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Serbian-Slovak relations in the context of the life of the Slovak minority in the newly formed Yugoslav state after 1918

Abstract: The study deals with the development of Serbian-Slovak relations after 1918 in the context of the life of the Slovak minority in the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The starting point of the study is the historical situation after the end of World War I, which brought about fundamental political and social changes in Central and Southeastern Europe and created new conditions for the development of international relations and for the position of national minorities. The focus is on the Slovak community living mainly in the territory of Vojvodina, which after 1918 found itself in a new state and political environment. The study offers an analysis of its social, cultural and institutional life, as well as forms of preserving national identity through education, community life, cultural activities and religious institutions. At the same time, it points to the role of the Slovak minority as a mediator of contacts between the Yugoslav environment and the Czechoslovak state, especially in relation to Czechoslovakia.

The aim of the study was to point out the importance of the Slovak minority in the formation and development of Serbian-Slovak relations in the interwar period. Based on the analysis of contemporary sources and professional literature, the author points out that the Slovak community played an important role not only in preserving its own cultural identity, but also as a bridge between the two political and cultural spaces. The results of the research contribute to a deeper understanding of the position of the Slovak minority in the Yugoslav state and at the same time expand knowledge about the broader context of Serbian-Slovak relations in the first half of the 20th century.

Keywords: Slovak minority, Vojvodina, Serbian-Slovak relations, interwar period, national minorities, Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Yugoslavia

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Introduction

The emergence of new states in Central and Southeastern Europe after the end of World War I fundamentally changed the political map of the region and created new conditions for international relations and the position of national minorities. Among the newly established states was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, inhabited by several nations and ethnic groups. Simultaneously, the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic marked the beginning of a new chapter in relations between Slovaks and the Yugoslav milieu. In this context, the presence of the Slovak minority in the territory of today's Serbia, whose roots go back to the migration processes of the 18th and 19th centuries, especially to the region of Vojvodina, acquired special significance. The Slovak community in Yugoslavia represented an important bridge between the two new state entities after 1918. Its cultural and social activities were not only an expression of the effort to preserve its own identity but also a factor contributing to the development of political, cultural, and economic contacts between Slovaks and Serbs. Mutual relations were formed on several levels—from diplomatic contacts between the states to the everyday life of the Slovak minority, which played a significant role in the transfer of ideas, cultural values, and social initiatives.

The aim of this study is to analyse Serbian-Slovak relations in the period after 1918 through the perspective of the life of the Slovak minority in the newly formed Yugoslav state. The focus is primarily on the social and cultural activities of Slovak communities, their relations with state institutions, and the role they played in shaping contacts between Slovakia (or the Czechoslovak Republic) and Yugoslavia. The study of these processes allows for a better understanding not only of the position of the Slovak minority but also of the broader context of the formation of mutual relations between Serbs and Slovaks in the interwar period. The study is based on the analysis of contemporary press, published archival materials, and relevant historiographical literature. Through these sources, we aim to highlight the dynamics of Serbian-Slovak relations and the importance of the Slovak minority as a mediator of contacts between the two cultural and political spaces during the period of fundamental social transformations after 1918.

Since its establishment, the population of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes formed a complex conglomerate of several nations and nationalities, as well as confessions. The political situation in the state remained highly volatile in the initial months following its proclamation. The war disrupted economic structures, and problems arose with supplying the population. In addition to national problems and labour unrest, peasant movements demanding the parcelling of great landowners' land (which was partially resolved by land reform) emerged. On June 28, 1921, the so-called *Vidovdan Constitution* was adopted, defining the state as a parliamentary monarchy and applying the principles of centralism and unitarism. The parliamentary system was significantly limited by the powers of the monarch. In the 1920s, internal political relations were characterized by instability, frequent changes of government, and the emergence of militant nationalist organisations. In the field of foreign policy, the signing of the alliance treaty with Czechoslovakia on August 14, 1920 – which

