, the most important political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for their support for the Vidovdan Constitution in the Assembly.<sup>58</sup>

The situation was also similar in Serbia. Existing *okruzi*, as the highest administrative units in the Kingdom of Serbia, were usually simply renamed as *oblasti*. Exceptions to this rule took place most often in *oblasti* intended to connect border areas such as Macedonia and Vojvodina. The former space of the Kingdom of Montenegro was divided between the Zeta and Užice *oblasti*. The greatest changes between districts as compared to earlier administrative units took place in Banska Hrvatska and Dalmatia. According to the decree, this territory was divided into six *oblasti*: Zagreb, Osijek, Srijem (Vukovar), Primorje-Krajina (Karlovac), Split, and Dubrovnik; illogical divisions were also made concerning borders of the *oblasti* themselves. Dalmatia was divided into

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<sup>56</sup> Đorđe Stanković, "Administrativna podela Kraljevine SHS," *Istorijski glasnik* 1, no. 1–2 (1981): 36.

<sup>57</sup> Stipica Grgić, *Između režimske ideologije i potreba građana: Savska Banovina 1929. – 1939.* (Zagreb: Fakultet hrvatskih studija Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2020), 64–65.

<sup>58</sup> *Article 135. Ustav Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca* (Beograd: Državna štamparija, 1926), 41.

the Split and Dubrovnik *oblasti*. The latter of these was small in both territory and population, especially because the decree annexed Boka Kotorska, which had been a part of Dalmatia, to the Zeta *oblast*. The remainder of the region of Dalmatia fell under the Split *oblast*, which also included the island of Krk, which had been a part of Istria under Austro-Hungary – and almost a hundred kilometres away from the rest of the *oblast* it was a part of. Of the counties that existed in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Syrmia County was the only one whose borders remained unchanged when it was renamed the Syrmia *oblast*. However, it should be noted that Serbs were the majority population in this area, and that the People's Radical Party had strong support. The remaining three *oblasti* in Banska Hrvatska – Osijek, Zagreb, and Primorje-Krajina – were formed without a direct connection to pre-existing administrative divisions or systems. The Osijek *oblast* was created by connecting the territories of the former Virovitica, Požega, and Bjelovar-Križevci counties, but without the towns of Čazma and Križevci. The Zagreb *oblast* consisted of the former Varaždin County, the *oblasti* of Čazma and Križevci in the former Bjelovar-Križevci County, and the majority of the former Zagreb County. The southern and western parts of the former Zagreb County (Banija, Kordun, the region to the south of the river Kupa) were appended to the Primorje-Krajina *oblast*. Karlovac was designated as the centre of the Primorje-Krajina *oblast*, a city that had previously been a part of Zagreb County. The Primorje-Krajina *oblast* also included parts of the former Zagreb County with a majority Serb population, as well as ethnically mixed parts of the former Modruš-Rijeka and Lika-Krbava counties. It can thus be theorised that the central state authorities attempted to create a territory with a significant Serb population on Croatian territory by redrawing territorial borders.<sup>59</sup>

However, despite the laws being enacted, they were not implemented across the entire state territory even then, as opposition parties strongly opposed the new administrative organisation. They had the support of the people in doing so; for example, in Croatian regions, the opposition headed by the Croatian (Republican) Peasant Party usually received roughly 80% of the electoral votes in the first half of the 1920s. This gave them the legitimacy to hinder the operations of newly named heads of *oblasti*, all of whom were representatives of the People's Radical Party and the Democratic Party. New elections for state parliament soon followed on 18 March 1923. After these elections, representatives of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party, the Slovenian People's Party, and the Yugoslav Muslim Organisation joined into the Federalist Bloc, with the goal of changing the constitution and abolishing centralism by preventing the formation of districts, at least in Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>60</sup> However, they did not succeed.

In various parts of the state, former regional administrative centres were gradually replaced with *oblasti*: in Dalmatia in July 1923, in Bosnia and Herze-

<sup>59</sup> Boban, *Hrvatske granice*, 24.

