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THE INTEGRATION OF THE DÉLVIDÉK
(SOUTHERN PARTS OF THE KINGDOM OF
HUNGARY) INTO THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE
KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS AND SLOVENES
A HUNGARIAN PERSPECTIVE

ABSTRACT: The southern territories of the Kingdom of Hungary came under the suzerainty of the newly formed Yugoslav Kingdom and until today constitute an integral part of its successor. This study aims to introduce the first historic phase of this centennial process, the incorporation of the Banat and Bačka into the administration of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. During this, while also details the endeavors of different Yugoslav governments, it also tries to introduce the various Hungarian aspects, chiefly in the years 1919-1920, and give an insight on the effects of all this on the Hungarian population of the territories in the new state.

KEYWORDS: Vojvodina, administration, Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenians, Hungarians

Under the historical term, *Délvidék* Hungarian historiography and public speech designate those, primarily Hungarian-inhabited, territories which were granted to Yugoslavia after the First World War: the Baranya triangle, Bačka, Međimurje, Prekmurje and the Western parts of the Banat. My paper, however, focuses chiefly on the incorporation of the two “core” territories of the *Délvidék*, namely: Backa and the Banat, into the Yugoslav administrative structure and on the respective most notable changes.

The said territories had formed a united administrative region only two times until the Second World War: first during the Serbian Voivodeship (1849-1860), then under the Danube Banat (1929-1941). This region had been a part of Serbian nationalist endeavors ever since the 17th century and,

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albeit, under different forms based on the changing Serbian political thought of the time, the thought of autonomy or incorporation into Serbia was indeed present until the end of the Dual Monarchy. While the Serbian Voivodeship was an example of the former, the realization of the latter possibility came with the outbreak of the First World War.

After the suppression of the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848-1849, the Viennese court, allowing Serbian nationalist claims because of power consideration, created the Serbian Voivodeship on the Southern territories of the Kingdom of Hungary, effectively removing it from the Hungarian administration. After the dissolution of the Serbian Voivodeship in 1860, the territory returned to the Hungarian County System. The counties of Bács-Bodrog, Krassó-Szörény, Torontál, and Temes, with centers of Sombor, Lugoš, Veliki Bečkerek, and Temišvar respectively, formed the framework for the Hungarian administration, which divided these, according to Hungarian traditions, into districts. After this, apart from the incorporation of the Military Frontier into the Hungarian County System in 1873, there were no significant changes concerning the administration until the end of the First World War.

The Incorporation of the Territories and the First Phase of the Establishment of Yugoslav Administration

Regarding the incorporation¹ of the Délvidék into Serbia, the Serbian government had already made their claims in September 1914, according to which the Yugoslav Northern and Northeastern borders would stretch above Oršava, from the Danube along with the mountain range to the North to the Mures (leaving Romania Arad, Lugoš, and Lipova), would follow the Mures to its estuary, then towards the Drave along with its flow (leaving Serbia Subotica and Baja) and would extend to Leibnitz along the Mur². The acquisition of these territories became possible for the Serbian Supreme Command after the breakthrough on the Macedonian Front in the last months of the war. Beyond sheer military superiority, the occupation of the territories was made possible by the provisions of the Belgrade Military Convention, signed by the Hungarian and Serbian governments and the Entente on November 13th, 1918. The ground for the Serbian invasion was prepared

¹ The incorporation of the territories into the Yugoslav kingdom was received as a grievance by a significant portion of the Hungarian population and Hungarian historiography treats it accordingly, especially during the interwar period. At the same time, it is indisputable that the Yugoslav population of these territories welcomed the incorporation as an important event of national self-expression and fulfilment and Serbian and Croatian historiography treats it as such.

² ЕКМЕЋИЋ, Milorad: *Ratni ciljevi Srbije 1914. Srpska književna zadruga*, Beograd, 1973, 87.

and further helped by a not-insignificant margin due to the Yugoslav, mainly Serbian, politically active population of the region.

In the weeks before the collapse of the Dual Monarchy, the situation escalated rapidly in the Délvidék as well. The royal proclamation of Charles IV, in which he calls for the formation of national councils for the Cisleithanian nationalities, found fertile ground in the nationalities of Transleithania as well. An actual race had developed between the nationalities and their respective political leaderships and voluntary activists to seize and secure the power (i.e. the administration) in the Délvidék. The events took place simultaneously in the greater cities. A great example of this is the case of Novi Sad, where on October 27th, 1918 Jaša Tomić, the head of the Radical Party, (who was as well the son-in-law and political heir of the late mayor of Novi Sad and civil leader of the radical Serbs living in the Kingdom of Hungary, Svetozar Miletić) proclaimed the formation of the Great National Assembly of Serbs, Bunjevci and other Slavs, which was prepared to seize power should it be necessary³. On the same day, however, the Hungarian and German proletariat of Novi Sad assured the emerging Hungarian National Council of its support. Subotica could also be another example, where also on November 3rd, the Bunjevci Militia was formed and, simultaneously, the Hungarian National Council seized power at the town hall⁴.

