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A very Yugoslav paradox? The strange afterlife of interwar democracy (and authoritarianism)

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Dejan Djokić

Department of History, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Keywords

FAQ: 1

In the run up to Belgrade local elections held in March 2018, Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić suggested that the governing Serbian Progressive Party, of which he is also the president, might adopt an election poster used by Yugoslavia's prime minister Milan Stojadinović in the late 1930s. The poster showed a man's hand with scissors cutting through a promissory note, with a caption reminding the electorate of the government's success in reducing peasants' debts. While perhaps unusual, Vučić's message was not surprising: among his most often repeated claims and promises is the alleged improvement in the standard of living in Serbia since he came to power in 2012 (first as deputy prime minister, then prime minister and finally, in 2017, as president). More noteworthy was Vučić's reference to Milan Stojadinović, an interwar politician associated not only with state-controlled economic policies but also with authoritarianism and fascism. Vučić, a far right nationalist turned pro-EU reformer, strongly protests accusations of authoritarian style of leadership, but reportedly gave a copy of Stojadinović's memoirs to Ana Brnabić before she succeeded him as prime minister in 2017. (Brnabić is the first female and openly gay prime minister in Serbia's history, though she is widely perceived as a mere figurehead, the real power resting with Vučić).¹

Vučić's open associations with the controversial interwar leader appear to have been largely overlooked by the Serbian public. This should not be surprising: the president's allies control much of the country's media and the population is accustomed to his frequent references to historical

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1. "Vučić predložio SNS-u plakat iz 1938. godine za beogradske izbore: Njime je Milan Stojadinović pre 80 godina odneo ubedljivu pobjedu", *Telegraf* (Belgrade), 9 September 2017; "'Pročitala sam knjigu koju mi je poklonio Vučić': Šta je Ana Brnabić naučila od Milana Stojadinovića", *Nedeljnik* (Belgrade), 27 December 2017.

Corresponding author:

Dejan Djokić, Goldsmiths, Department of History, University of London, London SE14 6NW, UK.

Email: d.djokic@gold.ac.uk

personalities; these range from Max Weber and Winston Churchill (who, incidentally, regarded Stojadinović ‘a potential Quisling and an enemy’ during the Second World War)² to Zoran Djindjić, ~~the~~ first democratically elected prime minister of the post-Milošević era who was assassinated in 2003 because of his reformist policies, and whose opponents included the current president in his previous political incarnation.

Nevertheless, the references to Stojadinović present the historian with an opportunity to revisit Yugoslavia in an era when democratic promise turned into a disappointment which facilitated the rise of authoritarian regimes throughout Europe in the 1930s – a development possibly analogous with the current slide towards authoritarianism and populism, not just in Serbia, but globally. It was also an era in Yugoslavia’s history when ideological divisions were complicated by a seemingly paradoxical political interplay. Increasingly authoritarian, if not outright fascist, tendencies by an elected head of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious government were kept in check by a prince-regent and care-taker dictator, as well as an opposition coalition driven by a search for inter-ethnic compromise and the abolition of dictatorship. All this suggests a high degree of complexity which requires a nuanced approach to Yugoslavia, one that does not fit easily into established patterns of interpreting the interwar period.³

Democratic promises and practises

Scholarly works on interwar Yugoslavia have traditionally focused on the national question, collapse of democracy and introduction of dictatorship, once classified in socialist Yugoslav historiography as ‘monarcho-fascist’. While such an approach may be understandable, I suggest possible ways of reinterpreting the period by proposing two broad hypotheses: first, the liberal-democratic promise was one of the main *raison d’être* of Yugoslavia when it was created in 1918 – and not just the South Slav (or Greater Serbian) nationalism, as is usually argued; the failure of democracy in the late 1920s was therefore as significant a destabilising factor as the nationality question. Second, I argue that the dictatorship introduced in 1929 did not succeed either, or at least it did not mean an end of democratic practices. The 1930s witnessed not just a foreign policy shift towards Berlin and Rome, but also the re-introduction of party politics and elections, while key political actors (both in government and opposition) pursued – with varying degrees of sincerity and success – politics of negotiation and compromise. Thus, the traditional periodisation of the interwar years needs to be revised.

