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DISPUTES OVER THE AUTONOMY OF VOJVODINA FROM THE CREATION TO THE BREAKUP OF YUGOSLAVIA

ABSTRACT: *The so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution in Vojvodina in 1988 was usually seen as an introduction to the breakup of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, and in fact represented the end of decades-long disputes over Vojvodina's autonomy. The aim of this paper is to present to the scientific public the genesis and course of the disputes over the autonomy of Vojvodina, which ended in the wake of the breakup of Yugoslavia. This synthesized work is the result of years of research in the Novi Sad and Belgrade archives and literature mostly written by contemporary witnesses.*

KEYWORDS: Autonomy, Serbia, Vojvodina, Yugoslavia

As historian Dušan J. Popović once remarked, “over time, the idea of Vojvodina changed its meaning, its content, and, naturally, its territory.”¹ After the demarcation with neighboring Hungary and Romania in 1920, those parts of Banat, Bačka, and Baranja that belonged to the Yugoslav state were considered to be Vojvodina. Later, the more common term was Vojvodina with Srem, or just Vojvodina - meaning also Srem. The use of the name Vojvodina appears to have been intensified publicly to counteract non-Serb names in the same geographical area. However, shortly after the Yugoslav unification, the idea of an autonomous Vojvodina, which had a completely different content than in the 19th century, would re-emerge.

The national goal pursued by the Serbian movement in Vojvodina was finally achieved in 1918. In addition, the ethnic majority of the Vojvodina area suggested that the creation of any autonomous area north of the Sava and Danube rivers would lead to the dominance of the Germans and Hungarians. However, it was not the national minorities who were the bearers of autonomous ideas in the Yugoslav state - in fact they wanted a revision of the borders. The movement for autonomy of Vojvodina emerged among the Serbian and Bun-

¹ Душан Ј. Поповић, *Срби у Војводини* (Нови Сад: Матица српска, 1990), 7.

jevac intellectuals in response to the difficult economic situation in which Vojvodina had found itself after its liberation. The currency issue, the agrarian crisis, the corrupt administration, and the exaggerated tax burden (many times higher than the national average) were the cause of great dissatisfaction among the inhabitants of Vojvodina, especially those who were wealthier.²

Articles against the exploitation of Vojvodina appeared on the pages of the local press in the first years after the unification. Over time, the leaders of the struggle for Vojvodina's economic equalization with the other parts of Yugoslavia became branches of the two strongest Serb parties in Vojvodina - the Radical Party and the Democratic Party, which produced significant results (taxes were equalized in 1928). However, some leaders of these parties felt that Vojvodina's economic equality could only be ensured if it were constituted as a separate administrative unit. In doing so, they accepted the program of the party led by Blaško Rajić, a Catholic priest who was the first to advocate an autonomous Vojvodina. However, Stjepan Radić, a leading Croatian politician and the head of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party, insisted on dividing Vojvodina between Serbia and Croatia.

In the second half of the 1920s, the idea of Vojvodina's autonomy became more prominent. Its main advocate was Pančevo lawyer Dušan Duda Bošković, a member of the Independent Democratic Party. In 1927, his party joined a coalition with the Croatian Peasant Party, with the idea of jointly resisting the so called "hegemony of Serbia". They demanded a revision of the constitution and the creation of a seven-member federation, in which Vojvodina would be an equal unit. However, King Alexander's suspension of the constitution on January 6, 1929, led to the country's new territorial division, which did not take into account the historical and national boundaries and created nine banovinas on the territory of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia with Novi Sad as the capital of the Danube Banovina, which covered the territory of Vojvodina and northern Serbia.

During the 1930s, the ruling parties - the Yugoslav National Party and the Yugoslav Radical Union - deemed that the creation of the Danube Banovina had solved all the problems of Vojvodina. On the other hand, Dušan Bošković and his followers were deeply dissatisfied with both the administrative division of the country and its undemocratic regime. This political group held rallies protesting against Vojvodina's economic position, and finally adopted the Novi Sad Resolution in December of 1932, which demanded the federalization of Yugoslavia, within which Vojvodina would have an equal status with the other units.³ Not only the regime, but most of the opposition parties, as well as a significant number of Vojvodina's Serbian intellectuals, condemned such a request.

When, after the assassination of King Alexander, a certain liberalization of political life came about, the supporters of Vojvodina's autonomy tried to unite in a separate political organization called the Vojvodina Front. However,

² Bogumil Hrabak, „Autonomizam u Vojvodini 1919–1928. kao reakcija na finansijsko iscrpljivanje i političko zapostavljanje Vojvodine“, *Godišnjak Društva istoričara Vojvodine*, br. 11, (1982), 71.