While on a local political level the rivalry was rampant, the Serbian Army was not idle either. On November 5th, 1918, the Serbian Supreme Command ordered the occupation of the Banat and Bačka to the Mures-Subotica-Baja line⁵. The Serbian troops marched into Zemun and Pancevo on the same day, and the next day into Bela Crkva. Two days after (November 7th, 1918), Serbian lieutenant Boško Pavlović organized the Serbian military police in Novi Sad with the help of 300 Serbian veterans returning from the front. Thus creating the conditions for the Serbian National Council of Novi Sad too, upon hearing the march of the Serbian troops into Syrmia, decide to seize control over the municipal administration, which was still under Hungarian leadership⁶.

³ CSUKA János: *A délvidéki magyarság története 1918–1941*, Püski Kiadó, Budapest, 1995, 13–14.

⁴ In the first week of November 1918, national councils were forming one after another in the greater cities of Backa and the Banat which assured the Károlyi Administration of their support. National councils formed in: on the November 1st, Pančevo, Vršac, Sombor, Novi Sad; on November 2nd, Feketić, Mali Idoš, Martonos, Bečej; on November 3rd, Lalic, Karavukovo, Zrenjanin; on November 4th Doroslovo, Ruski Krstur, Bač, Senta, Vrbas, Gajdobra, Temerin, Kucora and on November 5th, in Šajkaš but that was dissolved by the local Serbian population. MESAROS, Šandor: *Položaj Mađara u Vojvodini 1918–1929*, Novi Sad, 1981.

⁵ KRIZMAN, Bogdan: Srpska vrhovna komanda u danima raspada Austro-Ugarske 1918. In: *Historijski zbornik*, God, XIV, 1961, 180.

⁶ CSUKA: *op.cit.*, 14.

The struggle continued on a higher political level as well. On November 11th, 1918, a Hungarian delegation under the leadership of Béla Linder traveled to Belgrade to sign the armistice agreement, which would have clarified the administrative affiliation of the region. At the same time, however, the Serbian government consulted with Jaša Tomić to call an assembly in Novi Sad, which proclaims the incorporation of Voivodina into Serbia⁷. Ergo, while the leadership in Belgrade was prepared to allow the Hungarian administration to continue operation in the region at the conference table, it wished to create a *fait accompli* on the field.

On November 13th, 1918 Béla Linder, minister without a portfolio of the Hungarian government, signed the Belgrade Military Convention which declared not only the cessation of hostilities but stated that the administration of the Délvidék would continue to be under the authority of the Hungarian government. At the same time, however, the Hungarian government had to demobilize the region. It foreshadowed that, if given, the elimination of the Hungarian administration could be done rapidly. Indeed, the occupying Serbian military together with the local Serbian-Croat-Bunjevci population started to take over very soon the administration of the territories South to the demarcation line⁸.

A vital part of the incorporation of the Délvidék into Yugoslavia and the takeover of power was to develop a Serbian/Yugoslav administration and to fill it with their own cadre of officials. For this to happen, in parallel to the invasion of the Serbian troops started the elimination of the Budapest-oriented Hungarian administration. The Serbian political forces of the Délvidék, most notably the Radical Party and its leader, the abovementioned Jasa Tomic, played a vital role in this. Tomić, whose merits in the incorporation of the Délvidék are unquestionable, was the main initiator and orator of the assembly of Slavs in Novi Sad on November 3rd (before the invasion of the Délvidék by the Serbian Army), on which the Serbian National Council was formed, organized the People's Militia, which by the resolution of the council "would temporarily manage the affairs of the people". Ergo, the organization that wished to be the opposite of the Hungarian administration, which had been declared existing and functioning, had already been formed at the beginning of November.

Meanwhile, the struggle which already had two (Serbian and Hungarian) participants gained another one: on November 24th, 1918 the Parliament of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs formed from the National Council

⁷ A. SAJTI Enikő: A Délvidék elcsatolása. In: Szerk. JENEY Zsuzsanna: *Bűntudat és győztes főlény. Magyarország, Jugoszlávia és a délvidéki magyarok*, Szeged, 2010, 29.

⁸ The Serbian troops entered Subotica and Baja on November 13th, occupied Pécs, Barcs and Szigetvár on 15th, demobilised the militia in Subotica on 19th and a day later took over the administration of the city. CSUKA: *op.cit.*, 16.

in Zagreb and proclaimed the unification of Yugoslav lands concerning Voivodina as well⁹. This third participant was quickly eliminated though, as on the next day (November 25th), with the participation of the delegates from the various national councils the Great National Assembly of Serbs, Bunjevci and other Slavs (of the 757 delegates only 6 were Germans and 1 Hungarian) proclaimed in Novi Sad the incorporation of the Délvidék into the Kingdom of Serbia, according to the agreement between the Serbian government and Tomic. So the territories did not join the future Yugoslav state but directly to the Kingdom of Serbia, becoming its integral part, which would become important in the future administrative/regional divisions of the country.¹⁰ At the same time, the Great People's Council (*Veliki narodni savet*) was formed, and as an executive body, the People's Administration of Banat, Bačka and Baranya (*Narodna Uprava*), the most important task of which was to create a loyal cadre of officials. Although putting the administration on a new footing did not go smoothly, the People's Administration strengthened its political position relatively fast and made it possible for its administrative bodies to function at all levels of socio-political life¹¹.