Romania joined the following year to form the Little Entente – proved to be a pivotal moment. The government elite sought a way out of political crises by establishing the personal dictatorship of King Alexander I in January 1929. On October 3, 1929, the name of the state was changed by royal decree to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The administrative division of the state was also reorganised, dividing it into nine Banates headed by Bans appointed by the monarch. Most Slovak localities were located in the Danube Banate. "*The new division was much more advantageous for Slovaks*" (Gubová Červená, 2015, p. 231). The aimless political manoeuvring of Slovak officials between the Serbian democratic and radical parties ended, and naive trust in representatives of Serbian political parties resulted in disappointment. It is therefore not surprising that it was precisely in this period after 1929 that the *Matica slovenská* was successfully established in Yugoslavia and the cultural life of Slovaks developed more significantly.

The beginnings of coexistence in the newly constituted state

In 1919, Blanka Fábry, a witness of events, described the current position of Slovaks in the Yugoslav territories in comparison with members of other nations and national minorities. According to her, Slovaks enthusiastically welcomed Serbian soldiers and officials, while the new state was received coolly by the Croats, especially by the Bunjevci, among whom there were allegedly many supporters of the Hungarian state idea. However, she pointed out that the enthusiasm of the Slovaks began to fade after the Serbian victors began to hold the Slovak people responsible for the tragic events of 1914 and 1915. Real or imagined grievances against the Serbs led to threats and violence against the Slovaks, who defended themselves with lawsuits, but in the end, many preferred to sell their property, especially in the villages along the Sava River. As an explanation, Fábry stated that the discord – in fact a kind of silent but deep-rooted hostility of the Serbs towards the Slovaks – existed because the inhabitants of the Slovak settlements were increasingly buying up land that had previously belonged to the Serbs. According to the author: *"A Serb likes to live comfortably, he likes to have fun; many Serbian farmers squandered their entire fortune, which then came into the hands of the Slovaks, who had nothing but two hands and the ability and will to work."* It is said that only later did Serbs and Croats begin to recognize the good example of Slovak farmers, when, for example, they themselves enjoyed the benefits of growing hops, especially in the region of Bačka. She stated that Slovak settlers in Yugoslavia were already the third and often even the fourth generation of immigrants from Slovakia, people who had fully acclimatized and improved their properties (Fábry, 1919, p. 4). Two ethnic stereotypes are clear in this statement: Serbs are more frivolous compared to the more hardworking Slovaks, and Slovaks are also better economically or entrepreneurially minded farmers.

On the other hand, Fábry recalled that Serbs suffered greatly in 1914, and several Slovaks, together with Croats, took a hard line against the Orthodox population during World War I, e.g., in the ranks of the militia, gendarmerie, or police. After the war, there were cases when domestic Serbs alerted the Serbian authorities, who came from the

"Old Kingdom," to those who burned their flags, desecrated icons installed in households, actually or only supposedly reported Serbian neighbours for internment, or seized the property of the persecuted and refugees, etc. For example, at Christmas 1918, Slovak settlers from Ašana, Dobanovce, and other settlements near the Sava River had to flee from their indignant Serbian neighbours. Fábry also wrote about the departure of the intelligentsia, mostly from the Upper Hungary (i.e. present-day Slovakia), back to Slovakia, however: *"Every Lower Land peasant, dissatisfied that the Serbs often very emphatically express their desire to have the hegemony over Yugoslavia in their hands, does not think about resettlement.* (...) *The land is an irresistible magnet for the Lower Land peasant."* (Fábry, 1919, p. 4). The image of the strong bond between the Lower Land farmer and the land (soil) is characteristic and mentioned by many authors.