³ Ranko Končar, *Opozicione stranke i autonomija Vojvodine 1929–1941* (Novi Sad: Agencija MIR, 1994), 98–117.

in the elections of 1938, the Vojvodina Front failed completely, and the voters overwhelmingly supported the Unitarian policy of the government of Milan Stojadinović. An even greater blow to the autonomist movement was the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, signed in 1939, which heralded the partition of Vojvodina between Serbia and Croatia.⁴ There was major resistance among the Vojvodina Serbs because of the annexation of the Šid and Ilok districts to the Croatian Banovina,⁵ and in such a situation the supporters of the Vojvodina Front were also divided along ethnic lines.

This group of civic politicians and intellectuals justified the need for the autonomy of Vojvodina primarily for economic reasons, while in terms of ethnic policy it stood more or less on the positions of the royalist regime. Therefore, it failed to extend its base to the members of the national minorities, except for a smaller number of Hungarians and Slovaks. On the other hand, another marginal but very promising political organization (the Communist Party of Yugoslavia) advocated the autonomy of Vojvodina between the two world wars, not only for economic reasons, but above all as a way of resolving the “ethnic question”. The idea of an independent Vojvodina within a South Slav or wider Balkan federation appears in their documents sporadically. Also, the Yugoslav Communists repeatedly advocated that the northern part of Vojvodina should be added to Hungary, in accordance with the principle of national self-determination (for example at the 1928 Dresden Congress).

The withdrawal of the Comintern from the idea of breaking up the Yugoslav state also caused a change in the policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia toward the federalization of Yugoslavia. Since 1934, the Communists had been considering the possibility of Vojvodina’s autonomy within Yugoslavia, and this idea was elaborated in the coming years. The leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, including Tito himself, propagated the need to organize Yugoslavia on a federal basis so that each of its five nations would receive their own federal unit, while the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vojvodina, would have the right to decide what status they wanted. The Communists’ idea of a seven-member federation, of which Vojvodina would be a member, coincided with the ideas of the Vojvodina Front, and these two organizations also instigated some pre-election cooperation. The idea of Vojvodina’s autonomy was a frequent propaganda theme of Vojvodina’s communists, whose most prominent representatives were Žarko Zrenjanin and Svetozar Marković Toza. Their writings show that until the war they had remained steadfast advocates of autonomy, opposed to the so-called Serbian imperialism, but it is not clear whether the Vojvodina communists were ready to accept any possible connection of the autonomous Vojvodina with Serbia - which was sporadically mentioned in their propaganda.

Naturally, during the World War II, the partisan movement opted for the idea of an autonomous Vojvodina, based on the Communist Party of Yugoslavia’s pre-war concept. The idea was substantiated by the leadership of the Provin-

⁴ Ljubo Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček* (Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, 1965), 249.

⁵ Mira Radojević, „Srpsko-hrvatski spor oko Vojvodine 1918–1941“, *Istorija 20. veka*, br. 1, (1994), 57.

cial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia for Vojvodina, which in the interwar period had equal status with the other provincial committees of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Interestingly, during the war, the Vojvodina communists did not come into conflict with the Serbian communists, but with the Croatian Party leadership in terms of jurisdiction over Srem. Namely, although the party organization in Srem considered itself part of Vojvodina's party organization, and the Srem partisans were the backbone of the People's Liberation Movement in Vojvodina, the Communist Party of Croatia had pretensions to absorb Srem both militarily and politically. After decisive resistance from the Vojvodina communists, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia ruled in mid-1943 in favor of the Vojvodina Provincial Committee.⁶

After that success, the provincial party leadership constituted the Vojvodina political and military bodies - the Main People's Liberation Committee and the partisan brigades. Therefore, in the words of Jovan Veselinov Žarko, the leading figure of the communists of Vojvodina after the death of Svetozar Marković Toza and Žarko Zrenjanin, this was a "historic turning point"⁷ in the life of the people of Vojvodina and it was only a matter of time when the autonomy of Vojvodina would be proclaimed officially. However, at the second session of the Anti-Fascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia in Jajce in November 1943, when the Yugoslav Federation was constituted, Vojvodina was not even mentioned. It was not until March of 1944 that Josip Broz Tito decided on the fate of Vojvodina, promising it autonomy and noting that the citizens of Vojvodina could decide for themselves which federal unit to join.

At the session of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, in August of 1944, a decision was made to convene the Anti-Fascist Assembly of the People's Liberation of Vojvodina, but it never happened. According to important witnesses of the then political disputes at the top of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, Vojvodina's party leadership expected Vojvodina to become an autonomous unit within Yugoslavia, without any connection to Serbia - which would be in line with the party's conceptual ideas and organizational structure. Tito himself was allegedly thinking in this direction, but members of the Serbian leadership (Aleksandar Ranković, Blagoje Nešković, Moša Pijade and others) insisted that Vojvodina had to become part of the Serbian federal unit. The reason for this was the need for the communists to create a political stronghold in Serbia, which was predominantly monarchist, in the face of the upcoming partisan offensive.⁸

The fact that it was decided to make Vojvodina an autonomous province within Serbia was disclosed by Jovan Veselinov Žarko in November 1944, at the First Session of the Anti-Fascist Assembly of the National Liberation of Serbia, held in Belgrade. However, the introduction of military administration for Banat, Bačka and Baranya delayed the process of political and territorial constitution of Vojvodina

⁶ Јелена Попов, *Војводина и Србија* (Ветерник: ДЦИЈ, 2001), 20–28.

