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## **VOJVODINA IN THE NATIONAL POLICY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF YUGOSLAVIA 1918-1945**

**ABSTRACT:** The national policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY), between the two world wars, was formulated under the direct influence of the Comintern and was therefore subject to sudden and radical changes in the foreign policy of the USSR. Thus, in accordance with the foreign policy interests of the first socialist state, the national policy of the CPY ranged from demands for the disintegration of the Yugoslav kingdom to insisting on its constitutional reorganization. Within the federalist concept of the CPY, Vojvodina, as a “historical, geographical, and economic entity,” was also envisaged to have the status of a federal unit, with occasional and conditional acceptance of its autonomous status. Although based on a different ideological matrix, the arguments used by the communists to justify the need for a special constitutional status for Vojvodina were identical to the demands of the Croatian political movement and a segment of the civic opposition in the Vojvodina Front, which the CPY formally supported in the mid-1930s. Despite the fact that autonomist and federalist projects for Vojvodina were not widely supported by either the Serbs or its national minorities for various reasons, Vojvodina became an autonomous province when the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, at the end of World War II, established a federal Yugoslavia in the context of agreements among the interested major powers.

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## 1. Unitarist position of the communist party of Yugoslavia

When, on December 1, 1918, the joint state of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was proclaimed, all Yugoslav leftist parties welcomed the unification as a “revolutionary act” and the beginning of the “Yugoslav national revolution.” The Social Democrats of Croatia and Slavonia advocated the position of “national unity of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes,” while the Yugoslav Social Democratic Party of Slovenia saw the unification and the new state as “a precondition for the successful struggle for socialism and revolution.” For the Social Democratic Party of Serbia, the unification was also significant as a precondition for “more successful class struggle” and “resistance to imperialist pressure,” but the creation of a joint state was interpreted as a “political, economic, and cultural necessity beyond any discussion.” The consensus in support of national unification was also expressed at the founding of the Socialist Workers’ Party of Yugoslavia (Communists), at the Congress of Unification in April 1919, through the standpoint of “the national identity of the three tribes,” national state, and national unity. The SWPY(C) criticized the manner of unification but simultaneously opposed tribal separatism (Petranović & Zečević, 1987, pp. 266-267).

At the Second Congress in Vukovar in 1920, it changed its name to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia but still advocated the idea of national unity and a national state and even lamented that the process of centralization in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was not progressing faster, “resulting in the retention of different legislation in its provinces.” Despite the fact that the Comintern called the division of territories among the Balkan members of the Entente “banditry politics,” which, as stated, led to even greater national oppression than during Austro-Hungarian and Turkish domination, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) initially insisted on national unitarism. Seeking to accelerate the overcoming of provincial specificities, historical, and national differences through its organization, it formed the Central Party Council and abolished all provincial centers, replacing them with regional secretariats (Petranović & Zečević, 1988, p. 235).

This relative and conditional autonomy regarding the national question, as well as the overall political action of Yugoslav communists, would be replaced by unquestioning obedience to the Comintern after an intra-party showdown

with opponents of centralization, the so-called centrists<sup>1</sup> (Petranović, 1988; Gligorijević, 1992), and legal measures that initially restricted and then completely banned the activities of the CPY. Declared illegal, the Communist Party remained in the underground until 1941.<sup>2</sup> As Gligorijević (1992) notes, “condemned and rejected, without membership control, party officials increasingly turned to Soviet Russia,” from where they embarked “on the path of conspirators, not only against the ruling system but also against their own country” (p. 64).

During that period, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia did not seriously engage in the national question, which, according to its leadership, did not even exist because “the process of national assimilation for the Yugoslavs began with their state unification” (Muzej Vojvodine, Arhivska zbirka, Arhivska grada KPJ 1919–1941, NS, KI, br. 1921/10, *Political and Economic Situation in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes*).

However, the national policy of the CPY soon became conditioned by the foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union, which the Comintern, in the form of ideological principles, imposed on Yugoslav communists, and they unquestionably accepted them starting from 1924.<sup>3</sup> In line with Stalin’s

<sup>1</sup> A group of reformists in the Communist Party of Yugoslavia publicly rebelled against centralization and subordination to the Comintern, challenging the Bolshevik centralization of the party. Acceptance of the “21 conditions,” which envisaged the centralization of communist parties and their subordination to the Comintern, was treated as “political suicide,” and Comintern leaders were labeled as dictators to whom one should “submit, not respond.” Such public and explicit opposition to the decisions of the Comintern led to the expulsion from the party of 153 signatories of the “Manifesto of the Opposition of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia,” including Živko Topalović and Dragiša Lapčević.