Národnie noviny, the press organ of the *Slovak National Party* in Slovakia, reported on the gradual reorganization of the *Slovak National Party* in the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. According to the author, the goal was not to be "*some kind of party*", but to help build a democratic state and to preserve "*own national character*", to cultivate national culture, to defend and promote the "*special national interests*" of Slovaks (Fábry, 1919, p. 4). In later years, Slovaks participated in political life through Serbian and Croatian parties (*Národnie noviny*, 1919, p. 3). In the church periodical *Stráž na Sione*, an anonymous author from the village of Boljevce (Slovak name: Boľovce) published reports from his church congregation. One report was written on the subject of the creation of a new organization and leadership of the Evangelical Church in Slovakia. In its introduction, the author created a characteristic image of being freed from the "yoke" of Magyarization, which remained a typical feature of the Slovak historical assessment of the past throughout the interwar period: *"Our church has finally been freed from the destructive influence of Hungarian chauvinism, and we, living in free Yugoslavia, enthusiastically welcome and greet with general trust the church leaders placed at your head."* (*Stráž na Sione*, 1919, p. 22). In contrast to this image stands the imaginary "sorting of spirits," when many members of the clergy, previously "faithful to the homeland," had to adapt to the new conditions. For some, the change took a longer time; others (opportunists) coped with the changes more easily, and a few preferred to emigrate to Hungary. Such was the case of Koloman Kiss, a native of the Slovak community in Malý Kereš (Kiskőrös), who was an Evangelical pastor in Slovenský Aradáč for 33 years (Szeberényi, 1934, pp. 17-18).

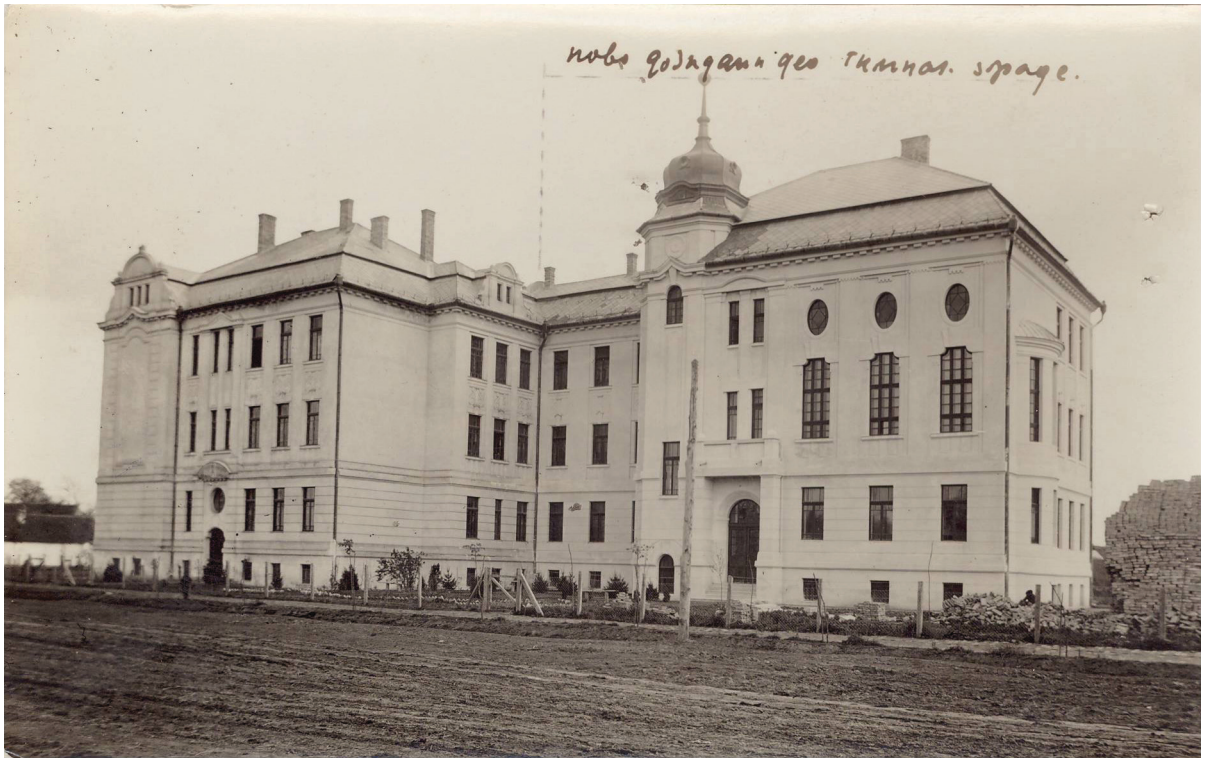
The day of October 28, 1919, anniversary of the Declaration of Czechoslovakia, was celebrated by Slovaks in Novi Sad as the "*liberation of the Czecho-Slovak nation*" (Národnie noviny, 1919, p. 3). Celebrations of Czechoslovak statehood were then held every year. The *Sokol* movement, popular also in Yugoslavia, played a major role in strengthening the Czechoslovak orientation. Jan Auerhan quoted words from the magazine *Svit*, published in Bački Petrovac by the *Association of Czechoslovak Academics*: "*One hundred and thirty thousand of us are still settled here, and we form the Czechoslovak south.*" (Auerhan, 1924, p. 148). From the beginning, Slovaks in Yugoslavia evidently accepted the idea of Czechoslovak unity, not only in terms of statehood but also in terms of national identity (which,