On the surface at least, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (as Yugoslavia was officially known between 1918 and 1929) was a prototype ‘successor state’ to the Habsburg monarchy. It was burdened by a complex pre-war legacy, including a delayed (certainly in comparison with Western Europe and ~~North America~~) and regionally uneven modernization. Its population had suffered unprecedented losses through violence and disease during the wars of 1912–1918, and infrastructure was seriously damaged; the violence, albeit on a smaller scale, continued into the 1920s,

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2. The National Archives (London), CO 968/107/4, Case of M Stoyadinovic, former Yugoslav Prime Minister, 21 May 1943.
 3. Recent (and excellent) literature on interwar Yugoslavia includes I. Dobrivojević, *Državna represija u doba diktature kralja Aleksandra*, Belgrade 2006; S. Ferhadbegović, *Prekäre Integration: Serbisches Staatsmodell und regionale Selbstverwaltung in Sarajevo und Zagreb 1918–1929*, Munich 2008; R. Mills, *The Politics of Football in Yugoslavia: Sport, Nationalism and the State*, London 2018, ch. 1; J. P. Newman, *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State-building 1903–1945*, Cambridge 2015; Ch. A. Nielsen, *Making Yugoslavs: Identity in King Aleksandar’s Yugoslavia*, Toronto, 2014; and Pieter Troch, *Nationalism and Yugoslavia: Education, Yugoslavism and the Balkans before World War II*, London 2015. The reader might wish to consult also D. Djokić, *Elusive Compromise: A History of Interwar Yugoslavia*, London 2007.

like it did elsewhere in post-war Europe.⁴ The peoples of what became Yugoslavia fought on different sides during the six-year Balkan war, though it would be too simplistic to reduce this conflict to ethnicity – many Serbs, for example, fought loyally in the Habsburg army, while some Croats and Slovenes joined the Serbian army, which also included non-Serbs from Kosovo, Sandžak and Macedonia. Yugoslavia needed to reconcile a society that was in some ways divided before it could be united; it was therefore a reconciliation project already in 1918, and not only after the 1941-1945 war.

The collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy created a number of small, relatively unstable nation-states which often treated their minorities as poorly if not worse than the empire they replaced (or empires, if Ottoman Turkey is included, as it should be when studying Yugoslavia). The Serb-Croat-Slovene kingdom was in some respects a smaller version of the Austro-Hungarian empire, but it was also a South Slav nation-state committed to, its creators insisted, liberal democracy, parliamentary monarchy and free, land-owning peasantry.

Yugoslavia was proclaimed by Serbia's and Habsburg South Slav leaders in Belgrade on 1 December 1918 and therefore it was not created by the Allies in Paris as is sometimes wrongly claimed. (In fact, the Conference refused to recognise the new state until May-June 1919). Yet, its destiny was directly linked to the fate of the Paris settlement, whose foundation faults, according to its many critics, facilitated the rise of Fascism and Nazism. The First World War broke out after the assassination in Sarajevo of the Habsburg heir to the throne, and his wife, by a Bosnia-born Yugoslav nationalist on 28 June 1914 – anniversary, incidentally, of the 1389 Kosovo battle ~~and a~~ sacred date in the Serbian, and at the time also Yugoslav, nationalist calendar. The collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy and the humiliation of its key ally Germany at Versailles on 28 June 1919, were among the key outcomes of the global conflict which had begun with Austria-Hungary's declaration of war against Serbia in late July 1914. Hitler's rise to power in a Germany crippled by the harsh peace treaty cannot be understood outside of the context of the post-war, Versailles order.