As a result of this, it is not surprising that the elimination of the Hungarian administration after November 25th, 1918 quickly gained momentum. This was further helped by the fact that on December 1st, 1918 the formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was declared in Belgrade and the new state officially laid claims on the territories of the Délvidék, which became the basis of serious changes in the Voivodina and the Baranya-Backa-Banat region.

The Yugoslav authorities started to establish their administration in the Délvidék while, at least on paper, these territories formed part of the Kingdom of Hungary until June 4th, 1920. Due to their efforts, by the turn of 1918/1919 a dual, Serbo-Hungarian parallel administration developed.¹² The fact that we can speak about dual or parallel administration is mainly because the Serbs, locals, and Belgrade (together) did not manage, despite their most

⁹ Precisely, he said that: „The State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, which formed in the coherent Yugoslav territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, unites with the Kingdom of Serbia, and Montenegro in a unified Slovene-Serb-Croat State.”, *Narodno vijeće Slovenaca, Hrvata i Srba u Zagrebu, 1918–1919*, Izabrani dokumenti (izabrali i priredili Marina Štambuk-Škalić, Zlatko Matijević) Hrvatski Državni Arhiv, Zagreb, 2008, 147.

¹⁰ The fact that the Great National Assembly of Serbs, Bunjevci and other Slavs decided for the direct accession to Serbia not to the Yugoslav state to be formed was significant from the aspect of the struggle between the Serbian government, the National Council in Zagreb and the Yugoslav Committee on the way of the formation of the Yugoslav state and its political system.

¹¹ MESAROŠ: *op.cit.*, 61.

¹² KECIĆ, Danilo: *Revolucionarni radnički pokret u Vojvodini 1917–1921*, Novi Sad, 1972, 123.

explicit intent, to gain control over the administration of the region overnight. The introduction of the Yugoslav administration in the Délvidék happened in multiple waves. In the first phase, as we could see, depending on local conditions (as the number of the occupying Serbian troops did not make it possible everywhere to maintain public order without the Hungarian national councils forming in the Délvidék as well from the end of October) started the dissolution of Hungarian national councils and militias. Simultaneously, Hungarian gendarme and border guard units were being disarmed.¹³

As part of the second phase in December 1918, the Hungarian administration was “decapitated” in nearly every major city. The mayors, notaries and high-ranking officials were replaced in Novi Sad, Vršac, Subotica, and Pančevo.¹⁴ The legal basis for this was provided by the December 4th, 1918 resolution of the Great National Assembly of Serbs, Bunjevci and other Slavs, according to which the People’s Administration took overall administrative responsibility and tasks, appointed new prefects, and accepted the text of the oath of allegiance demanded by the new regime.¹⁵ The new administrative body technically filled the position of a government, under which 11 departments, *de facto* ministries, operated.¹⁶ However, the Hungarian cadre of officials, which despite the “decapitations” remained indispensable in certain areas, tried to remain loyal to Budapest and could only expect to gain (if even) its salary from it as well.

This situation, which compared to the events that followed could be described as “peaceful”, ended abruptly in the Spring of 1919. Due to various factors that were unfavorable towards the Yugoslavs, the Serbian occupational policy became harsher and the elimination of the Hungarian administration was accelerated and enforced mercilessly. One of the factors was, among other things, that the Yugoslav government was afraid of a possible Italian-Hungarian-Romanian alliance which, although faintly, was outlined as a result of the Italian diplomatic offensive, which would endanger

¹³ MESAROŠ: *op.cit.*, 57. When the Hungarian government protested against this, the Serbian response was that the Serbian Army had occupied the territories in question before the signature of the convention. See: Edited by. RÁNKI György: *Magyarország története. 8/1.*, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1988, 100.

¹⁴ The prefect from this latter city was eventually interned as well. KEČIĆ: *op.cit.*, 124. See: MESAROŠ: *op.cit.*, 62. On December 5th, however, he decided that the judges can remain in their places, as there were no qualified Serbian professionals, but cannot pass judgements in the spirit of the Hungarian laws.*ibid.*

¹⁵ SZŰTS Emil: *Az elmerült sziget. A Baranyai Szerb-Magyar Köztársaság*, Pannónia Könyvek, Pécs, 1991, 21.

¹⁶ It is important to note, that Belgrade had never actually acknowledged the People’s Administration. It merely let it operate as it was beneficial for it. Its “Independence” was short-lived, because from March 1919 it officially became subordinated to the Ministry of the Interior in Belgrade under the name Department of the Banat, Bačka, Baranya *op.cit.*, 122.

the acquisition of the territories of the Délvidék.¹⁷ Another factor was the general strike in the occupied territories: Pécs, Subotica, and Temesvar which started in February 1919 and was welcomed by the Hungarian government that even partly organized it. The aggressive actions of Belgrade were indirectly affected by the fact that the Hungarian government, renounced its policy (after facing the brutal facts) of unconditioned trust towards the benign intentions of the great powers and envisaged a more active stance concerning Hungarian advocacy.¹⁸ Last but not least, the harsher Yugoslav occupational policy was further reinforced by the policies of the Paris Peace Conference which kept the successor states in uncertainty, thus forcing Yugoslavia to provide *faits accomplis* as soon as possible. The establishment of the Hungarian soviet regime served as a valid basis for Belgrade to avoid any complaints from Hungary, as due to the regime of Béla Kun, Hungary separated itself from the international political scene even more than the previous governments. All these factors combined resulted in the harsher measures implemented by the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, due to which (despite the unchanged international legal nature of the territories) by mid-1919 the Délvidék *de facto* changed ownership. With the signature of the Peace Treaty of Trianon, the change of ownership ended *de jure* as well and the provisions that had been in effect illegally before became legitimate overnight, at least according to the internal legislation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.