<sup>2</sup> *The Proclamation and the Law on the Protection of Public Safety and Order in the State* are interpreted as a success achieved by the Communists in the elections for the Constituent Assembly in 1920 (they received nearly 200,000 votes, making them the third-largest party in terms of seats and the fourth-largest in terms of votes), as well as strikes in Slovenian and Bosnian mines. The Proclamation was justified by the intention of the Communists to carry out a revolutionary coup in the country, accusations of being foreign spies, demoralizing the army, inciting violence, and undermining the state. The assassination of Milorad Drašković, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the attempted assassination of Regent Alexander were the pretext for the Law on the Protection of Public Safety and Order in the State, which banned the Communist Party of Yugoslavia as a “terrorist and anarchist organization.”

<sup>3</sup> Recent analyses of the national policy of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and its relationship with the Comintern, between the two world wars, indicate that the formulation of the national question in the Yugoslav party was heavily influenced by the Communist Party of Bulgaria, and its interest in the “Macedonian question,” which it considered crucial to its national policy. The Communist Party of Bulgaria, as a section of the Comintern, had a much better status than the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, so the Third International, in the early post-war years, accepted the viewpoint of the Bulgarian Communist Party that Serbia “occupied Macedonia” in the Balkan Wars, where “about a million Bulgarians” lived, preventing their national unification. Bulgarian communists were also dominant in the Balkan Communist Federation, where, at the end of 1923, with the support of the Comintern, the idea of breaking up Yugoslavia began to mature.

assessment that Yugoslavia should be dismantled as an “artificial creation” and as a bulwark of French and British policies in the Balkans, the CPY would soon abandon the idea of national unitarism, and then the restructuring, or the survival, of the Yugoslav state. At the First Land Conference of the CPY in 1922, there was still talk of the “three tribes,” but also of the “specificities of Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Montenegrins, and Macedonians who should resolve their status in the state freely, based on the right to self-determination” (Petranović & Zečević, 1987, p. 273).

Under the dominant influence of the Comintern, Yugoslav communists, by mid-1923, abandoned the idea of national unity of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes and adopted the principle that each nation in the Kingdom had the right to self-determination and its own independent sovereign state (Muzej Vojvodine, mikrofilm, Komunistička internacionala, F-I, K XVI/14 , inv. br. 21446, fk 1069, *General Situation in the Country and Tasks of the Communist Party – the Problem of Nationalities*). Unquestionably following changes in Moscow’s approach to the national question, the CPY would, in the following decades, alternately insist on the breakup and federalization of Yugoslavia. The right to self-determination until the secession of all “oppressed nations and national minorities” was based by the communists on premises of “national oppression” and the “hegemony of the Serbian bourgeoisie and the dominance of the Serbian nation over other nations” (MV, AZ, Arhivska građa KPJ 1919-1941, NS, KI, br. 1924/66, *Resolution on the National Question*), but occasionally, as an alternative, they also offered federal arrangements or provincial autonomies as the “best solution to the constitutional issue” (MV, AZ, Arhivska građa KPJ 1919-1941, NS, KI, br. 1923/70, S. Marković, *The National Question in the Light of Marxism* ). In line with the Comintern’s stance that “national conflicts create fertile ground for revolutionary movements,” the Communist Party of Yugoslavia was instructed to call upon the Croatian Republican Peasant Party to join in the common struggle with the “revolutionary proletariat” (Gligorijević, 1992, pp. 109-113).

## 2. The fifth congress of the comintern

The Fifth Congress of the Comintern, held in 1924, formalized the change in the communists’ approach to the national question, and the thesis on the existence of a distinction between “oppressor” and “oppressed” nations served as the basis for the decision on the disintegration of Yugoslavia. According to the interpretation of the Comintern, by creating the Yugoslav state, “imperialist state” Serbia “occupied” all other peoples, so the Platform of Agreement of

the CPY, adopted the same year, based on the decisions of the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, for the first time, instead of the formulation “ruling Serbian bourgeoisie,” states that “the ruling nation is Serbian, which oppresses all other nations in Yugoslavia.” In line with this stance, the recommendation of the Comintern was not to wage a struggle against “every nationalism” as it would hinder the national movements of the “oppressed nations,” but rather “against the Serbian financial oligarchy and its instruments, camarillas, and militaristic cliques,” as the “most dangerous enemy of the revolutionary proletariat” (Gligorijević, 1992, p. 122, 158). The Platform was adopted despite doubts and confrontations within the membership of the CPY, and with the Resolution on the National Question in Yugoslavia, the principle of federative organization was completely abandoned and replaced with an explicit demand for the breakup of the state. It was concluded that the right to self-determination “must be expressed in the form of Croatia, Slovenia, and Macedonia seceding from Yugoslavia and forming independent republics,” and that the communists would support the right of the Hungarians to secede and the “struggle of the Albanian people for independence” (Gligorijević, 1992, pp. 118-120).