Nazism was of course preceded by the emergence of Mussolini and Fascism in Italy.⁵ One of the key reasons for Italy's revisionism was its failure to secure the incorporation of the whole of the Dalmatian coast at Paris because of the competing Yugoslav demands. If Serbia's wartime leadership had abandoned the united front with the Croats and Slovenes and pursued an enlarged Serbia rather than Yugoslavia, then Rome likely would have had its way. Yugoslavia, therefore, seemed to unite key factors which led to the interwar crisis more than any other successor state.

Besides the existence of the 'Yugoslav idea', which originated in early nineteenth-century Croatia, and Serbia's early twentieth-century political and military achievements, the creation of Yugoslavia was facilitated by favourable international circumstances, of which the defeat and dissolution of Austria-Hungary was one. Despite a complex make-up, as suggested by the country's original name, Yugoslavia fitted the dominant ideology on which the new international order, led by the United States, was to be based: the much quoted (and often misinterpreted) Wilsonian principles, which promoted national self-determination and liberal-democracy. Yugoslav peacemakers in Paris acted in a belief that a Yugoslav nation-state was the best solution for the South Slav 'question' (or, perhaps for the Serb and Croat 'questions'). They viewed the Serb-Croat-Slovene state as a key member of a just and hopefully long-lasting peace settlement. At the same time, like other representatives of the victorious countries, they used the nationality principle and historical and economic arguments selectively and in ways which suited their goals best. Italy's objections meant

4. R. Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End*, New York 2016. See also P. M. Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*, Cambridge, MA 2016, ch. 8 and Epilogue.

5. For an up to date reassessment of the relationship between the two dictators, and their ideologies, see Ch. Goeschel, *Mussolini and Hitler: The Forging of the Fascist Alliance*, New Haven, CT 2018.

that the new state was not immediately recognised, but the Yugoslav leaders eventually succeeded in securing most of their territorial aims. While their considerable diplomatic skills should not be overlooked when analysing these events, the international acceptance of the Yugoslav nation suggests that a hundred years ago the idea of a South Slav ethnic and linguistic unity may not have seemed so far-fetched and unrealistic.⁶

Usually overshadowed by the nationality question and the issue of national self-determination is the interconnected and equally important question of democracy. In other words, it is hard to imagine that Yugoslavia would have been (eventually) accepted at Paris if its leaders had not demonstrated a commitment to democracy. Parallel to the peace conference, elections for a constituent assembly were being held in the country and its leaders debated future constitution in the provisional parliament. I would further argue that the success of the Yugoslav nationalism in the years preceding the war was also down to the democratic promise. Pre-war Serbia was attractive to the Habsburg South Slavs because it was an independent Slav state which opposed 'oppressive empires' (Ottoman and Habsburg), but also because Serbia was a democracy, however imperfect, even by the standards of the day, due to corruption and interference of the military in civil affairs. At least from the point of view of most Habsburg South Slav leaders and nationalist-revolutionary youth organisations – one of which was Young Bosnia – Belgrade offered an increasingly attractive alternative during the decade preceding 1914. Serbia was seen by others as the South Slavs' Piedmont, even before Belgrade eventually embraced the idea.

During the war, the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee (London-based Habsburg South Slavs who advocated a Yugoslav union) clashed due to their different visions of how the future country should be united. In short, the government preferred a centralised state built around the Serbian core, while the committee advocated a unification on equal terms (between two unequal partners, one might add). An emphasis on the disagreements in the existing literature tends to overshadow equally important examples of mutual understanding on such key issues as a common goal to create a Yugoslav state under the Serbian dynasty, and a somewhat exaggerated claim that all South Slavs spoke the same language and belonged to one nation. Similarly, authors looking for examples of ethnic conflict usually neglect important Serb wartime divisions – within the government, and between the government, the crown and the military. Not to mention conflicting agendas and rivalries among Habsburg South Slavs – between the émigré Yugoslav Committee and leaders of the pre-war Croat-Serb Coalition who stayed in the country, as well as divisions within the Yugoslav Committee (e.g. Frano Supilo's resignation in 1916).