In the spirit of centralization, Belgrade had already dissolved the “separate government” of the Voivodina, the People’s Administration on February 27th, 1919. The Great National Assembly of Serbs, Bunjevci, and other Slavs held its last session on March 11th, and then it effectively dissolved. After all, it had done its duty, and there remained no need for it. After this, the administration of the territories of the Délvidék incorporated from Hungary came under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior in Belgrade, where a separate department, the Bačka-Baranya-Banat Department handled it.

On the other hand, the temperance with which Belgrade refused the April 14th, 1919 proposal of the commander of the military district of Novi Sad, which proposed to eliminate the Hungarian administration by simply invalidating the paragraph of the Belgrade Military Convention which allowed Hungarian administrative bodies to remain in place and operate, is remarkable.

¹⁷ Primarily the affiliation of the Banat became endangered as Romania claimed the entirety of the Banat.

¹⁸ Károlyi said in his speech of May 2nd that if the world refuses the principles of Wilson, Hungary must face its attackers with weapons in the hand. *Az Est*, March 1919.

*“It is proven day by day that a decision must be made regarding this question immediately. Passive resistance by the Hungarian officials at the railways, post offices, telegraph and telephone centres is continuous. – writes Voivode Petar Bojović (the author of the petition) who requested authorization for the dismissal of Hungarian civil servants suspected of infidelity and for the interment of dangerous and harmful elements.”*¹⁹ Belgrade however had not yet wanted to escalate the situation. To resolve the issue, it was deemed necessary to replace the officials and demand oaths of allegiance to the Yugoslav State and found the situation created by its refusal sufficient.²⁰ The reason for this is that the most effective way to eliminate the Hungarian administration was by demanding an oath of allegiance and requiring proficiency in the official language.²¹

It is important to remember that the Hungarian governments, until the signature of the peace treaty, paid scrupulous attention not to leave any doubts regarding the fact that these territories still legally constituted a part of Hungary. The Hungarian governments formed rights to maintain, besides the administration, education, and jurisdiction, draft citizens and collect taxes in the occupied territories. According to this, until September 1919 Budapest encouraged the official of the Délvidék to refuse oaths of allegiances demanded by the new regime even if it resulted in their dismissal and expulsion. In Autumn 1919 this finally changed when the Friedrich Administration encouraged officials to seemingly integrate. The Huszár Administration which gained international acceptance, unequivocally left it to the officials whether they swear the oath or not. The reason for this was the consideration that the interests of the Hungarians demanded the officials to remain in their positions as by this point, Budapest had already had official information on the exact line of the border, for the future change of which necessitated the Hungarian officials to keep their positions in the integrated territories. Financial considerations also played a part in this decision: “the financial resources of the state will not be sufficient to provide for the livelihood of our torn blood in the territory of this Rump Hungary” went the reasoning on the government meeting, on which it was also proclaimed that the official who swore the oath of allegiance “cannot be cast out from the society and cannot suffer the blame for it at any future time”.²²

¹⁹ KEČIĆ: *op.cit.*, 139–140.

²⁰ SAJTI: *op.cit.*, 32.

²¹ Its legal codification did not happen until April 1920, but then according to the decree of the minister of education and culture in April 1920, the Hungarian teachers had to acquire a successful exam of the official language. Until then, they can only be in temporary employment.. MESAROŠ: *op.cit.*, 138.

²² MOL K-27 Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek. 1920. január 3. Idézi SAJTI: *op.cit.*, 37.

In the Administration of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes

The incorporation of the territories of the Délvidék was finalized by the Peace Treaty of Trianon (signed on June 4th, 1920) and the administrative order of the territories was now *de jure* organized following the constitution and laws of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes as well.

We should not forget to remember the special situation of the country when we focus on the administration of the Yugoslav state. The territories which became part of one country each possessed different levels of economic, cultural, and social development. All this was topped by the difference between the languages and, more importantly, the religion of the core nations. Last but not least, the large number of ethnic minorities who were not quite entertained by the prospect of living under a Yugoslav state. Another fine addition was the rivalry coming from the strive for dominance by the Serbs, which was quickly opposed by the Croats and left its mark on the whole period. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the legislature took into account while organizing the administration the issue of unification and nation-building as much as it was possible. The political leadership of the Belgrade-centred state found the principle of centralization the most effective measure under the prevailing circumstances which, besides the benefits of unification and nation-building, also served the purpose of repressing the minorities and establishing Serbian dominance.

The statute of the new administration, and one of the most important laws of the Yugoslav state as well, was the so-called Vidovdan Constitution approved on June 28th, 1921, which besides the political arrangement also foreshadowed the administrative division of the country under the principles of centralism.