Soon after, Stalin corrected the decision to break up Yugoslavia, so the communists returned to the federalist concept, with seven Yugoslav provinces that “have their own particular political life,” namely: Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro, Vojvodina, Macedonia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thus, at the Third Congress of the CPY in 1926, Vojvodina was mentioned for the first time as a federal unit, although as early as 1922, among the members of the Central Committee, there were opinions that “Vojvodina must not belong to Serbia”, (Muzej Vojvodine, mikrofilm, Komunistička internacionala, F-I K XVI/14, inv. br. 21446, fk 308), and a year later, among the communists, the first ideas about the autonomous status of Vojvodina within the future Balkan-Danube federation emerged. Given the communists’ stance on the “imperialist annexation of Vojvodina,” its northern part was referred to as “Hungarian territory” where the Hungarian minority was “nationally oppressed,” and therefore had the right to secede. Such Comintern propaganda played into Budapest’s revisionist policy, and the communists were also ordered to support the Hungarian Party as a possible ally in the fight against the “interests of the Serbian bourgeoisie” (MV, Arhivska grada KPJ, NS, KI br. 1926/18, *Resolution of the Presidium of the Comintern on the Yugoslav Question*).

From 1928 onwards, the Comintern returned to the policy of breaking up Yugoslavia and committed the CPY to fight for independent Croatia,

Macedonia, Slovenia, and Montenegro, as well as for an independent and united Albania to which Kosovo and Metohija would be annexed, i.e., Yugoslav territories inhabited by an Albanian national minority (Pešić, 1983, p. 235). The Fourth Congress of the CPY assessed that “on Hungarian territory in northern Vojvodina, annexed to Yugoslavia by the Treaty of Trianon, the Great Serbian bourgeoisie is also implementing its denationalization policy.” Therefore, the CPY recognizes the right to secede to the Hungarian national minority in northern Vojvodina and fights “against all forms of national oppression against the Hungarian and German populations of Vojvodina.” A year later, the communists added “independent Vojvodina” to the list of “independent worker-peasant republics,” alongside Bosnia and Herzegovina, although the Comintern rejected this concept as a “template and invented solution” that does not take into account the national structure of Yugoslavia but rests on pre-war borders of individual provinces (Petranović & Zečević, 1987, pp. 388-390). The Comintern believed that no nation in Vojvodina demanded its independence but rather the right to self-determination, and considered such an idea as “unserious.” Therefore, in directives to the membership in the province, the leadership of the CPY emphasizes the right to self-determination up to secession, including the “right to secede the occupied Hungarian regions in northern Vojvodina” (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI 1933/162, *Circular of the Central Committee of the CPY to organizations, groups, and members of the CPY in Vojvodina*).

The policy of breaking up Yugoslavia by the Comintern was based on ideological constructs according to which Serbia annexed all other peoples and territories in Yugoslavia, so the Serbian nation, as the ruling one, oppressed all others, even its compatriots in the Prečani regions. In a letter of the Central Committee to the provincial communists, it is stated that “through the plundering policy of the big Great Serbian bourgeoisie,” not only towards “oppressed nations but also towards all the annexed provinces, the Prečani Serbian peasantry has been pushed into the front line of the struggle against national oppression” (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI br. 1928/49, *Letter from the CC of the CPY to the Provincial Secretariat of the CPY in Vojvodina*).

Although based on a different ideological matrix, the national policy of the CPY was in line with the legal demands of the Croatian political movement, and the absurd claim that “Prečani Serbs are also nationally oppressed,” insistence on the distinction between “Prečani Serbs” and “Serbians,” and slogans advocating the expulsion of “Serbian occupiers, officials, and gendarmes” perfectly fit into the propaganda arsenal of the Croatian Peasant Party (Pešić, 1983, pp. 251, 259). As early as 1925, the Comintern instructed Yugoslav

communists to establish cooperation with the Croatian Peasant Party and vote for its candidates in elections, while simultaneously seeking to neutralize the influence of the Croatian Peasant Party and win over the peasants, whom they considered their natural followers, and to radicalize not only social demands but also national issues and thus “outbid the leadership of the Croatian Peasant Party” (Pleterski, 1986, p. 207). After the assassination in the Parliament, the CPY began a more intensive approach to the Peasant-Democratic Coalition, estimating that after the death of Stjepan Radić, the coalition was on the brink of collapse and that the peasantry, “liberated from bourgeois influence,” would massively opt for the communist party (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS, KI 1932/11, 1932/21, 1932/35). In the directives of the Central Committee to the provincial committees, the basic slogans were the convocation of the Assembly (Constituent Assembly of representatives of the independent state of Croatia) and the complete national liberation and secession of all “oppressed nations” (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS, KI, br. 1928/77-a, *Proposal for a resolution in preparations for the Fourth Congress of the CPY*).