Another overlooked unifying factor was the belief, shared by the Yugoslav Committee and Serbia's leadership, in a moral superiority of their cause. They viewed themselves as representatives and advocates of liberal-democratic values, which included national self-determination – just like their western allies, but unlike their main enemies, the Habsburg and German empires and Bulgaria (whose monarch, incidentally, styled himself an emperor). The war that broke out in 1914 was the culmination of a struggle between democracy on one hand and imperialism on the other according to Milenko Vesnić, Serbia's minister in Paris and a key member of the Yugoslav peace delegation. The Habsburg-Serbian conflict was only up to a degree down to political and economic factors; it was above all an ideological war, Vesnić believed, 'a permanent, open and irreconcilable conflict between absolutism and democracy [...] Vienna and Berlin, the Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns, the last representatives of absolutism and Caesarism in Europe, viewed in this, at the time still small, country the main haven and axis of democratic tendencies and ideas'.⁷ This was of course a contentious claim and the dichotomy – democracy vs tyranny – painted a highly

6. See D. Djokić, *Pašić and Trumbić: The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes*, London 2010.

7. M. R. Vesnić, *O Društvu naroda (Konferencija održana u klubu Beogradskih Radikala 30. januara 1920. god.)*, Belgrade 1920, 10-11.

simplistic picture, albeit one which became more convincing in 1917, after the withdrawal of Tsarist Russia from the war and the entry into the war of the United States.

In May the same year, Habsburg South Slav deputies in the reconvened Austrian parliament issued a declaration calling for the creation of a mini-Yugoslavia within the monarchy. This provoked a strong reaction among exiled Habsburg Yugoslavs, whose leader Ante Trumbić issued an appeal to the British parliament, dismissing the declaration as unrepresentative and the Reichsrat as an undemocratic institution.⁸ The declaration also accelerated talks between the Serbian government and the Yugoslav Committee, leading to their meeting in July at Corfu, where the former fled after Serbia's military defeat of late 1915. The Corfu Declaration stated that 'this three-named [Serb-Croat-Slovene] people of ours is one according to blood, spoken and written language, the feelings of unity and continuity and compactness of territory in which it lives'. It included another important, yet overlooked, statement: '[...] the *authorised* representatives of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes [...] demand on the basis of the principle of free national determination that the [Yugoslav nation] be wholly liberated [...] and united in a free, national and independent state...based on *modern* and *democratic* principles'.⁹ Yugoslavia rested on the values of democracy and justice, and was a worthy member of an emerging world order based on the Wilsonian principles, Vesnić, who was also one of the authors of the Covenant of the League of Nations, claimed. He interpreted the Great War in terms of a struggle between freedom and tyranny, echoing the sentiments of the Yugoslav leadership and of the Allied statesmen at the time.¹⁰

The Ironies of Yugoslav History in the 1930s and 1940s

A Serb-Croat cooperation was necessary for a stable Yugoslavia. In the event, much of the interwar period was spent in an attempt to solve the Croatian question, which emerged in opposition to Serb-preferred centralism during the elections for a constituent assembly and constitutional debates of 1919-1921. Yugoslavia was built on the independent Serbian kingdom (which had united with the Kingdom of Montenegro one week before the proclamation of the Yugoslav union) but also on Croatia's medieval state traditions, preserved in Habsburg legal documents. Considering that Serbia had claimed a continuity with a medieval Serbian state, and that medieval Bosnia was described by South Slav advocates as a proto-Yugoslav kingdom because of the title of its greatest ruler, king Tvrtko, it was claimed, not without contest, that the South Slav union represented the culmination of centuries-long struggle for independence and liberation from foreign empires. Yugoslavia, today often seen as a 'prison of nations' – not unlike the way Austria-Hungary was perceived in Yugoslavia – was the first state in which almost all Serbs and Croats lived together. It may be argued that only after 1918 the Croats and Serbs became integrated nations. It was only in interwar Yugoslavia that Croat (male) peasants were finally allowed to vote, which led to the transformation of a previously small Peasant Party into a de facto Croatian national movement. The Croat Peasants' opposition to the Serb-style centralism represented only one element of a complex political dynamic. At another level, Croat and Bosnian Muslim leaders had figured out a way to exercise a degree of autonomy in the 1920s, despite a centralist Constitution. Similarly, the government was rarely able, or indeed willing, to fully control majority Croat areas in the second half of the 1930s, as, for example, the voting pattern shows.¹¹