however, began to change in the 1930s). At the end of the interwar period, Yugoslav Slovaks expressed their opinion on the declaration of autonomy of the "Slovak Land" (in Slovak: Slovenská krajina) on October 6, 1938, in Žilina, which occurred because of extremely serious international intervention in Central Europe. The editorial staff of Národná jednota recalled the merits of the Czechs in the cultural flourishing of the territory of Slovakia within Czechoslovakia, and further stated: *"We can look at the autonomy of Slovakia within the Czechoslovak Republic sympathetically, objectively, and consider it a historical necessity. The Slovak nation, the Slovak language, the Slovak spiritual and cultural identity are real now, and Slovak autonomy follows quite logically from this. Slovakia is beginning to live its own life, it will control its own destiny, and this new state system will create a sincere, cordial, and truly fraternal relationship between Czechs and Slovaks."* (*Krajan*, 1938, p. 7).

The reality of the socio-cultural, economic and everyday life of the Slovak minority in the Yugoslav state

Despite certain problems in the critical period of 1918–1919, the Slovak minority generally had a relatively good position in the new circumstances, which resulted from historical experiences of cooperation with the majority Serb population and from interstate agreements. There was an unprecedented development of Slovak cultural activities: the publishing of newspapers, magazines and books, the building of an education system, the organization of community life, and the establishment of cultural institutions. Slovaks in the region of Vojvodina, as the only Lower Land Slovaks in the surrounding states, were able to establish their own Slovak secondary school in the interwar period. The Slovak grammar school in Bački Petrovac was established as a private school on October 1, 1919, and on August 27, 1920, it was nationalized. In the first years, this involved the construction of a special building (1922–1923), material and financial provision, the establishment of a teaching staff, the arrival of visiting teachers from Czechoslovakia, the delivery of textbooks and books from Slovakia, and the recognition of the school's public rights by the school authorities (Benková, 2009, p. 29). In the 1920s, remarkable activities of students and professors developed – e.g. celebrations, linden tree planting, and theatrical performances were organized. In 1925 the *Sládkovič Student Self-Education Club* was established, while libraries and cabinet collections continued to expand. However, at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, the economic crisis and the establishment of a dictatorship interfered with the school's activities. The number of Serbian professors and students at the grammar school increased, and various interventions limited student activities. After 1932, however, the role of the grammar school as an institution of Vojvodina Slovaks was restored, as was positive cooperation with the Yugoslav administration (Boldocký, 2009, p. 29; Sirácky, 1980, pp. 172-173). In addition to the grammar school in Bački Petrovac, an attempt was made in 1918–1922 to establish a private "real grammar school" in Stará Pazova, but this project ended unsuccessfully due to financial and personnel problems.