<sup>60</sup> Franjo Tuđman, *Hrvatska u monarhističkoj Jugoslaviji: 1918. – 1941.*, vol. 1 (Zagreb: Hrvatska sveučilišna naklada, 1993), 392–393.

govina in September 1923, and in Slovenia in December 1923.<sup>61</sup> The closure of the Regional Administration for Croatia-Slavonia, headquartered in Zagreb, was also announced in early 1923. However, due to political opposition from the strongest opposition party in the country, the Croatian (Republican) Peasant Party, the final decision to liquidate all business of the Regional Administration was only implemented in early 1925.<sup>62</sup>

However, the government also took advantage of its position of power when establishing the *oblasti* by implementing the laws only partially. Administration was introduced at the level of *oblasti*, but self-government was not. This was an attempt to diminish the influence of the opposition, as the government held complete control of the *oblasti* through the naming of their heads. The heads of *oblasti*, “veliki župani”, were named by the king at the suggestion of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This ensured centralism, although state administration was seemingly decentralised as, in addition to the heads of *oblasti*, they were also managed by councils and committees as elected regional parliaments and governments.<sup>63</sup>

The heads of *oblasti* were political representatives of the government; they undertook all general administration tasks under the jurisdiction of particular ministries, which meant that they answered to ministers in some cases. All civil servants in the *oblasti* answered to the head of the *oblasti*, who also indirectly supervised the work of all (self-governing) civil servants at the county, city, and municipality level.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, *oblasti* councils and committees were supposed to have authority over the narrow range of tasks not assumed by the ministries in Belgrade. The scope of powers of *oblast* self-government thus included finance, public works, improvement of the economy of the *oblast*, transport, health, education, management of estates owned by the *oblast*, and humanitarian institutions, as well as transport, social, health, and other institutions. According to the plans of the People’s Radical Party, *oblast* assemblies and committees were supposed to have regional administrative powers only; any involvement in state policy was strictly forbidden.<sup>65</sup>

However, *oblast* self-government began to function only after the first (and final) *oblast* elections on 15 January 1927, at which the opposition unsurprisingly won in the western parts of the Kingdom of SCS. Even after that, the central state government regularly interfered even in the limited range of authority of *oblast* self-government.<sup>66</sup> All of this led to further increases in ethnic tensions. The situation escalated after the murder of Croatian Peasant Party MPs in June of 1928. The final result was the introduction of a royal dictatorship in 1929, the

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<sup>61</sup> *Almanah Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca*, vol. 2 (Zagreb: Glavno uredništvo Almanaha, 1924), 98.

<sup>62</sup> Beuc, *Povijest institucija državne vlasti*, 338.

<sup>63</sup> Grgić, *Između režimske ideologije i potreba građana*, 66–67.

<sup>64</sup> Beuc, *Povijest institucija državne vlasti*, 351–354.

<sup>65</sup> Lazar Marković, *Jugoslavenska država i hrvatsko pitanje: (1914 – 1929)* (Zagreb: Komisiona naklada S. Kugli, 1935), 214.

<sup>66</sup> Beuc, *Povijest institucija državne vlasti*, 351–354.

abolition of *oblasti*, and the founding of *banovinas* that replaced *oblasti* as regional units. *Banovinas* were considered even more as pure extensions of the government. This finally realised the goal of a fully centralised administrative system.

## CONCLUSION

From the 1850s to the early 20th century, an organised, professional, and (in some segments) decentralised state administration was built in the South Slavic parts of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Joining the new state union in December 1918 meant the possibility of further democratisation, as the majority of this administrative apparatus placed itself at the service of the new state upon unification. However, this did not take place. Government decrees, acts, and the 1921 constitution affirmed the foundations of a centralist state order in which the state centre had a policy of supremacy over the periphery. This was followed by the dissolution of pre-existing centres of administration and self-government, which were replaced by centres modelled by the centralist tendencies of the state parties in power. This change was exceptionally significant as traditional institutions had great symbolic meaning to particular nations, such as Croatian Parliament to the Croats.<sup>67</sup> This also meant ensuring the primacy of the Serbian part of the state over its western parts, which the leading centralist elites saw as no more than a “lucky coincidence”.<sup>68</sup> The first state constitution played an exceptionally important role in institutionalising this policy, which was intended to provide the Kingdom of SCS with internal stability and guaranteed unity, but which later turned into an instrument of internal divisions. Retaining power in centres of state administration and preventing lower instances from expanding their scope of work had a negative impact on the general situation in the state. This resulted in the capital of Belgrade being equated with all the increasingly clear negative characteristics of centralism and unitarism. This is how centralism, instead of a stabilising factor, became a factor in internal political destabilisation in the years that followed.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Janjatović, *Politički teror u Hrvatskoj*, 24.

<sup>68</sup> Vesna Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia: a transnational history* (Basingstoke – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 97.

<sup>69</sup> Djokić, *Nikola Pašić and Ante Trumbić*, 155.



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Map 1. Kingdom of SCS after the 1918 unification. Source: Ljubo Boban, *Hrvatske granice od 1918. do 1993. godine* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1995), 21.



Map 2. Kingdom of SCS after 1922 – oblasti; Source: Ljubo Boban, *Hrvatske granice od 1918. do 1993. godine* (Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1995), 27.