8. A. Trumbitch [Trumbić], *To the British Nation and Parliament: On the Convocation of the Austrian Parliament. An Appeal*, London 1917.

9. "Krfška deklaracija od 20. (7.) jula 1917", *Dokumenti o postanku Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca 1914.-1919.*, compiled by F. Šišić, Zagreb 1920, 96-99. My emphasis.

10. Vesnić, *O Društvu naroda*, 13-14, 17.

11. Ferhadbegović, *Prekäre Integration*; Djokić, *Elusive Compromise*.

A stable, long lasting national agreement may have ultimately proven elusive, but the point is that repeated attempts were made throughout the interwar period to reach a Serb-Croat compromise. Despite political instability – by no means unique in Europe between the World Wars – Yugoslavia survived various crises, including political assassinations. Tragic murder of Croat parliamentary deputies in summer 1928 gave an authoritarian king Alexander a pretext to suspend the parliament, abolish the Constitution and ban political parties in early 1929. This event should be also understood in a wider context of the crisis of European democracy. Alexander's statement about divisions caused by party rivalries echoed Marshal Piłsudski's proclamation of dictatorship in Poland three years previously.

Unlike in Poland or Romania for example, there were no strong manifestations of anti-Semitism in interwar Yugoslavia, not even in the 1930s, despite the adoption of two anti-Jewish laws in 1940 following Germany's pressure on Stojadinović's successors.¹² That is not to say that the political life was free of violence: the Communist Party assassinated the minister of interior in 1920, and called for a Bolshevik-style revolution. Croat Ustaše and Macedonian revolutionaries also carried out terrorist attacks, including the assassination of the king in 1934; the Organisation of Yugoslav Nationalists, founded in Croatia, was one of several militant organisations, which included the Croatian Peasant Party's para-police units and Stojadinović's 'green shirts'. But the country's true fascists were on the margins of the political life (Ljotić's Zbor) or based abroad and without any real influence until the Second World War (Pavelić's Ustaše).

Despite becoming a dictatorship in 1929, Yugoslavia remained for a while, in terms of foreign policy, an integral part of the post-Versailles order, one of the reasons why Alexander, together with Louis Barthou, was assassinated in Marseille in October 1934. The assassin may have been a Macedonian revolutionary and the *Attentat* may have been masterminded by the Croat Ustaše, but it was sponsored by Mussolini's Italy. The League of Nations chose to blame Hungary, a smaller revisionist nation also implicated in the assassination, in an act of appeasement which would be repeated several years later vis-à-vis Germany, during the Czechoslovak crisis. Almost all of Yugoslavia's neighbours, which included Fascist Italy and, after the Anschluss, Nazi Germany, sought to revise terms of the Paris settlement. By moving closer to Berlin and Rome in the second half of the 1930s, during Stojadinović's premiership and Prince Paul's regency, the Yugoslavs effectively abandoned the system which had made the creation and very survival of their country possible.