However, the new president of the Croatian Peasant Party and one of the leaders of the Peasant-Democratic Coalition, Vlatko Maček, did not agree with the “revolutionary orientation” of the CPY, nor with armed resistance to the regime, relying on diplomatic support from major powers and negotiations with England and Italy. The communists again accused the leadership of the Croatian Peasant Party of contacts with the civic opposition and, especially, the stance that the national issue, primarily Croatian, could be resolved within the Yugoslav state. On the other hand, the CPY was very uncritical towards the Ustasha movement and its terrorist actions and demanded from its membership, “workers and peasants” of Croatia and Serbia, to “assist with all their strength” the Ustasha fight in Lika and Croatia (Pešić, 1983, pp. 229, 258).

The new concept of solving the national question seems to have been most difficult to accept in Vojvodina, where, regardless of the national heterogeneity of the population, the directive on breaking up or federalizing the country was not easy to implement. The fact that posters and leaflets printed in the province did not contain messages about the creation of a “federation of worker-peasant republics in the Balkans and the Danube region,” which were otherwise emphasized in party propaganda from the headquarters, attests to the lack of understanding for the policy of state disintegration in Vojvodina (Arhiv Vojvodine, Arhiva Oblasnog sekretarijata SK, 2670 /1924, K-306/1925).

The greatest resistance was caused by the order to support the Hungarian Party, or the directive that communists must not suppress its irredentism, as

it would serve the “Serbian hegemonic bourgeoisie.” Neither the Hungarians themselves were enthusiastic about this strategy of the Central Committee, so the tasks of the CPY Central Committee for Vojvodina in 1926 include, among other things, “to fight against all cases of oppression of national minorities and against the hostile annexation of Vojvodina and to suppress the negative attitude of a part of Hungarian comrades towards Hungarian irredentism in Vojvodina” (Palić, 1980, p. 213).

### **3. The People's Front policy**

The January 6th Proclamation in 1929 was seen by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia as a signal to begin the revolution, prompting the party leadership to issue a call to arms to workers and peasants. However, the communists found themselves isolated in their intentions, attributed by Končar (1995) to “incorrect and unrealistic views on the national question” (pp. 266-267). Practically dismantled during the dictatorship, the CPY began its organizational reconstruction in 1932 as a member of the global communist movement and a section of the Comintern, albeit with little influence in its organs and on the margins of its politics. It was an illegal and small party, directed from abroad and particularly burdened by misconceptions about the national question stemming from the foreign policy assessments of the party and the state leadership of the USSR (Petranović, 1988, p. 213). Until mid-1934, the Comintern considered fascism not as a threat to the international proletariat but merely as accelerating a new imperialist war and revolution that would ultimately abolish capitalism. Therefore, initially, Stalin cooperated with Rome and Berlin, with whom he was crucially bound by the identical goal of destroying the European order established by the Versailles Treaty, besides the militancy in organization and fanaticism of followers. However, when it became apparent that the balance between the countries of the so-called Western democracy and the fascist powers was rapidly shifting to the detriment of the former, there was a turnaround in the Comintern’s policy and a revision of Soviet foreign policy, which began to seek new allies and gradually transitioned into the camp of defending the Versailles system (Karaivanov, 1953, p. 18).<sup>4</sup> In line with the changing attitudes towards fascism, the Comintern’s stance towards social democracy also changed, and

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<sup>4</sup> In the autumn of 1934, the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations, a year later formed an alliance with France, then with Czechoslovakia, met with the British Prime Minister, and changed its previously hostile attitude towards the Little Entente.

the idea of gathering all “left forces” matured. The People’s Front policy, ratified at the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in 1935, was supposed to encompass all middle-class parties and political groups, liberal, radical, and even conservative, that expressed readiness to resist fascism.

The first and most important change in the party’s national policy concerned its attitude towards the “Versailles Yugoslavia” and its, albeit conditional, affirmation. According to the explanation provided by the Politburo of the Central Committee itself, the change in the CPY’s stance towards the Yugoslav state was influenced by foreign policy factors: the danger of German and Italian fascism to world peace, i.e., the fact that France and its allies no longer represented forces willing to provoke a new imperialist war. As for internal political reasons that influenced the change in the CPY’s stance, the Politburo cited only one: the “categorical and clear” statement by Vlatko Maček regarding the maintenance of the “state community within today’s borders on the condition of the freedom of the Croatian people” (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS, KI, br. 1935/65, *On Cooperation with the Croatian Peasant Party*). The communists no longer sought the disintegration of Yugoslavia but rather “the right and freedom of each nation to determine for itself with whom and how it will form its state community” (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI 1935/16, *Letter from B. Parović, Central Committee of the CPY, on the state of the organization in Vojvodina*). The CPY advocated for the “Serbian people to support the demands and struggles of other nations for equality” and declared support for “the convocation and free election of national assemblies for each nation in Yugoslavia, primarily the Croatian Sabor and then the Slovenian, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, and Vojvodina national assemblies which should confidently resolve all issues” (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI br. 1935/145). In parallel with giving up on breaking up Yugoslavia, at the suggestion of the Comintern, the CPY embarked on the reorganization of the party, namely the formation of national communist parties in Croatia and Slovenia, with the perspective of Macedonia as well (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI, 1935/230, *Letter from the Central Committee of the CPY to the Comintern*).