⁷ Јован Веселинов Жарко, *Сви смо ми једна партија* (Нови Сад: Будућност, 1971), 33–34.

⁸ Dušan Popović, *Letopis o Vlačićima*, knj. 3 (Novi Sad: Agencija MIR, 2006), 31.

until the spring of 1945. At the beginning of April 1945, the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia for Vojvodina and the Main People's Liberation Committee of Vojvodina declared that Vojvodina would become part of Serbia, after which Vojvodina's deputies in the Anti-Fascist Assembly of the National Liberation of Serbia made a statement about Vojvodina's integration into Serbia. The First assembly of the Envoys of the People of Vojvodina confirmed its integration into Serbia on July 31, 1945, which was accepted in August by the Yugoslav and Serbian assemblies. Finally, by adopting an appropriate legal act, Vojvodina became an autonomous province within Serbia at the beginning of September 1945.

At the same time, for the first time in history, the Vojvodina party organization became a branch of the Serbian organization. Zemun was excluded from Vojvodina and integrated into Belgrade, which did not cause as much dissatisfaction as the border with Croatia, which took Baranja and Western Srem. Dissatisfaction in Vojvodina was also aroused by the fact that for a whole decade after its liberation, the Provincial Committee for Vojvodina was governed by cadres from Serbia proper. In those years, Vojvodina was also hit by economic hardship, which was primarily the result of measures taken by the federal authorities (forced purchase of agricultural products, the creation of peasants' cooperatives, the relocation of industrial capacities from Vojvodina, etc.).⁹

The beginning of the 1960s was marked by a slowdown in economic development in Yugoslavia, which had been very intense in the previous decade. Economic difficulties caused political debate at the top of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, primarily between the "centralist forces" and those who advocated weakening the powers of the federal state. For many years, political disputes between the two factions within the communist regime continued shaking the high forums of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia. Disagreements on how to further the development of society were especially expressed during the preparation of the constitutional reform. The need for a new constitution had emerged in the late 1950s, since it was considered that the further development of self-government was not possible within the framework of the constitutions of 1946 and 1953.¹⁰ During the process of preparing the new constitution, a conflict broke out between the Serbian and Vojvodina party leadership, for the first time since the establishment of Vojvodina's autonomy after World War II.

The conflict went public at a session of the Secretariat of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia for Vojvodina in October of 1961. The agenda included "some questions regarding the Constitution". On this occasion, Miloš Minić, President of the Executive Council of the Serbian Parliament, explained his proposals, which he had previously presented in the party newspaper *Borba*, in four sequels, entitled "Contribution to the Discussion on the New Constitution". Minić analyzed the reasons for the formation of the autonomous units, concluding that the roots of their existence should be sought in taking

⁹ Јелена Попов, *Народни фронт у Војводини 1944–1953*. (Нови Сад: Филозофски факултет, 1986), 273–274.

¹⁰ Марко Ницовић, *Уставни развој Србије 1804–2006*. (Београд: Sezam medico, 2007), 416.

categories from the Soviet Constitution. However, he did not deny the specific reasons for the formation of the autonomous units in Serbia - first of all, the peculiarities of the economy and the national composition of the population, and then the historical and geographical specificities (which were of secondary importance).

Without challenging the “justification and necessity” of implementing autonomy in Vojvodina and Kosovo and Metohija, Minić also raised some objections regarding the development of the autonomous units. He noted that the autonomous units themselves were sometimes exposed to unjustified criticism by the republic authorities from the position of “republic bureaucratic centralism”, but added that there were also opposite phenomena that went in the direction of weakening the links between the autonomous units and the republic bodies. He therefore called for the new Serbian Constitution to determine as precisely as possible the relations between the republic and the autonomous units, in order to avoid further misunderstandings.¹¹

The extent to which Minić’s articles aroused the party membership in Vojvodina became clear at the plenary session of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia for Vojvodina, held in December of 1961 in the presence of Dragoslav Marković, a member of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia. Although “ideological issues among the youth” were on the agenda, Vojvodina’s leaders took the opportunity to raise the issue of autonomy in the context of the ongoing public debate on the impending constitutional reform. In response, a meeting was organized in the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia on “economic issues”. For two days, Vojvodina executives suffered harsh accusations for “deviant phenomena”, even separatism. Disagreements between the party leaders of Vojvodina and Serbia echoed in the federal bodies, as it was revealed at an extended session of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, held in March of 1962. On this occasion, Aleksandar Ranković brought charges against the Vojvodina leadership (primarily for its negative attitude toward Belgrade). Jovan Veselinov Žarko supported him and none of those present opposed it.