Political tensions and disputes surrounding the elections in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and



Grammar School Building, Bački Petrovac, first half of the 20th century
Photo: Museum of Vojvodina Slovaks

Slovenes in 1920 led to many Slovak voters voting for the communists, which allegedly aroused resentment among representatives of the dominant Serbian parties. The reality of post-war life brought bitterness to interethnic relations. *"After the elections, Slovaks were considered an anti-state element. They were accused of communism, and their rights were no longer respected. The Serbian language was introduced into schools and offices; pleas to ministries were in vain; they did not even receive answers to their official documents. The lives of Slovak intelligentsia were made extremely difficult. Teachers were required to take nostrification exams and Slovak officials (notaries) were simply transferred."* (Siracky, 1923, p. 4). S. Leitmann wrote in this regard: *"In the pre-war period, Slovaks bravely fought for the Slavic idea alongside the Serbs, and in equal measure they endured various sufferings for their Slavic identity. They were persecuted, pursued, and imprisoned solely because they publicly stood alongside the Serbs. It is only natural that when the time of sweet liberation arrived, the Slovaks were the*

first among the inhabitants of Vojvodina to solemnly declare their joining the triune nation of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes within Yugoslavia. However, after the days of joyful resurrection, accursed chauvinism soon took over, and the Serbs began to act as the ruling class, disregarding both the sad yet glorious days of common suffering and the unwavering devotion of the Slovak people, with which they so adhered, and continue to adhere, to the present state formation" (Leitmann, 1923, p. 126). Even according to Andrej Sirácky, the relationship between Slovaks and Serbs was quite tense at that time (Sirácky, 1924, p. 6).

The political representative of the Slovaks in Vojvodina was the *Slovak National Party*. However, its activities within the political system of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were ineffective. Therefore, in 1927, the local branches of the party in Bački Petrovac, Hložany, and Kulpín agreed to develop a new programme. On April 3, the Congress of the *Slovak National Party* was held in Petrovac, at which the party chairman Dr. Ľudovít Mičátek presented a proposal to transform the party into a non-political organization. Most of participants rejected this, after which Dr. Mičátek left the congress. The delegates then approved the reorganization of the party, a modified program, and its renaming to the *Slovak National Peasant Party* (Slovak name: Slovenská národná roľnícka strana). In addition to the national idea, the program emphasized the agrarian principle. The full text of the draft program was published by Gabriela Gubová Červená.

The *Slovak National Peasant Party* included among the individual points of its program: a) in the field of education: ensuring teaching in Slovak in at least the first four grades (except for the so-called "national subjects"); care for an eight-grade Slovak state grammar school in Bački Petrovac; Slovak-language instruction at teacher training school; personnel provision for Slovak schools (including visiting teachers from Czechoslovakia); b) in the economic field: the advancement of the peasant, artisan, and other "classes"; the demand for cheap credit; the provision of work for workers and the poor; the fair implementation of land reform; support for cooperative forms of economic activity; fair taxation, etc.; c) in the field of civil law: the demand for complete civil equality; civil self-government; free elections; simplification of state administration; a cheap and effective judiciary; care for socially disadvantaged citizens. (Gubová Červená, 2015, pp. 281-306).

At the congress in July 1927, Dr. Jozef Haško, a lawyer from Novi Sad, was elected party chairman. In the elections in September of that year, the *Slovak National Peasant Party* concluded an agreement with the Serbian *People's Radical Party*, which in the next elections brought it one deputy – Andrej Labáth from Petrovac. Dr Mičátek ran for the *Democratic Party* of Ljubomir Davidović, whose press body harshly attacked representatives of the Slovak party. Overall, however, Slovak political activities can be characterized as inconspicuous and fragmented due to disputes between leading figures of the community. Among many voters, there was rather a shift to the left of the political spectrum. The *Slovak National Peasant Party*'s activities ceased after the introduction of the king's dictatorship.