The fact that the reorganization of the CPY proceeded selectively—since the Communist Party of Serbia was formed only in 1945, and Montenegro in 1948—caused doubts and criticism even then. It was later assessed as one of the biggest mistakes of the CPY, but neither the creators of the party’s policy nor numerous researchers of the history and politics of the communist movement found convincing and justified reasons for it. Part of the answer, at least formally, lies in the limitation contained in the initial rationale of the

idea of national parties, whose establishment is envisaged only for “nationally oppressed countries that are compact” (Gligorijević, 1992, pp. 274-275; Pešić, 1983, pp. 267-268). This automatically excluded Serbia, which, according to the communists’ understanding, was not “nationally oppressed,” as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Vojvodina because they were not “ethnically compact.” Skepticism about the possibility and necessity of creating the Communist Party of Serbia may have stemmed from the dilemma of which of the existing “national” parties to include Bosnia and Herzegovina and Vojvodina, even with a special status (Pleterški, 1986, pp. 330-331).

Yugoslav communists adapted slowly and with difficulty to the new course of party politics, as, practically from its inception, their struggle was directed against the Versailles order and “artificial creations” such as Yugoslavia, according to the Comintern’s understanding. Moreover, in line with the Comintern directive that they “must rid themselves of sectarianism towards social democracy and opposition bourgeois forces,” they were forced to call for cooperation with former ideological enemies (Petranović & Zečević, 1988, p. 377). However, a coalition between the Serbian bourgeois opposition and the communists was not formed, even though they occasionally appeared together at political gatherings, as the invitation was rejected by both democrats and left-wing agrarians and socialists. The only example of cooperation was recorded in Vojvodina, where the communists entered into an electoral coalition with the Vojvodina Front. Also, before the parliamentary elections in 1935, the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party for Croatia concluded an agreement with the Croatian Peasant Party, without the knowledge of the Central Committee and contrary to its directives. At the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, cooperation with the Croatian Peasant Party was positively assessed, with a recommendation to continue negotiations with Maček (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI br. 1935/144, 1935/166, Pismo PK KPJ za Hrvatsku kojim poziva vođstvo HSS u Dalmaciji na zajedničku akciju, *Information on cooperation with the “radicevci”*). The communists tried to win over the membership of the Croatian Peasant Party and even take the lead in the Croatian peasant movement, but instead, by “adopting a new national policy and supporting the Croatian Peasant Party, they were losing supporters instead of gaining them. At the April plenum in 1936, it could only be noted that there were communists who were “under the influence of the Croatian Peasant Party” (Gligorijević, 1992, p. 268).

After the consultations in Moscow in 1936, the leadership of the CPY concluded that the goal of the joint struggle of all the peoples of Yugoslavia against fascism was the “urgent solution of the national question,” which,

as stated, “must coincide with the aspirations and will of all the peoples of Yugoslavia, especially those oppressed and neglected by Greater Serbian chauvinism.” Communists see this solution in a democratic federative state, where all peoples must be equal or “have broad autonomy.” Thus, according to the instructions received by the Central Committee of the CPY from the Comintern, the most important political slogan became: “For a democratic federative Yugoslavia” (MV, mikrofilm, Komunistička internacionala, K XVII/1, inv. br. 21446, fk 158).

That same year, the positions of the Central Committee of the CPY regarding federation were specified in a letter, in which, judging by the proposed seven federal units, Vojvodina is treated as one of them. It emphasizes the right to self-determination of all peoples, not only “Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes but also Macedonians and Montenegrins, as well as the right of the people in Vojvodina, Bosnia and Herzegovina to decide whether to preserve their regional autonomy in the federative state.” The author of the letter<sup>5</sup> notes that the “Serbian united oposition (and even a part of the people’s front) is ready to give freedom to Croats and Slovenes, while considering the other peoples and provinces Serbian. Serbian bourgeoisie wants to ensure its domination and hegemony over Macedonians and Montenegrins, over the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Vojvodina in a new and refined way.” The letter also states that “the leftists’ position coincides with the position of the Peasant-Democratic Coalition” (MV, mikrofilm, Komunistička internacionala, K XVII/1, inv. br. 21446, fk 69).