The defining statute of the administration of the country was the Act on the Self-Governance of Provinces and Districts which was accepted by the National Assembly on April 26th, 1922. According to the act, the country was divided into 33 provinces (*oblast*) the borders of which were defined disregarding any historical national borders.²³ The situation of the country by the way without doubt justified a certain degree of centralization. The territories inhabited by Yugoslavs were, to put it mildly, quite heterogeneous, and possessed different levels of self-governance. In Serbia for example, there was no kind of self-governance after the second half of the 19th century when the self-governance that was the characteristics of Serbian village communities under Ottoman rule ceased to exist. In Bosnia, there was also no trace of municipal self-governance whatsoever. In Croatia however, self-

²³ With the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina where the current administrative borders did not change.

governance had serious traditions and was well-developed not only at a communal level but at the level of counties as well. The same can be only be said in the case of Slovenia for the greater cities. So all these differences could have necessitated some degree of centralization or unification.²⁴

Local governments and parliaments functioned in the provinces, which had financial, economic, and transportation authority. The law fixed 800 thousand people as the maximum population for the provinces and theoretically made possible the unification of smaller territories.²⁵ The territories of the Délvidék were divided into 4 provinces: Bačka, Belgrade, Syrmia, Podunavlje. The head of each province was a prefect, the political representative of the government, who was entrusted with a wide array of powers in the fields of administration which belonged under the authority of the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Land Reforms, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Water, Ministry of Construction, Ministry of Industry and Trade, Ministry of Public Health and Ministry of Forestry and Ministry of Mining.²⁶ As we can see, almost nothing missed the list, only matters concerning foreign, military, and naval affairs, the harmonization of judicial laws²⁷ and financial, transportation, post, and telegraph affairs were not under their authority.

The act which was created in the spirit of the constitution addressed in detail the establishment of provincial self-governance and regulated it at the same time. According to this, municipal, district, and provincial elected bodies of the self-governments helped to administrate the territories (sometimes complicating it though). The work of the prefect was helped by the provincial body of representatives (provincial assembly) and the provincial council.²⁸ The provincial assembly was the legislative and supervisory body of the

²⁴ With the formation of the first government the centralisation of the Yugoslav Administration started as well. In the territories which formerly belonged to Austria-Hungary, the local provincial governments remained in place, Croatia, Slavonia and Syrmia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia and Dalmatia, however with limited authority and from 1920 onwards, belonged under the supervision of the central government in Belgrade. In Belgrade, they gradually and decisively endeavoured to end the autonomies.

²⁵ *Dva veka lokalne samouprave u Srbiji (1804–2014)*. Bogoljub Milosavljević, ured. Stalna konferencija gradova i opština – Savez gradova i opština Srbije, Beograd, 2015, 204.

²⁶ They only had the purview over the territories under the authority of the Ministry of Forestry and Mining if they did not concern goods in state possession.

²⁷ In 1918 six penal and legal codes were in effect in the country. Out of which only the Serbian and Montenegrin were independent Yugoslav national legal codes, the others were derived from that of Austria-Hungary with smaller modifications (that of the Voivodina, Croatia-Slavonia, Croatia-Dalmatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina). All this combined with the chaos and variety of terminologies made legislature and the application of a unified legal code impossible.

²⁸ *Dva veka lokalne samouprave. op.cit.*, 205.

provincial self-government and it was elected by a secret direct vote with universal suffrage where all votes were equal. It had the authority to issue decrees concerning the internal matters of the provincial, the functioning of self-government bodies, and the expenditure of funds, however, its decrees had to be countersigned by the prefect. The main aim of these decrees was in fact to “refine the respective laws when it was deemed necessary for their application in a given province.”²⁹

The executive body of the provincial self-government was the provincial council, the duties of which included, besides managing the administration, the supervision of self-governmental bodies, and the approval of the provincial budgets.³⁰ In effect, the provincial council functioned as a sort of government with a president elected from the council members who were otherwise each responsible for a given area of the administration. The council members were elected by the provincial assembly. The structure of the administration was similar at municipal and district levels, where bodies elected via a secret, direct, equal vote with the help of universal suffrage also operated. There was however a not insignificant difference, namely, that in the case of districts, the president of the council and the assembly were the same person.³¹ The magistrate of the district had the same powers in connection to the district assembly and council as did the prefect to the provisional assembly and council respectively.³² The prefect had the right to withhold assent from the decrees of the local bodies if they violated the constitution, local laws, or perhaps the provincial regulations.³³

It was required by the law that within 3 months from enforcing it, elections must be held to convene the provincial assemblies after which within 5 months elections must be held at the district level as well.³⁴

Despite careful regulations and provisions, there had not been municipal elections in the Délvidék until 1927 so the officials of the local self-governments were appointed by the prefects, which (we have to admit it) was a clear and effective manifestation of centralism. It is important to note briefly the regulations for the officials of the local administration. Because it provided ample space for abuses. Although the law had set the bar high for the officials of the provincial administration, requiring a law degree or in absence of it at least a grammar or vocational school education, it was much more permissive towards the officials of the district or municipal administration. It made possible the employment of those who had already

²⁹ *ibid.*, 213.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 217.

³¹ *ibid.*, 222.

³² *ibid.*, 223.