Subsequently, in April of 1962, a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia was held, whose agenda was the situation in the party leadership of Vojvodina. Veselinov and Minić blamed Vojvodina’s leadership for autonomy, to which Stevan Doronjski responded, claiming that Vojvodina was economically backward. The continuation of the conflict followed in May, at the session of the Secretariat of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia for Vojvodina. On the agenda was the “political situation, relations in the Secretariat of the Provincial Committee, and relations with the Executive Committee of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia”. After speaking about the state of Vojvodina’s agriculture and industry, Doronjski criticized the republic authorities for centralism. He accused three members of the Secretariat of the Provincial Committee

¹¹ Слободан Бјелица, *Спорови око аутономије Војводине – књига прва: 1961–1974*. (Београд: Службени гласник, 2015), 69–90.

(Đura Jovanović, Petar Relić and Đorđe Nikšić) of Serbian nationalism and of a negative attitude toward the minorities, especially toward the Hungarians. He claimed that they had recruited several members of the Provincial Committee and that the disputes had also been carried over to the Provincial Executive Council.¹²

The dispute was resolved in 1962, after Đurica Jojkić replaced Geza Tikvicki as chairman of the provincial Executive Council, and the following year became secretary of the Provincial Committee instead of Stevan Doronjski.¹³ Some other Vojvodina officials were punished by being transferred to new positions. However, it would be shown three years later that the conflicts within the Provincial Committee, as well as between the Novi Sad and Belgrade party headquarters, had only been frozen and not closed at all. The issue of Vojvodina's autonomy would re-emerge during the constitutional changes that followed in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Yugoslavia.

When, after the ouster of Aleksandar Ranković in 1966, the conditions for a constitutional reform had been acquired (in order to further “de-etatize” Yugoslavia), demands for the extension of autonomy were heard again from Novi Sad and Priština.¹⁴ In March of 1967, the issue of extending provincial autonomy was raised at the session of the Assembly of Vojvodina. At that early stage of the constitutional reform, it could be noticed that there were conceptual differences, not so much between the party leaderships of Vojvodina and Serbia, but within them. While in Belgrade, opposite to the liberal authorities, stood an option close to centralist ideas (personified by Dragoslav Marković, who constantly emphasized the need to “preserve the unity of the republic”), in Novi Sad the opposition to the moderate provincial leadership was led by the head of the Novi Sad party organization, Dušan Popović.

The idea of the Vojvodina leaders was achieved at the end of December of 1968, when the second set of amendments to the Federal Constitution was adopted (the first set was adopted in April of 1967 and did not give mention the status of autonomous provinces). This substantially strengthened the subjectivity of the autonomous provinces: they were added the attribute of “socialist”, it was stated that the federation protects the constitutionally guaranteed rights and duties of the provinces, that the territory of the autonomous provinces could not be changed without the consent of the provincial assemblies, the provinces had been given responsibility for the performance of the federation's activities in their territories, they were entitled to an independent delegation to the Federal Assembly, etc. In the explanation of the amendments, a new interpretation of the genesis of autonomous provinces was given, that is, they were indigenous - born in the war and the revolution and were included into the composition of Serbia on the basis of the free will of their citizens.

After the adoption of the amendments to the Serbian Constitution, the Constitutional Law of Vojvodina was proclaimed at the session of the provincial

¹² D. Popović, *n. d.*, 404.

¹³ Ranko Končar i Dimitrije Boarov, *Stevan Doronjski – odbrana autonomije Vojvodine* (Novi Sad: Muzej Vojvodine, 2011), 796–832.

¹⁴ Љубодраг Димић, *Историја српске државности – Србија у Југославији* (Нови Сад: Платонеум, 2001), 393–394.

assembly in February of 1969. The third set of amendments ensued in 1971, and in April of 1972, the deputies of the provincial assembly adopted amendments to the Constitutional Law of Vojvodina. Finally, the Constitution of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina was adopted in February of 1974. This completed the process of the constitutional reform, which was essentially completed by the adoption of three sets of amendments, which gave the Socialist Autonomous Province (SAP) Vojvodina the highest degree of autonomy it had ever had.

After years of constitutional reform, which ended with the adoption of the federal, republic and provincial constitutions in early 1974, the leadership of the Yugoslav Communists declared the transition to a new phase of building self-government-based socialism. However, it would become evident that many were dissatisfied with the new constitutional solutions. Practice disclaimed theory and state propaganda. The ambiguity or misinterpretation of certain constitutional provisions caused problems in the functioning of the political system, primarily within the Socialist Republic of Serbia. The Serbian leadership described all the difficulties encountered in implementing the provisions of the constitution in an extensive document entitled “The Socialist Republic of Serbia and the Autonomous Provinces within it - Constitutional Position and Practice”.