In line with changes in the national policy of the CPY, its attitude towards the status of Vojvodina also changed. Advocating for Vojvodina as a federal unit, or “broad autonomy,” communists practically aligned their views with the demands of the Vojvodina Front. After initial reservations, caused by fear of too many political concessions, communists formally supported the Vojvodina Front, and this was actually the only example of cooperation between the Communist Party and civil opposition parties in Serbia. Thus, the platform of the People’s Front was practically realized only in Vojvodina, based on identical understandings of its future position in the state community. In one document from the archival material of the CPY, signed under the pseudonym “Zweig,” it is written that the “People’s Front in Vojvodina is mainly formed from the following groups: United Workers’ Party, left-wing

<sup>5</sup> The letter is unsigned, and in post-war literature, it was often attributed to Tito, although in more recent historiography, it is generally undisputed that the author is Adolf Muk, a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPY, executed in 1943.

agrarians, Vojvodina Front..." (Muzej Vojvodine, mikrofilm, Komunistička internacionala, K XVII/1 inv. br. 21446 , fk 89). The leadership of the CPY adopted the slogan "Vojvodina for Vojvodinians" from the Vojvodina Front and recommended to its members in Vojvodina to "positively express themselves on the issue of the Vojvodina Front" (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ 1919-1941, NS KI 1935/45).

In the tasks for building the People's Front in 1936, autonomy was foreseen for Vojvodina: "If there are aspirations for autonomy and federation among certain peoples, communists support and help these movements as a step forward towards full national liberation. For this purpose, communists support the demand for the convocation of the Croatian and other assemblies and the movement for the autonomy of Vojvodina and Montenegro" (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI br. 1936/398, *Communists and the Constituent Assembly*).

Seeking to emerge from illegality through the political activities of the Vojvodina Front, communists reached an agreement with it in October 1936, which, over the next two years, confirmed "unity of views on the political solution to the position of Vojvodina." By a decision of the Central Committee from April 1936, the CPY "unreservedly supported the movement for the autonomy of Vojvodina as a step forward towards full national liberation, i.e., towards establishing national equality, seeking to give it the meaning of a struggle for social justice" (Milanović, 1971, p. 132). However, differences in the projection of Vojvodina's future state-legal status, present in the policy of the civil opposition, are also noticeable in the program of the CPY, so, parallel to autonomy, communists seek "the democratization of the country and its reorganization on a federative basis, where Vojvodina would also be a federative unit." In contacts with the membership, activists of the People's Front in Vojvodina also present various options for state restructuring. Žarko Zrenjanin, secretary of the Provincial Committee of the Communist Party for Vojvodina, in 1938, emphasizes that communists seek organization based on "seven units with full rights to determine their position in federative Yugoslavia (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Vojvodina)" (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI, br. 2193, *Lecture by Žarko Zrenjanin*).

Cooperation with the Vojvodina Front was expanded in 1938 with a new agreement with the Initiative Committee of the Workers' Party, or the Party of the Working People (PWP), through which communists intended to legalize their work. The platform for the work of the Initiative Committee of the PWP of Vojvodina formulated the standpoint according to which

“Vojvodina should be an equal unit in the future state arrangement with other provinces” (Popović, 1971, p. 161). Agreement was reached on joint action in the upcoming parliamentary elections and the participation of communists in the political rallies and conferences of the Front. The leadership of the CPY positively assessed cooperation with the Vojvodina Front, so Tito informed the Comintern in 1938 that “the majority of democratic elements are found in the Vojvodina Front,” where “our comrades are not doing badly and are achieving great success in creating a people’s front.” Tito believes that the name Vojvodina Front should be retained because it “is popular in Vojvodina and enables some minorities to join this front, for example, Hungarians, who are quite numerous, as well as Romanians, Bunjevci (Croats), etc.” (MV, Arhivska građa KPJ, NS KI 1938/23, *Tito’s report to the Comintern*; NS KI 1939/8, *Tito’s report to the Comintern*).

The state-legal status of Vojvodina is explicitly mentioned for the last time in the platform of the Party of the Working People from 1939, which criticizes the Cvetković–Maček Agreement and the “ruling Serbian circles” for their alleged intention to “split all Serbian and Croatian masses.” Apparently motivated by current speculations about the future position of Vojvodina, communists state: “Exactly because Vojvodina has its special tasks, both in the economic and national fields, and because it is an independent historical unit with its tradition, it cannot be included in any province without consequences for its peoples. The Initiative Committee of the PWP of Vojvodina stands on the position that Vojvodina should be an equal unit in the future state reorganization with other provinces” (Končar, 1971, p. 40).

#### **4. Formation of the Autonomous province of Vojvodina**

A new change in the foreign policy of the USSR, crowned by the Non-Aggression Pact with Germany in 1939, marked a radical reorientation in the policy of the Comintern. According to the new interpretation from Moscow, the center of the “world reaction” had shifted to England and France, the states that, as guardians of the capitalist order, were the main culprits for the imperialist war. The anti-fascist policy of the People’s Front and cooperation with all democratic civil forces were declared heresy, social democracy was once again labeled as the “treacherous ally of Western imperialism,” and the main goal of the communists became “war against war” and the defense of the neutrality of the Soviet Union (Petranović, 1988, p. 243).