³³ *ibid.*, 222.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 225.

been in their current positions when the law came into force or had spent at least a year working in municipal administration.³⁵

This provided the opportunity for numerous abuses, especially if we take into account the way the Yugoslav administration was established from 1919 through 1920. During the takeover, there were not enough qualified Serbian/Croatian/Bunjevci officials, so many persons coming from Serbia or other Yugoslav territories without proper qualifications or local knowledge gained, usually thanks to their political connections, positions in the public but more often the self-governmental administration. The employment of these persons was also sanctioned by this law.

The notaries had an exceptionally important position in the administration, as it was in their purview to impose fines. The legal basis for the sanctions of administrative abuses was provided by the Act on Provincial and District Self-Governments of 1922, which stated that “those persons who did not comply with provincial/county regulations could be penalized with 5-300 dinars, depending on their financial situation, or if it was not possible with the incarceration of 1-7 days; in case of serious or repeated offense they could be penalized with a fine up to 1000 dinars and two weeks of incarceration.”³⁶ This provided opportunities for many cases of abuse and among its victims, people coming from the minorities were overrepresented. As the notaries had been appointed by the prefect until the ever delaying municipal and provincial elections took place. The standing of municipalities was further worsened by the fact that the pensions and several pays of those employed in the administration, in case of a dismissed official, were to be paid by the municipality.³⁷

The first municipal elections in the Délvidék were held five years after the approval of the act on self-governance, on November 6th, 1927. Before that, on September 12th, provincial elections were held. The importance of the elections, besides complying with the law, was that it made it possible to improve the standing of the positions of the local self-governments and consequently, to reduce the number of abuses towards the minorities. The minorities of the Délvidék, the Hungarians included, participated in the elections more actively than they did in the parliamentary elections. Partly because of this, there were fewer opportunities for the manipulation of the elections, the Hungarian Party achieved a complete victory in every district where it had its electoral list. In the municipalities with an absolute Hungarian majority, it won all the seats, whilst in the municipalities with mixed demography, it could secure seats respective to its proportion of the population. With this, the abuse of the notaries could be remedied instantly as from now on the notaries and officials could be elected (appointed) in their purview.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 224.

³⁶ *ibid.*, 213.

³⁷ CSUKA: *op.cit.*, 325.

From Royal Dictatorship to the Dissolution of the Country

This promising start however ended abruptly. On January 6th, 1929, King Alexander dissolved the parliament elected on November 11th, 1927. He abolished the Vidovdan Constitution of 1921 and instituted a royal dictatorship. The monarch in his proclamation titled "To My Beloved People, Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" justified the introduction of royal dictatorship with the fact the parliamentary system threatened with the disintegration of the unity of the state. Indeed, the political conditions degraded to such a level that legislature was practically impossible and even the opposition parties welcomed the King's decision. King Alexander set as the principal aim to preserve the unity of the state and nation and to create a state administration that is the most well-suited for the needs of the nation and state interests.³⁸ The modification of the administrative structure of the country was necessarily a part of this.

On January 18th, 1928, the government of General Živković dissolved parties organized by religion or ethnicity citing the State Security Act. Provincial assemblies and even municipal representative bodies were dissolved because they were part of parliament systems and their members were representatives of the dissolved parties. Soldiers, persons with no local knowledge whatsoever, were placed at the head of the administration who were hostile towards the local population. For example, retired general Velimir Ostojić became the mayor of Subotica.³⁹ In October 1929 the name of the country was changed from Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The country was divided, instead of the former 33 provinces, into 9 Banates (*banovinas*). The capital was a separate administrative division. The Voivodina became part of the Danube Banovina, with Novi Sad as the center. With this Bačka, the Western part of the Banat and the Eastern part of Syrmia became, now the second time in its modern history, a part of a new administrative division.

The Danube Banovina incorporated the Northeastern part of the country, the Voivodina (Banat, Bačka, Baranya), the Eastern part of Syrmia and the Northern part of Serbia (Šumadija, Braničevo, Stig). Its territory surpassed 30 thousand square kilometers thus constituting 12% of the landmass of the country, and with it being the second-largest banovina after the Sava Banovina, with 2.5 million inhabitants. The territory of the Danube Banovina was further divided into 10 cities with self-governments, 48 districts, and 768 municipalities. The cities with self-governments were the following: Novi Sad, Bela Crkva, Velika Kikinda, Veliki Bečkerek, Vršac,

³⁸ ČULINOVIĆ, Ferdo : *Jugoslavija između dva rata II.*, Zagreb, 1961, 7–8.

³⁹ CSUKA: *op.cit.*, 365.

Senta, Sombor, Sremski Karlovci, Stara Kanjiža, and Subotica.⁴⁰ While drawing the borders for the banovinas, the guiding principle was to create a majority for the Serbian population. This applies to the Danube Banovina as well. This aim could only be realized by ignoring the historical and ethnic borders (which were for the most part economic and natural borders as well). This is why Šumadija became part of the Danube Banovina instead of its natural place as part of Serbia, thus ensuring a Serbian, orthodox majority in the Banat opposing the local Hungarians, Germans, Romanians (and Croats!), who combined formed the absolute majority in the Voivodina.