The frequent disagreements between the republic and provincial leaderships led Dragoslav Marković to raise the issue of the constitutional position of Serbia at the session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia in December of 1974.¹⁵ Also, the initiative to consider the “issues of the constitution of the Republic with special reference to the exercise of functions of interest to the Republic as a whole” was also launched at the session of the Presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia in January of 1975. A year and a half later, in June of 1976, the Presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia was informed that work was underway to “prepare and produce materials that would serve as a basis for a discussion on the problems of the Constitution of the Republic”.

In December of 1976, the materials on the status of the provinces were completed, after which Dragoslav Marković submitted his report at the session of the Presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia. The expected remarks by the provinces were absent, so Marković informed the members of the Serbian Parliament that it was high time to examine how far the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Serbia as a unified state and socio-political community had come. The text of the working group of the Presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia was finally published in March of 1977 as a top-secret document entitled “The Socialist Republic of Serbia and the Autonomous Provinces within it - Constitution Position and Practice”. The document was addressed to the highest executives and, as it was engraved in a blue cover, it was called the “Blue Book”.

The “Blue Book” was intended to show “how much has been achieved so far in building the internal cohesion and unity of the Republic” and “what tendencies have been observed in this area and what problems are still open”.

¹⁵ Драгослав Марковић, *Живот и политика*, књ. 2 (Београд: Рад, 1987), 169.

According to the authors of the “Blue Book”, the problems are the following: the construction of three inadequately harmonized legal systems, which are increasingly distant from one another; strong tendencies toward territorial closure; weakening of the internal connection to the Republic, and difficulties in communication and the free movement of people.¹⁶

The first reaction to the “Blue Book” came from Vojvodina. Stevan Doronjski and Dušan Popović were dissatisfied with the content of the document. The answer to the “Blue Book” was written by Popović and it was presented to the Vojvodina officials in mid-April of 1977. According to Popović, the ideological and political foundations of the “Blue Book” were “etatist-centralist, nationalist, and Greater-Serbian”. Noting that the relationship between the republic and its provinces is merely a direct reason to open a much broader and far-reaching issue - the “issue of the position of the Serbian nation and the Serbian state in Yugoslavia”, Popović warned that the strengthening of “etatist-nationalist” tendencies in Serbia “would soon bring the whole of Yugoslavia into crisis”.¹⁷

Opponents of the “Blue Book”, both those from the provinces and those from Belgrade, initiated a debate on it at the Coordination Body of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia. This informal body met on the last day of June 1977, in the absence of the authors of the “Blue Book” (Najdan Pašić, Radoslav Ratković, Miodrag Zečević and the others), to continue the work on July 11 and 12, 1977, Tihomir Vlaškalić’s introductory presentation was supported by Dragoslav Marković and Ivan Stambolić, but the “Blue Book” was condemned as nationalist, centralist and etatist by representatives of the provinces and by Miloš Minić, Mirko Popović, Živan Vasiljević, and Momčilo Dugalić.

These controversial issues were on the agenda of a meeting of Josip Broz Tito with Tihomir Vlaškalić, president of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, Dušan Alimpić, chairman of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Vojvodina, and Mahmut Bakali, chairman of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Kosovo, held at Brioni in July of 1977. Tito was aware of the Coordination Body’s conclusion that “a working group of the leadership of the Republic and the provinces should be formed to prepare the consideration of the issues of the constitution in the Socialist Republic of Serbia and the provinces”.

The views of the “Blue Book” were re-evaluated, deemed unacceptable, and finally rejected at a meeting of the Coordination Body of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia on November 10 and 11, 1977. Thus, at the very end of 1977, the discussion on the constitutional status of Serbia ended far from the public eye and remained a secret for a long time. The parties to the “Blue Book” conflict interpreted the final outcome in different ways. According to the recollections of Stevan Doronjski, Dragoslav Marković was defeated and submitted his resignation, but withdrew it at the urging of Edvard

¹⁶ Слободан Бјелица, „Плава књига и њена рецепција 1977. године“, *Токови историје*, бр. 2, (2016), 37–61.

¹⁷ D. Popović, *n. d.*, 666–669.

Kardelj and Fadil Hoxha. Petar Stambolić saw the entire “Blue Book” affair as a failed attempt by Miloš Minić and his followers to seize power in Serbia and blamed Tito’s lack of support for the failure of the “Blue Book”.¹⁸ However, the “Blue Book” questions would become relevant again in the early 1980s, when, after the Tito’s death, Yugoslavia began to fall into a deep economic and political crisis.

In March of 1981 large-scale Albanian demonstrations erupted in Kosovo under the slogan “Kosovo Republic”. The Yugoslav leadership introduced a state of emergency. The discussions in party forums both at the federal and republic levels started about the Kosovo issue but also the issue of Serbia’s relations with its northern province - Vojvodina.¹⁹ The session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia and the session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, in early May of 1981, discussed the events in Kosovo but also the status that the provinces got in the 1974 Constitution. The Serbian leaders argued that there were tendencies toward both provinces being separated from Serbia and strongly opposed the use of the term “Serbia proper”. They also stated that the discussion from 1977 had to be continued.