In November 1929, Slovak activists established the *Advisory Committee of Slovaks of the Danube Banate* with its headquarters in Novi Sad, whose

chairman was Dr. Ján Bulík. The committee sought to promote the national and cultural demands of Slovaks in Vojvodina and to develop cooperation with state or Serbian cultural institutions. It was responsible, for example, for the establishment of the *Matica slovenská in Yugoslavia* (1932). Ján V. Ormis briefly and fairly assessed the position of the Slovak minority in interwar Yugoslavia with the words: "*they* (Slovaks) *are living in a friendly foreign country*". Teaching is not only carried out in the Slovak language, no one is accommodating them politically, but they can freely develop culturally "*which means a lot.*" (Ormis, 1935, p. 72).

Andrej Sirácky, a native of Bački Petrovac and then a 23-year-old student at *Charles University* in Prague, purposefully provided essential information about the Yugoslav Slovaks. In a critical-analytical article published in 1923, he presented several remarkable findings. In terms of culture and education, he noted a sense of uncertainty among Slovak officials, which resulted from the conditions of the time: *"Small-scale national work is progressing, but the centre is somehow getting lost, and the minds of our representatives are being taken over by nervousness. On the one hand, there are promising future developments: the Sokol movement, the establishment of a grammar school, the publishing of magazines, educational associations, theatres; on the other hand, however: the expulsion of the mother tongue from schools, the removal of Slovak teachers and notaries, the difference between Slovaks and Serbs (in the implementation of land reform). The elimination of these injustices – actually, a matter of party tactlessness – can only be expected from the new parliament."* (Siracky, 1923, p. 1). After the fall of Hungarian supremacy, many Slovaks idealistically expected that cooperation with their "brothers," the Serbs, would be excellent, but disappointment inevitably followed, as the Slovaks remained a minority and the Serbs became the majority.

Most Slovaks in the Lower Land traditionally made their living in the agricultural sector; artisans, tradesmen, businessmen, officials, and members of other professions formed only a small part of the Slovak communities. This naturally followed from the fact that Slovaks in the Lower Land mostly settled *"...in the lowlands (...) where there is more arable land, uncultivated by ploughs or hoes."* (*Z hospodárského* života, 1922, p. 11). Andrej Sirácky also provided a picture of the fertile lowland plain: "*You can walk for hours and hours through our territory and you will not find a single hill anywhere – only in the distance, 10-15 km from us, the low slopes of Fruška Gora turn blue.*" (Sirácky, 1927, p. 49). He also assessed "*the perhaps too special and strong ties of our people to the soil, to the land*". And he apparently considered this a negative, because supposedly this dependence on land, on property, makes the Lower Land peasant not very idealistic, almost without higher spiritual ambitions.

A characteristic feature of the Lower Landers mentioned in the press and literature was their hard work. The Germans appreciated the Slovaks' efficiency in agriculture, as well as in crafts, and their efforts to get an education. Another author pointed out a certain unfavourable association within the community regarding the hard work of the Slovaks: *"With the well-known Slovak hard work, they spread throughout the Srem region, founded independent settlements (Boljevce, Binguľa), bought up properties or farmsteads, and soon there will be no settlement in Srem where we will not find a Slovak.*

However, for the Slovak national cause it is a loss; the Slovaks are – slowly but inevitably – assimilating" (Sirácky, 1923, p. 3). Many Slovak families became convinced that their own physical labour was no longer enough to cultivate the land. As the author of the text wrote: *"The Yugoslav Slovak invested his net profit in land, that is, he bought land from neighbouring Germans and Serbs, and he became materially stronger. This also had political and cultural consequences. He became wealthier and thus more politically independent. Individuals, having a larger number of hops, subscribe to newspapers to be informed about the market price of hops, and at the same time they also pay attention to their own political position.* Some visit larger markets, gain a broader perspective, and become familiar with more advanced economic life." (*Naše zahraničí*, 1922, pp. 13-14). However, the problem of economic management was represented by the plots scattered across municipal boundaries, so there were great expectations regarding land consolidation and land reform. Compared to other nationalities, the author stated that the state of social stratification was not favourable for the Slovaks: as many as 45% of Slovaks owned land with an area of only up to 3 cadastral yokes (Note: one cadastral yoke equals 0.575 hectares), 35% owned land with an area of 3–10 yokes, 15% with an area of 10–50 yokes, and the remaining 5% owned more than 50 yokes. The Slovaks did not have landowners with holdings of over 500 yokes. Therefore, great hopes were pinned on the announced land reform, but preference was given by the government to Serbian settlers (often from Bosnia, Kosovo, or Montenegro), especially at the expense of "non-Slavic nationalities" (*Naše zahraničí*, 1927, p. 6).