The expansion of the Voivodina with additional territories from Serbia was met with euphoria from a part of the local Serbian elite. An outstanding personality of the era, Dr. Fedor Nikić, the professor of the Faculty of Laws in Subotica, called the establishment of the Danube Banovina the culmination of a natural process in his writing titled “*Oproštaj sa Vojvodinom* (Farewell from Voivodina)”, as he regarded the Voivodina as an integral part of Serbia, as part of which the administrative unification of the Voivodina with Serbia was perfectly realized in the banovina system.⁴¹ And the Voivodina disappeared completely after fulfilling its role in the life of the Serbian and Yugoslav nation.⁴² However, not everyone was so eager for Voivodina to gain Serbian territories because it was obvious that the aim of this was to help the establishment of Serb (from inner Serbia) dominance in the Northeastern parts of the Yugoslav state even at the expense of the local Serbs.

According to official justification, the introduction of the new administrative order was necessary because the old administrative division into 33 provinces could no longer satisfy the administrative and economic needs of the territories. They were too small and economically unstable, as per the justification, which although received tasks but had almost no executive power and the incomes of the former provincial self-governments were dependent mainly on the benevolence of the members of the executive branch. The reasoning behind the idea was that with the establishment of the banovinas this could be remedied as the government of the banovinas was first and foremost an executive body in the purview of which were all the

⁴⁰ The centres of the districts, which for the most part were the same as the names of the districts, were the following: Alibunar, Apatin, Arandelovac, Bačka Palanka, Bačka Topola, Batina, Bela Crkva, Beograd, Velika Kikinda, Veliki Bečkerek, Velika Orašja, Velika Gradišta, Vršac, Grocki, Gornji Milanovac, Darda, Zabarim, Žablja, Zemun, Ilok, Irig, Jaša Tomić, Kovačici, Kovin, Kragujevac, Kula, Lazarevac, Mladenovac, Novi Bečej, Nova Kanjiža, Novi Sad, Odžaci, Pančevo, Požarevac, Rača, Rudnik, Ruma, Senta, Smederevo, Smederevska Palanka, Sombor, Sopota, Sremska Mitrovica, Stara Pazova, Stari Bečej, Topola, Titel, Umka, Šid.

⁴¹ ŠUMENKOVIĆ-BEŠLIN, Biljana: *Prosvetna politika u Dunavskoj banovini (1929–1941)*, Novi Sad, 2007, 89–90.

⁴² *ibid.*

administrative and self-governmental bodies located in the territory of the banovina.⁴³

The creation of all the administrative and official criteria of the Danube Banovina had been almost finished by the beginning of 1930.⁴⁴ At the head of the territory, as its name shows, was the Ban who was appointed by the monarch on the recommendation of the prime minister. It was a position of trust, but that trust often waned as there were 11 Bans of the territory until 1941.⁴⁵ The following matters were in the purview of the Ban: agriculture, construction, commerce and industry, mines and forestry, social affairs, and healthcare and education. The Ban had legislative initiative regarding matters of the self-government of the banate which defined the operation of certain institutions and institutes. These regulated the management of the wealth of the municipalities of the banate. The regulations were countersigned by the Ministry of the Interior with the consent of the Ministry of the respective portfolio. With the consent of the finance minister, the Ban could also impose fees and local taxes.⁴⁶ The Ban was helped in his duties, after the Imposed Constitution of 1931, by the banate council; the members were appointed by the minister of the interior. Although it had an advisory purview, its role was mainly rather symbolic than significant as the Ban assembled it annually and it could only make suggestions. The constitution provided for the establishment of the banate assembly as well. Similar to the previous era it was elected for four years but unlike the previous years now via an open ballot system.

First Bans were personally selected by the monarch himself. The main criteria in their selection were their reputation in the eyes of the population, their loyalty to the dynasty, and their political experience. Later on, the selection of the individual Bans came under the purview of the prime minister or the minister of the interior, when the main criterion of the selection was party loyalty.⁴⁷ Behind every Ban, there was a Deputy Ban, who was substituted by the head of the II Department (Administration) in case of him being prevented from carrying out his duties.⁴⁸

The administration of the banate was divided into head departments, departments, and referatures. The directors of the head departments were appointed by the monarch via a royal decree. Their duties included the

⁴³ VAJAGIĆ, Predrag M.: *Banovi Dunavske banovine. Akademska knjiga*, Novi Sad, 2017, 34.

⁴⁴ AV, F-126/II 23694/1930. Idézi VAJAGIĆ: *op.cit.*, 47.

⁴⁵ Daka Popović (1929–1930), Radoslav Dunjić (1930), Svetomir Matić (1930–1931), Milan Nikolić (1931–1933), Dobrica Matković (1933–1935), Miloško Vasović (1935), Svetislav Paunović (1935–1936), Svetislav Rajić (1936–1939), Jovan Radivojević (ban) (1939–1940), Branko Kijurina (1940–1941), Milorad Vlaškalin (1941).

⁴⁶ VAJAGIĆ: *Banovi Dunavske banovine... op.cit.*, 39.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, 40.

management of officials, the perfection of the office, record-keeping, and creating statistics for the evaluation of officials as well as the preparation of the budget of their department. The discussion of important issues that required unanimous decision happened at directorial meetings which were held with the participation of all directors. The heads of departments were subordinated to the directors but the Ban had the right to personally take over the leadership of a given department.⁴⁹ The act required the formation of eight head departments: general, administrative, agricultural, educational, technical, social politic, financial, and lastly, commercial and industrial.⁵⁰ There were usually two departments in each head department.