In accordance with the change in the general course, the Comintern softened its unequivocal demands for the federal status of certain regions,

so the Fifth Earth Conference in 1940 suggested a somewhat more moderate policy on the national question (Popov & Popov, 2000, p. 60). The resolution of this conference included, as one of the most important tasks, the “struggle for national equality of oppressed and national minorities in Yugoslavia,” namely the “Macedonian and Montenegrin people” and the “Albanian minorities in Kosovo, Metohija, and Sandžak,” the “true solution to the national question of Croats and Slovenes,” as well as the “struggle against the attempts of Serbian and Croatian bourgeoisie to mutually divide Bosnia and Herzegovina.” As for Vojvodina, the tasks of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia were defined as the “struggle for freedom and equality of Hungarian, Romanian, German, and other national minorities in Vojvodina, while simultaneously fighting against the attempts of Hungarian, German, and other reactionaries to allegedly solve the national question in these and other areas through imperialistic conquest” (Petranović & Zečević, 1987, p. 615). At that time, however, there already existed a provincial organization of the CPY for Vojvodina, equating it with Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Dalmatia, since national party organizations existed only in Croatia and Slovenia.

At the Sixth Provincial Conference of the Communist Party for Vojvodina, there were also no concrete solutions regarding its possible state-legal status, nor explicit advocacies for its federal or autonomous status, as in previous party documents. However, in explaining the national policy, the “frontist” argumentation of “Vojvodinian distinctiveness” was again noticeable as a key theme: “The Serbian bourgeoisie attempts to justify its imperialistic policy of oppressing the people in Vojvodina solely by the fact that a relative majority of the Serbian people live in Vojvodina. However, it has no right to exploit the Vojvodinian peoples even if only Serbs lived in Vojvodina because Vojvodina historically has never been a Serbian province, just as it has never been Hungarian, although it was subjugated to Hungarians. Despite the fact that Vojvodina is inhabited by peoples of various nationalities, it has its own economic, geographical, and historical entity. If we agree that this is the case, and bourgeois theoreticians do not deny it either, then it belongs solely to the Vojvodinian peoples and only to them” (Končar, 1995, pp. 291-292).

Changes on the political map of Europe, the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, and the radical turn in the policy of the Comintern, i.e., the USSR, before the Second World War, temporarily and apparently pushed into the background the views of the CPY on the national question, including the question of Vojvodina, which was not explicitly addressed even in the early years of the war. This was the result of understandable caution prompted by the influence of German National Socialism and Hungarian revisionism on the

most populous national minorities in Vojvodina even before the April War. At that time, Serbs and Croats constituted only a relative majority in Vojvodina, while there were more Hungarians and Germans, overall. Their behavior after the outbreak of the war and the breakup of Yugoslavia necessitated caution in proclaiming the state-legal and political solutions for the future status of Vojvodina. This did not call into question the policy of the CPY towards national minorities, nor its efforts to mobilize them to fight against fascism. The fact that the CPY, especially its cadres in Vojvodina itself, did not abandon the idea of autonomous status is evidenced by the demands to renew the Provincial Committee of the CPY in 1942, to establish a provincial organ of people's power, and to launch a Vojvodinian party newspaper (Popov & Popov, 2000, p. 62).

The AVNOJ Decision on the construction of Yugoslavia on a federal basis did not mention Vojvodina because it was not considered opportune. Thus, AVNOJ (The Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia, commonly abbreviated as the AVNOJ), in fact the Central Committee of the CPY, did not want to diminish the prospects for the mass accession of Croats to the People's Liberation Movement, while at the same time seeking not to exacerbate the Serbian-Croatian relations regarding this issue. Disagreements had already arisen between the communist leaderships of Croatia and Vojvodina regarding the political and military jurisdiction over the territory of Srem. Thus, in June 1943, the Provincial Committee of the CPY for Vojvodina warned that "the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Croatia (KPH) and ZAVNOH (The State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia) in some of their publications speak about Srem as a province of Croatia." Deeming this to be incorrect, Vojvodinian communists emphasized that "Srem is an integral part of Vojvodina" and that "the national composition of Srem is such that, in our opinion, it cannot become part of Croatia" (Petranović & Zečević, 1988, p. 645). In this context, it is also important to note that in January 1942, Tito directed the leadership of the partisan movement in Srem to the effect that this area henceforth "directly falls under the Main Headquarters of the People's Liberation Partisan Detachments of Croatia" (Petranović & Zečević, 1988, pp. 749-751). In mid-1943, the Central Committee of the CPY recognized the renewed Provincial Committee for Vojvodina, and soon resolved the issue of the territorial-political affiliation of Srem by deciding that "up to the lines Vukovar–Vinkovci–Županja, and all eastward, including Zemun, belong not only as a military-operational area to the Main Headquarters of Vojvodina but also as the area of the Provincial Committee of Vojvodina on which it