The situation of Slovak communities was complicated by Serbian political practice, namely that everything in the region was then subject to the dominant Radical Party (despite its name, it held conservative positions with a distinctly national character), which promoted its representatives to official positions (Pelikán, 2019, p. 309). For example, in Bački Petrovac, there was a notary named Lamoš, a former Czechoslovak legionnaire (and member of the *Slovak National Party*), who was suddenly transferred to a Hungarian-populated village near the border, and another notary, previously of Hungarian orientation, came in his place – but in the new times a "first-class" Serb and a member of the *Radical Party*, who refused to resolve problems in any language other than Serbian ("*here is one injustice that has offended Slovaks to the core*") (Leitmann, 1923, p. 127). Or other example of the difficult position of Slovak communities: In Binguľa, the Slovak school, founded 60 years earlier, was merged with the Serbian school, which the school board justified by claiming that mutual love and harmony would be better cultivated between Serbian and Slovak youth (*Nový útok*, 1922, p. 131). On the other hand, Prime Minister Nikola Pašić kindly received the Slovak deputation presenting the memorandum with their demands, and emphasized that he considered Slovaks a fraternal nation, which in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was entitled to the same rights as all other Slavs in Yugoslavia (*Naše zahraničí*, 1922, p. 138). The official line of the government and the specific political practice in the regions obviously differed.

According to Czech lawyer Jan Auerhan, an employee and later chairman of the *Czechoslovak Institute for Foreign Affairs*, immediately after the

Graduates of the State Grammar School in Petrovac, Bački Petrovac, 1929.
Photo: Museum of Vojvodina Slovaks

coup, the Slovaks believed that the good, friendly relations that had existed between Serbs and Slovaks in Bačka during Hungarian rule would continue. They relied mainly on friendly personal contacts with the leaders of the Serbian people. However, some of them had died in the meantime, while others had left or moved to other regions and cities – and all the more important positions in Bačka were filled by people who either did not know the Slovaks or who, during Hungarian rule, had supported the Hungarian state idea and, as a result, did not feel friendship towards the Slovaks, but rather distrust. Therefore, these people troubled the Slovaks with various forms of administrative harassment. For example, they dismissed or transferred Slovak officials without cause, sent teachers into retirement, removed Slovak teachers from leading positions and replaced them with Serbian ones, and ordered that all public signs and decrees had to be in Serbian only, while private signs and boards also had to include Serbian text (in the first place), etc. The most sensitive issue, especially for the socially weaker part of the Slovak population, was its postponement in the implementation of the land reform, which concerned the vital interests of Slovak peasants (Auerhan, 1924, p. 148). He char-

Members of the Sokol Society Stara Pazova after a public session, 1930s
Photo: Private archive of Steva Lepčević

acterized the background of this situation in the context of Serbian political reality: "*If we want to understand this hostility of today's leading Serbian local officials in Bačka towards the Slovaks there, we must realize the great, truly unhealthy importance of political partisanship in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, where everything is judged from the point of view of party affiliation*" (Auerhan, 1924, p. 148). At that time, Slovaks themselves became active in their own party, but without any success – unlike Romanians, Germans, or Turks, who elected their own parliamentary deputies. The Serbs allegedly preferred members of minorities to organize politically through "Yugoslav" parties. The insecurity of Slovaks in the first years of the Yugoslav state (in several cases also involving violence from Serbian neighbours) led to the idea of resettling in Czechoslovakia, but in the end, only a few dozen people were involved.