A Belgrade media campaign followed, blaming “Serbia’s federalization” for the Kosovo problem. The political leaders of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina worried that the riots in Kosovo were used by the Serbian Government to raise the issue of autonomy and denied the claims that the Republic was unequal in comparison to its provinces. As the Serbian leadership demanded a re-definition of republic-provincial relations, the Executive Council of the Assembly of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina formed an expert group, which gave their view of the economic and normative problems of Vojvodina and Serbia (in the field of foreign trade, domestic trade, tourism, banking, etc.) However, the meetings between the representatives of all three sides (Serbia, Vojvodina, and Kosovo), held until the end of 1981 were unsuccessful.²⁰

In March of 1982, at a session of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, Dušan Alimpić welcomed the opening of the issue of the differences between the Socialist Republic of Serbia and its provinces at the highest Yugoslav party forum, expressing his fear that “if these differences are not eliminated there is a danger that they will continue to deepen and have consequences on our overall relations in the League of Communists and therefore on our unity”. Recalling that since 1981 it had been consistently stated that “Serbia was not constitutionally founded, that there were separations of provinces from the Republic, that there was an outgrowth of the Republic by the provinces, which was also the result of federal legislation, that there was separation of the provincial organizations of the League of Communists and the League of Communists of Serbia, and so on” and that the “press was very engaged on these issues”, he

¹⁸ Венцеслав Глишић, *Сусрети и разговори – прилози за биографију Петра Стамболића* (Београд: Службени гласник, 2010), 120.

¹⁹ Dejan Jović, *Jugoslavija – država koja je odumrla* (Beograd: Samizdat B92, 2003), 293–296.

²⁰ Slobodan Bjelica, „Views of the Vojvodina leadership on reopening the issue of the relationship between the SR of Serbia and the SAP of Vojvodina in 1981“, *Istraživanja*, no. 27, (2016), 258.

concluded that all of this “created a tense situation of ideological and political confusion and confusion in the minds of the people”. He also warned that “emphasizing the traditional relations between the Serbs from Vojvodina and the Serbs from Serbia, as well as their cultural and other ties with Serbia”, automatically “narrows the space for developing our community in Serbia and Yugoslavia on socialist and self-government-based relations”.

Conclusions on the tasks of the League of Communists in achieving the Constitution and further building and strengthening of the unity in the Socialist Republic of Serbia, adopted in early 1982, were discussed almost two years later, in December of 1983, at a meeting of top executives of Serbia and Vojvodina, held in Novi Sad. Among other things, Slavko Veselinov, the President of the Provincial Committee of the League of Communists of Vojvodina, articulated his impression that “in the activities of some institutions, the press, for example (*Politika*, *NIN*, etc.) seems to have established a permanent watch on what is happening in the Province. It has the qualities of just one campaign according to particular political measures or social actions we are conducting in the Province”. Đorđe Radosavljević, the President of the Presidency of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, said that “relations are much better than the public impression is and much weaker than they could be”. On the other hand, Dušan Čkrebić, in relation to the attitude of the Republic toward the provinces, said that these relations should be built according to the Constitution. “Anything less than the Constitution is not good, anything more than the Constitution is not good, therefore, relations must be built to the extent defined and envisaged in the 1974 Constitution”. Nikola Ljubičić also agreed that “much has been done to improve relations within the Republic of Serbia as a whole with regard to the provinces”. He noted that “many of the problems that have previously strained relations between Serbia proper and the provinces have been largely overcome” and that the remaining problems can be overcome by “open talks”.

One year after the Republic-Provincial Summit, in November of 1984, assessing the progress made in relations between Serbia and Vojvodina, Boško Krunić said that “in some areas of political life things are proving much more difficult and complicated than we had anticipated”, and that the “main backbone of the schism” was in the sphere of the political system. He also noted the “strengthening of the radical wing, which does not stand still and challenges the results achieved in the last three years”. Also in a statement from the meeting of the Vojvodina leadership, the “categorical demands for significant changes to the system that question the character of the federation, its relations based on equality of nations and national minorities, the constitutional position of the socialist republics and socialist the autonomous provinces, the position of the provinces as constituent elements of the federation, etc.” were labeled as “categorically harmful”.²¹

The problem between Serbia and its provinces was the main topic of discussion at the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, in May of 1985. Milan Kučan, on behalf of the working group formed by the

²¹ Слободан Бјелица, „Војвођанска аутономија – кризно жариште социјалистичке Југославије“, *Култура полиса*, бр. 15, (2018), 73–76.

Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, pointed out that it was “common knowledge and also our assessment that these relations are not good, that there are different and even opposite views on the essence of constitutional relations, to the position of the socialist autonomous provinces in the Socialist Republic of Serbia, and consequently to their position in the Federation, but also to the position of the Socialist Republic of Serbia... Our assessment is that the problem is so acute and at the same time significant for the whole country, that the League of Communists of Yugoslavia cannot leave it solely down to the communists of Serbia, Vojvodina and Kosovo”. Ivan Stambolić reiterated that “even the least complete review of the past events would show that there are no issues that have been resolved without serious conflicts, disputes and mutual accusations. All of this left negative consequences among people and in their relationships”. He stressed firmly that the League of Communists of Serbia was not an “advocate of any constitutional revisionism that would diminish the rights of provinces in the Federation”, but that he could not agree with the “tendency that relations in the Socialist Republic of Serbia take on confederate labels, with two partners being known and defined, and the third constitutionally being non-existent”. Radiša Gačić questioned why the “representatives of the Provincial Committees hold talks with the representatives of the Central Committees of other republics without the President of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia... What can we have in relations between parts of the League of Communists of Serbia and other Leagues of Communists that the President does not need to know?” On the other hand, Đorđe Stojšić stated that “no one, I speak on behalf of the Socialist autonomous province of Vojvodina, has ever denied the facts - that the Assembly is for the whole republic, that the Executive Council is for the whole republic, that the administrative bodies are for the whole republic, and that the Presidency is for the whole republic”.

In July of 1985, the conflict between the representatives of Serbia and Vojvodina over the Law on the System of Social Planning and on the Social Plan was renewed. In September of 1985, in an interview to the press, Ivan Stambolić criticized the position of the provinces and referred to the Serbian national traditions of Vojvodina’s autonomy. This interview elicited major resonance even in federal institutions, and in Vojvodina it provoked additional polarization between the more radical autonomists (Dušan Popović, general Petar Matić) and members of the moderate faction (Đorđe Stojšić, Boško Krunić), who thought that they would satisfy Belgrade by yielding to pressure from the republic authorities.²²

In 1985 the Presidency of the Central Committee of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia became involved in the republic-provincial strife. The reason was a letter sent by the Vojvodina leadership to Ivan Stambolić, the chairman of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, demanding that the media campaign against the autonomous provinces be stopped. Since the answer was not satisfactory, the Vojvodina leaders approached the federal leaders, so the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia

²² D. Popović, *n. d.*, 792.

formed a commission which conducted talks in Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Priština, after which it adopted “Views on Current Issues of Establishing Relations on which the unity and community in the Socialist Republic of Serbia is based”.

However, as of the beginning of 1986, the rejuvenated Serbian leadership (led by Ivan Stambolić and Slobodan Milošević) had again begun to initiate changes in the constitutional position of the provinces within the Socialist Republic of Serbia. One of their first steps was the adoption of the Conclusions on the Achievement of Unity and Community in the Republic, at the Constitutional Commission of the Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Serbia, in July of 1986. These conclusions provoked protests by the Vojvodina leadership, who felt that they did not stem from the joint work of the three commissions - the Serbian and the two provincial commissions. Distrust toward Serbia also emerged among the representatives of the other republics, gathered in the working bodies of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia.²³

The political elimination of Ivan Stambolić, carried out in September of 1987 at the Eight Session of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia, and the complete domination of Slobodan Milošević in the League of Communists of Serbia, further aggravated the relations between the republic and its two provinces. It was at this time that the Presidency of Serbia’s proposal for constitutional changes emerged, which was far more radical than the Blue Book thesis. Consequently, the assemblies of Vojvodina and Kosovo did not approve the proposal to change the constitution of Serbia in the parts concerning the exercise of the functions of the provinces. However, attempts to reconcile positions on the constitutional issue continued, seemingly leading to a compromise in early 1988.²⁴

At that time, mass rallies were ongoing in Kosovo and in Serbia proper, through which the Kosovo Serbs informed the public about their plight and pressured the political authorities to remedy the situation. Considering that Vojvodina’s leadership with its resistance to constitutional changes gave an alibi to the leaders of Kosovo not to be accused of Albanian separatism, the leaders of the Serbian movement in Kosovo and Metohija (Miroslav Šolević and others) decided to hold a rally in Novi Sad. On the morning of July 9, just over a thousand protesters arrived at the Novi Sad train station, from where they walked to the Provincial Executive Council building, where they held demonstrations.

Over the next two months, rallies were held throughout Vojvodina: in Pančevo, Nova Pazova, Titov Vrbas, Vršac, etc. the participants in the rallies were mostly colonists. The rallies themselves had a Serbian national landmark, and in some places were held with the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In some places (Odžaci, Bačka Palanka), the municipal leaderships also supported the rally demands and the policies of the republic authorities. The attempt to organize a counter-rally in Sremska Mitrovica failed, and the intention of the provincial authorities to punish the disobedient leadership of Bačka Palanka (Mihalj Kertes, Radovan Pankov) was the reason for the protest in Novi Sad.