This was not the only paradox of Yugoslavia in the 1930s. Shortly after proclaiming the dictatorship, king Alexander sought to create a government representative of all the main parties he had just abolished. Headed by an army general with no party affiliation, the new government included 'dissident' members of the main Serb, Croat and Bosnian Muslim parties, while the Slovenian Clericals' leader entered the new cabinet. The dictatorship may have abolished political parties, but the regime also created two government parties, one of which was Stojadinović's Yugoslav Radical Union, a de facto coalition of Serbian Radicals, Slovenian Clericals and Bosnian Muslims. The dictatorship was somewhat relaxed after Alexander's death in 1934, just as Bulgaria, Greece and Romania formally abandoned democracy. Quasi democratic general elections were held in 1935 and in 1938, and local elections in 1936. Political parties, while officially banned, resumed a full range of activities in the second half of the 1930s, with the exception of the Communist party, which had been banned in the early 1920s (strictly speaking, therefore, it is wrong to claim that

12. W. W. Hagen, "Before the 'Final Solution': Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland", in: *Journal of Modern History*, 68 (June 1996) 2, 351-381; I. Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*, Ithaca, NY 1995; J. Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars*, Seattle, WA 1974.

Tito and the Communists banned political parties after the Second World War – most had been formally abolished in 1929 by king Alexander).

At the same time, Yugoslavia's prime minister appeared to be adopting image of a fascist dictator during the second half of the 1930s. During the 1938 election campaign – when the governing party used the poster mentioned at the beginning of the article – prince Paul, regent of Yugoslavia, requested that the Belgrade police chief investigated increasingly open manifestations of fascist iconography by Stojadinović and his followers.¹³ Stojadinović's appointment in summer 1935 was followed by a general political relaxation, and was greeted by ~~the Anglophile prince-regent's~~ British allies. Yet, only a few years later, the prime minister's supporters had begun addressing him as Leader (*Vodja* in Serbo-Croat), started wearing green-shirted uniforms, and used the fascist salute. Such images sent a message which some observers noted with deep concern, while others welcomed it – depending on their own ideological position. Reporting on political developments in Yugoslavia at the time, the British minister in Belgrade informed London with some concern that it 'seemed as if [Stojadinović] was going to be satisfied with nothing short of personal dictatorship'. Count Ciano, Italy's foreign minister, on the other hand noted with delight that the Yugoslav prime minister was beginning 'to enjoy the idea of dictatorship' and adopted the Roman salute and a fascist dress sense – '[he] wears his coat inside out showing the suede lining because it is "more military"'. Stojadinović, Ciano wrote in his diary, was a fascist, if not 'by virtue of an open declaration of party loyalty', then 'certainly [...] by virtue of his conception of authority, of the state and of life'.¹⁴ Germany also followed with interest the Yugoslav domestic and foreign policies, noting, for example, the support Stojadinović enjoyed within the sizeable (around half a million strong) German minority in Yugoslavia and especially his friendly turn towards Rome and Berlin. While German diplomatic reports from Belgrade did not specifically comment on the prime minister's quasi fascist image, the warm reception he was afforded by Hitler and other leading Nazi officials during a visit to Germany – first ever by a Yugoslav prime minister – in January 1938 was telling.¹⁵ Following Stojadinović's removal in February 1939, a former Yugoslav minister to Berlin was appointed the country's foreign minister, and his first trip abroad was to Berlin. He would return there in June, as part of a Yugoslav high delegation accompanying ~~Prince Paul~~ and princess Olga. Hitler and the German leadership did their best to impress, if not intimidate, the Yugoslavs, but failed to persuade the prince-regent to leave the League of Nations or sign an anti-Comintern pact.¹⁶

After the war, Stojadinović defended his government's turn towards Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in foreign policy and trade, as necessary and pragmatic. He pointed out that Britain and France, instead of protecting their small allies in east-central Europe, opted to appease Mussolini (for example regarding king Alexander's assassination and Italy's invasion of Abyssinia) and Hitler (concerning Austria and Czechoslovakia).¹⁷ Yet, Stojadinović's unquestionable authoritarian tendencies, together with a (not unrelated) failure to reach a compromise with the Croats, led to his

13. Bachmeteff Archive, Columbia University, New York, Prince Paul Papers, box 13, Milan Aćimović to Prince Paul, Belgrade, 24 November 1938.