The banates, besides being the basic unit of territorial division, operated also as a form of self-government. This was also true for the previous provinces but in that case state and self-government operated in parallel. In the banovina system, it was required for state and self-governmental bodies to unify in the royal banovina administration, under the supervision of the Ban.⁵¹ As such, the Ban had a dual function: as a body of the state when he handled the matters of the banovina as the embodiment of the power of the state; and as a local body when he handled the matters of the banovina as the self-government. As a result of this departments of the Ban and the banovina worked simultaneously which resulted in the blending of their purviews and later on the blurring of the two cadres of officials.⁵²

The heads of the departments made bi-monthly reports for the Ban on the prevailing conditions in the banate. Their work, and the operation of the entire banate administration, was overseen by supervisors. In remote areas far from the center, this was done by district supervisors who were usually former prefects. There were 22 district supervisors altogether in the country of which 4 were in the Danube Banovina with the centers of Zrenjanin, Kragujevac, Smederevo, and Sombor.⁵³ As opposed to the previous era, the requirements for employment for officials were significantly harsher, at least legally. The officials of the banate were required to have a legal education, the passing of the appropriate exams (which could only be passed after working two years in the administration) was also a basic requirement. Moreover, they were also forbidden to enter political parties and were obligated to abstain from party politics and its struggles.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Službene novine Kraljevine Jugoslavije, br. 250. 1929. 10. 25.

⁵⁰ VAJAGIĆ, Predrag: *Formiranje Dunavske banovine, Spomenica istorijskog arhiva Srem*, br. 8/2009. 139–140.

⁵¹ VAJAGIĆ: *Banovi Dunavske banovine... op.cit.*, 35.

⁵² *ibid.*

⁵³ MANKIN, Viktor: *Banovina Dunavska*, Zagreb, 1931, 19.

⁵⁴ VAJAGIĆ: *Banovi Dunavske banovine... op.cit.*, 48.

The Act on the Self-Governance of Provinces and Districts of 1922 was modified in 1933. It stated that the municipalities are self-governmental bodies and legal persons both in regards to public and private law, their purview extends to cover economic, cultural, and social matters and the local police are under their authority as well. The municipalities had to have at least 3000 inhabitants, all of whom had to possess Yugoslav citizenship, at the same time, all citizens had to belong to a municipality.⁵⁵ The legislator now promulgated *expressis verbis* (without even pretense) “that persons who do not know the official language cannot be nominated to the municipal council within the first six nominees, which by the way was elected for six years using an open ballot system.”⁵⁶ The head of the municipality was the president, who was elected from the members appearing on the strongest list. The municipality had the right to issue regulations in force in its territories which entered into force after approval from the Ban. In connection to this, it had the right to punish “those who violated its regulations with a fine up to 200 dinars or up to 5 days of incarceration.”⁵⁷

This law did not apply to the cities, whose standing was regulated by the Act on the Authorities of Cities which was approved in July 1934. The mayor and two-third of the council members were elected by a universal, direct and equal vote using the open ballot system, while the remaining one-third was appointed by the Ban.⁵⁸ In its other provisions, the act kept in line with the act regarding the municipalities, mainly focusing on questions of authority.

This order of administration, with little modifications, was in effect in the Délvidék until 1941, when all of a sudden in Spring 1941 the Yugoslav administration of two decades and with it the Yugoslav state collapsed. An important part of the territory, Bačka, returned to the Hungarian state, while the Banat under the *de jure* authority of the Serbian puppet state came under *de facto* German control.

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⁵⁵ *Dva veka lokalne samouprave u Srbiji* 230.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 233.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 254.

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THE INTEGRATION OF THE DÉLVIDÉK (SOUTHERN PARTS OF THE KINGDOM OF HUNGARY) INTO THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE KINGDOM OF SERBS, CROATS AND SLOVENES A HUNGARIAN PERSPECTIVE

Summary

After the Great War, the historical Délvidék at first became part of the Kingdom of Serbia, then later on the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs; territories with significant Hungarian population included: Backa, the Western part of Banat that became part of the Yugoslav state, the Baranya triangle, Prekmurje, and

Međimurje. After the incorporation of the territories, the new regime reorganized the administration in the spirit of centralization and unification while progressively dismantling the former administrative organization and dismissing the civil servants who had held positions in the municipal administrations before the Treaty of Trianon. territories that possessed different levels of economic, cultural, and social development became part of a single state. This was topped by the difference between the languages and, more importantly, the religion of the core nations. Finally, the large number of ethnic minorities who were not quite entertained by the prospect of living under a Yugoslav state posed a difficulty. Another fine addition was the rivalry coming from the strive for dominance by the Serbs, which was quickly opposed by the Croats and left its mark on the whole period. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the legislators considered while organizing the administration, the issues of unification and nation-building as much as it was possible. The political leadership of the Belgrade-centred state found the principle of centralization the most effective measure under the prevailing circumstances which, besides the benefits of unification and nation-building, also served the purpose of repressing the minorities and establishing Serbian dominance. Thus, the chosen method of integration and administration posed a serious challenge for the Hungarian minority from religious, political, social, and economic standpoints.