²³ Душан Чкробић, *Живот, политика, коментари* (Београд: Службени гласник, 2008), 315.

²⁴ Boško Krunić, *Decenija zatora i raskola* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 2009), 61–62.

Factory workers from Bačka Palanka left for Novi Sad on October 5, where they were joined by workers and other citizens from Novi Sad. The protesters surrounded the Provincial Committee building, demanding the resignation of the Provincial Committee Presidency. Initially, Vojvodina's party leadership resisted the pressure, but faced with the possibility of numerous protesters breaking through the police cordon and storming the building, as well as the addresses of Slobodan Milošević and Raif Dizdarević (the president of the Presidency of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), a session of the Provincial Committee was scheduled for the following day. On the agenda were the resignations of the members of the Presidency of the Provincial Committee.

A few days before the finale of the "anti-bureaucratic revolution", the top provincial leaders discussed the political situation in Vojvodina. At that session, Đorđe Radosavljević emphasized that "here in Vojvodina there can only be a leadership that will either represent the interests of the people, even if they are in conflict with some in Vojvodina and some in other parts of the country and in the Socialist Republic of Serbia, or there will be someone's branch and it will conflict with the real interests of people - there is no other way". He asked "what is an autonomist in our case; if he is the one who defends the real interests of the people living in the autonomy can he be attacked as an autonomist?"

On the day of the scheduled meeting of the Provincial Committee, on October 6, a huge mass of people gathered in the center of Novi Sad.²⁵ At the same time, a session of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia was held in Belgrade, supporting the demands of the protesters. The collective resignation of the members of the Presidency of the Provincial Committee was adopted by majority vote, and sharp "differentiation" in the provincial and municipal administrations would be implemented in the coming months, with the aim of replacing the autonomists. As it is usually the case in these situations, in these purges many innocent people were removed from office and lost their jobs, and hesitants would quickly move into the ranks of the victors. Finally, by politically liquidating the rebellious Vojvodina leadership, the republic government was able to implement the long-announced constitutional changes.

The Amendments to the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Serbia were adopted on March 28, 1989, thus redefining the constitutional position of the provinces within the republic. The provinces continued to retain their autonomy, but their powers in the legislature were reduced. On the other hand, the competences of the Presidency of the Socialist Republic of Serbia were expanded. Among other things, the procedure for amending the constitution was changed and it was stated that any changes in the Constitution were decided by the Serbian Parliament after obtaining the opinions of the provincial assemblies (which had lost their right of veto). With these amendments the Socialist Republic of Serbia regained its statehood throughout its entire territory.²⁶

²⁵ Стојан Бербер, *Сведок времена* (Сомбор: Историјски архив, 2016), 46.

²⁶ Љ. Димић, *н. д.*, 456.

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DISPUTES OVER THE AUTONOMY OF VOJVODINA
FROM THE CREATION TO THE BREAKUP OF YUGOSLAVIA

Summary

The idea of an autonomous region of Vojvodina had its origins in Serbian political thought and the new political, demographic and cultural circumstances and opportunities which emerged in the early 20th century. In a self-proclaimed effort to break with the complex problems of the past and take into account the particularities of local history, ethnic structure, and cultural distinctiveness, the communist authorities of Yugoslavia awarded territorial autonomy to Vojvodina in the aftermath of World War II. In socialist Yugoslavia in the 1960s there were constitutional reforms whose goal was to establish new relations between the republics and the federal state and, in particular, between the autonomous provinces and the Republic of Serbia. Just as the reforms of the federal Constitution took place as a sign of conflict between two concepts, so the future standing of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina provoked expert polemics between the prominent Serbian and Vojvodina officials. The reasons for this were dual: the state of the economy of Vojvodina and its position in the ensuing revision of the federal Constitution. After years of the constitutional reform process, which led to federal, republic, and provincial constitutions in 1974, the Yugoslav communist leadership declared a transition to a new phase of the construction of socialism. However, vagueness or incorrect interpretations of some constitutional provisions caused problems in the political system, primarily within the Republic of Serbia. Frequent disagreements with provincial leaderships prompted the republican leadership to raise the question of Serbia's constitutional status. A top-secret document, the so-called "Blue Book", analyzed the constitutional and legal position of the republic and its provinces, with a negative statement. The "Blue Book" was met with a negative reaction in the provinces, and after President Tito's intervention, the republic authorities suffered a defeat. But after Tito's death and the massive Albanian demonstrations in Kosovo in 1981, the Serbian leadership reopened the issue of Kosovo's and Vojvodina's position in Serbia. The Vojvodina communists opposed the intentions of the Serbian authorities, and the dispute ended in 1988, when the so-called anti-bureaucratic revolution came to pass.

KEYWORDS: Autonomy, Serbia, Vojvodina, Yugoslavia