14. TNA, FO 371/23875, Campbell to Halifax, Belgrade, 13 February 1939; G. Ciano, *Ciano's Diary, 1937-1943*, London 2002, 33-34; J. B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934-1941*, New York 1962, 82.

15. Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (Berlin), Deutsche diplomatisch-politische Korrespondenz, Nr. 8, 14 January 1938, and a memo on the visit sent to German embassies in London, Paris, Rome and several other European capitals, Berlin, 22 January 1938.

16. PA AA R103323 „Aufzeichnung über die innen- und außenpolitische Lage Jugoslawiens“, Berlin, 24 April 1939; PA AA R103324 Deutsche diplomatisch-politische Korrespondenz, Nr. 101, Berlin 30 May 1939; Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, 147; TNA FO 371/23876 Campbell to Halifax, Bled, 8 July 1939.

17. BAR PPP, box 13, Aćimović to Prince Paul, Belgrade, 24 November 1938; M. M. Stojadinović, *Ni rat, ni pakt: Jugoslavija između dva rata*, Buenos Aires 1963, 590.

forced resignation in February 1939, only two months after less than a convincing election victory. A would-be Yugoslav Mussolini was thus outmanoeuvred by a reluctant regent. Oxford-educated **Prince Paul**, who was allegedly more interested in discussing and collecting modern art than in dealing with Yugoslavia's politicians, proved capable of dispensing of populist and relatively popular leaders such as Stojadinović and his predecessor Bogoljub Jevtić, whom **Paul** similarly removed after an election victory in 1935. Interestingly, a British journalist observed Jevtić being greeted with cries of 'Leader!' by his party colleagues, 'so infectious in these days are the methods of National Socialism and Fascism'.¹⁸

Prince **Paul** appeared to count days until his nephew king **Peter II** turned 18, so that he would be relieved of his duties as a regent, and contemplated stepping down at least once.¹⁹ He proved unwilling to abolish the royal dictatorship, but succeeded in inciting the Croats into government. An agreement was only possible because **Maček** put Croat autonomy above the united Croat-Serb opposition's demands for democracy.²⁰

In the event, **Paul** didn't have to wait that long for his regency to end. **Peter II** was proclaimed of age six months prematurely, after a group of Serb officers of the Yugoslav air force deposed the regency and the government on 27 March 1941. This was in reaction to the government signing an adherence to the Tripartite Pact in Vienna two days earlier. Mass demonstrations broke out throughout the country (but especially among Serbs, who found an alliance with Germany tantamount to treason) as the news spread, providing popular support for the Putschist officers (who, unsurprisingly, also enjoyed Britain's support). **Paul** would spend the war in Kenya and South Africa under British 'protection' (effectively house arrest), sharing, ironically, Stojadinović's destiny. The former prime minister had been interned in Mauritius since March 1941, only weeks before **Paul's** own downfall. Fearing that Stojadinović might be installed in power by Berlin and Rome, **Paul** asked the British for assistance in removing him from the country. Aćimović, the Belgrade police chief who in 1938 investigated Stojadinović on **Paul's** orders, and who had briefly served as interior minister, was a prominent collaborator in German-occupied Serbia. Such were the ironies of Yugoslav history in the 1930s and 1940s.

Stojadinović and Vučić

Eighty years after he allegedly hoped to become Yugoslavia's Mussolini, before prince **Paul** practically ended his political career in early 1939, Stojadinović seems to be making a come-back of sorts, thanks above all to populist Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, as mentioned at the beginning of the article. Vučić prides himself as an economic reformer, and it is in that context that his references to Stojadinović should be probably understood. He has not commented on Stojadinović's fascist leanings, although he must be aware of them.