will develop its party and political activity.” The Second AVNOJ session definitively dismissed assumptions about Vojvodina as the seventh federal unit and opened the question of the form and political framework of autonomy. In March 1944, Tito said that “Vojvodina, like other regions aspiring to it, will receive the broadest autonomy, but the question of autonomy and the question of which federal unit the respective region will be attached to depend on the people themselves, or their representatives when addressing the definitive state organization after the war.” It became clear that Vojvodina would be an autonomous province within one of the federal units, not an autonomous province directly included in the federation, as implied by the demand of the Provincial Committee of the CPY for Vojvodina in May 1943 to form an Antifascist Council of People’s Liberation in the province, so that Vojvodina would become “like the rest of our provinces.” However, the question of which federal unit Vojvodina would belong to remained open, and on this occasion, the need for political expediency in resolving Serbian-Croatian relations prevailed, which was postponed for the post-war period (Popov & Popov, 2000, pp. 69-73).

The Seventh Provincial Conference of the CPY in April 1945 pointed out the solution of the autonomous status of Vojvodina, unanimously declaring for the “inclusion of autonomous Vojvodina in federal Serbia.” At this conference, Jovan Veselinov stated that “from the national composition of Vojvodina, it is clear that Vojvodina should be in federal Serbia,” but at the same assembly, he explained that “there was already a decision of the Central Committee for Baranja to belong to Croatia.” Regarding this statement, Popov (2000) evaluates that the verification of the situation in the field and the collection of data conducted by the AVNOJ Commission for demarcation between Serbia and Croatia in Baranja in the summer of 1945 was “unnecessary and insincere” (p. 88). Four months later, the Assembly of Delegates of the People of Vojvodina in Novi Sad once again expressed support for the unification of Vojvodina with Serbia, a proposal confirmed by the vote at the Third AVNOJ session.

In the meantime, a special AVNOJ Commission dealt with the demarcation between the two federal units, Serbia and Croatia. The Commission decided that the districts of western Srem, Vukovar, Vinkovci, and Županja, as well as Baranja, which was excluded from the province’s composition as early as May 1945 by the decision of the Main People’s Liberation Committee of Vojvodina, would belong to Croatia. Thus, the border line followed the Danube from the Hungarian border to Ilok, then crossed the Danube, leaving Ilok, Šaregrad, and Mohovo in Croatia, as well as the surrounding villages

in the Šid district: Opatovac, Lovas, Tovarnik, Podgrađe, Adaševci, Lipovac, Strošinci, and Jamena. Šid and the villages of Ilinci, Mala Vašica, Batrovci, and Morović became part of Serbia. This “temporary” border entered into the second provision of the first article of the Law on the Establishment and Organization of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, enacted by the Presidency of the National Assembly of Serbia on September 1, 1945. The status of Vojvodina, as an autonomous province and “integral part of Serbia,” was also confirmed by the first Constitution of the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia in January 1946. (Petranović & Zečević, 1988, p. 784).

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## VOJVODINA U NACIONALNOJ POLITICI KOMUNISTIČKE PARTIJE JUGOSLAVIJE 1918-1945.

**APSTRAKT:** Nacionalna politika Komunističke partije Jugoslavije, između dva svetska rata, formulisana pod neposrednim uticajem Kominterne i stoga podložna naglim i radikalnim zaokretima u spoljnoj politici SSSR, kretala se u rasponu od zahteva za dezintegracijom jugoslovenske kraljevine do insistiranja na njenom državnopravnom preuređenju. U federalističkom konceptu KPJ, za Vojvodinu je, kao “istorijsku, geografsku i ekonomsku celinu”, takođe, bio je predviđen status federalne jedinice, uz povremeno, uslovno pristajanje i na njen autonomni položaj. Mada na različitoj ideološkoj matrici, argumentacija kojom su komunisti obrazlagali potrebu posebnog ustavnopravnog položaja Vojvodine, identična je zahtevima hrvatskog političkog pokreta i dela građanske opozicije u Vojvođanskom frontu koji će KPJ i formalno podržati, sredinom tridesetih godina. Uprkos činjenici da autonomističke i federalističke projekte Vojvodine, iz različitih razloga, nisu masovnije podržavali ni Srbi, niti njene nacionalne manjine, ona će postati autonomna pokrajina kada Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, krajem Drugog svetskog rata, u kontekstu sporazuma zainteresovanih velikih sila, uspostavi federalativnu Jugoslaviju.

**Ključne reči:** Komunistička partija Jugoslavije, Komintern, nacionalna politika, federalizam, Vojvodina, autonomija.

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