There are obvious analogies between Stojadinović and Vučić, two ambitious, energetic men attracted by the idea of strong, if not absolute, rule. Both may be described as populists and both performed major U-turns, albeit going in opposite directions – Stojadinović away from democracy, Vučić allegedly towards it. Both took charge of domestic and foreign affairs, Stojadinović formally, as simultaneously prime minister and foreign minister, Vučić unofficially, as someone

18. "The Yugoslav Regency: Is Reconciliation in Sight?", *The Times*, 10 July 1935.

19. BAR PPP, box 14, Prince Paul's resignation speech, handwritten, no date (Paul later wrote "late 1940, early 1941" in the top margin of the note).

20. BAR PPP, box 2, Anton Korošec to Milan Antić, Belgrade, 16 January 1937 (on Paul's unwillingness to abolish the dictatorship.); TNA FO 371/23875, R.W. Seton-Watson to Orme Sargent, 1 April 1939 and *ibid.*, Rapp's confidential despatch to Campbell, Zagreb, 7 April 1939 (on Maček giving priority to the Croat question over democracy). Lj. Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček*, Belgrade 1965, offers the most comprehensive account of the 1939 agreement.

widely perceived to be in de facto control of the government. The 2018 Belgrade elections offer a good illustration of Vučić's dominance of the Serbian politics: the pro-government list was named after him and he took an active part in the election campaign even though he did not run for the office of the mayor. Most people did not seem to find this unusual – possibly because it is assumed that the authoritarian and populist president would run Belgrade, just like he runs the whole country. (Despite, or because of, a convincing victory for the Vučić list – just under 45 per cent of the vote, well ahead of an opposition coalition which received slightly under 19 per cent – the new mayor of Belgrade, a former director of a city hospital with no party affiliation or previously known experience in politics, has been appointed three months after the elections).²¹

Both Stojadinović and Vučić had begun political careers in a Radical party, although Nikola Pašić's People's Radical Party – a populist and radical turned conservative party of the government in early twentieth century Serbia and Yugoslavia – and Vojislav Šešelj's ultra nationalist, paramilitary Serbian Radical Party are separated by more than just a century.

Indeed, the historian must remain sensitive to false analogies: Stojadinović was prime minister of a large South Slav state, appointed by a royal regency; his attempt to fill a dictator's vacancy after king Alexander's assassination ultimately proved unsuccessful and he was removed surprisingly easily by a prince-regent whose authority many had apparently underestimated. Vučić, on the other hand, however authoritarian his style of government may be, is a democratically elected president, having previously also served as prime minister with a democratic mandate. Present-day Serbia, until recently an international pariah (in no small part thanks to policies previously supported and shaped by Vučić and his former allies), is much smaller and far less significant internationally than interwar Yugoslavia, which was a key member of the post-World War I order. Although both Stojadinović and Vučić sought to establish good relations with Berlin, fundamental differences between the Germany of the 1930s and present-day Germany require no elaboration.

Yugoslavia in the 1930s was a dictatorship which tolerated, or perhaps was unable to fully curtail, democratic institutions and practices. Present-day Serbia is a democracy with serious limitations, including an authoritarian leadership, censorship of media and freedom of speech, and weak and divided opposition. In its final years, the Yugoslav kingdom had become a dictatorship without a real dictator, but with a relatively democratic opposition. Contemporary Serbia, on the other hand, may be viewed as a democracy without a genuinely democratic government, but with an authoritarian leader.

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21. "Rezultati izbora za odbornike Skupštine grada Beograda 4. i 18. marta 2018", Gradska izborna komisija, <http://www.beograd.rs/m/gradska-vlast/1746811-/>; "Radojičić izabran za gradonačelnika Beograda", *Danas* (Belgrade), 7 June 2018, <https://www.danas.rs/politika/radojicic-izabran-za-gradonacelnika-beograda-video/> (both links last accessed 8 June 2018).