Ladislav Zgúth stated that, despite assurances of brotherhood between Serbs and Slovaks, Slovak citizens encountered hardships. For e Sokol Society xample, he gave an example of a Serbian teacher preventing Slovak children from speaking Slovak at school, or a Serbian major's protest during the oath-taking of conscripts in Bački Petrovac against

a Slovak speech by an Evangelical priest. He also stated that a Slovak was often called by Serbs the pejorative Hungarian term "Tót". If a Slovak complained about some injustice, he was said to receive the following response: "Go to the land of the Tóts." Zgúth firmly claimed that Czechoslovak legionnaires also fought for Serbian freedom, that Masaryk, Beneš and Štefánik also helped to build the foundations of a united Yugoslavia, that the 44 Slovaks executed in Kragujevac on the orders of the Austrian-Hungarian military command were among the common victims of both nations during World War I (Zgúth, 1924, p. 153). Otherwise, the memorial site in Kragujevac (in the Šumadija region), where a monument was ceremonially unveiled in 1925, became an important symbol of Czechoslovak-Yugoslav relations.

On the other hand, it is said that Serbian neighbours, for example in Bajša, had a positive influence on Slovaks, so that they did not succumb to Hungarian assimilation, which often happened in mixed marriages (Hříbek, 1931, p. 72). Another author wrote that Macedonian Slavs occupied fertile estates in Vojvodina at the time of the land reform and that, subsequently, poor Slovaks from Vojvodina were instructed by the Serbian government to settle on infertile land and in unhealthy regions of southern Serbia. In his opinion, by this act the Serbian government killed two birds with one stone: it tore several members away from the large family of Slovaks and at the same time at least superficially met the demands of its citizens, who were also Slavs, but not Serbs (Leitmann, 1925, p. 14). The short-lived and small Slovak settlement in Kosovo disappeared due to unfavourable soil, climate, and transport conditions, but also because of the hostility of the surrounding Albanian population, among whom the Serbian authorities had placed it.

In 1922, the *Czechoslovak Union* in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes prepared a memorandum in which it demanded, among other things, that the "Czechoslovak language" be taught in the first three grades of elementary school and that the state language be taught only from the 4th grade, that additional minority schools be established, and that departments of "Czechoslovak" language and literature, history, church singing, and music be established at teacher training institutes in Sombor, Novi Sad, and Osijek (*Naše zahraničí*, 1922, p. 132). However, the memorandum and these demands alluded to the political practice of promoting the Serbian idea in the Yugoslav state. In some places, the press brought positive news for minority education – such as in connection with the visit of Minister Dragutin Pečić to Bački Petrovac, who promised to solve the problems of the Slovak population on the spot: *"The Minister thanked [them] for the warm welcome, stated that the Slovak nation can rightfully demand from the state everything that belongs to it, including the Slovak school, and promised that he would present the request of the residents of Petrovac for the reopening of the 7th grade of the grammar school at the next Crown Council." He assured that the request would be handled favourably*" (*Naše zahraničí*, 1925, p. 201).

Representatives of the *Slovak Evangelical Church* also felt considerable grievance, especially in connection with the nationalization of church schools, the confiscation of church buildings and land, the dismissal of Slovak teachers, and the loss of control over the religious education of children (Zgúth, 1927, p. 2). In 1924, schools for Slovak pu-

pils suffered from a significant shortage of Slovak teachers, who were replaced by Serbian teachers in many places. The schools had a Serbo-Slovak character, reinforced by a regulation that stipulated that in the 1st grade 4 out of 22 teaching hours per week should be devoted to Serbian, in the 2nd grade 6 out of 24 hours, in the 3rd grade 6 out of 28 hours, in the 4th–6th grades out of 28 hours 10 hours in each grade (2 hours of reading, 2 of writing, 2 of conversation, 2 of geography, 2 of history). In addition, Serbian songs were to be practiced in singing lessons. It should also be mentioned that children at that time had to learn up to 3–4 writing systems, including the traditional Older German black letter script in religious education. While Serbian teachers practiced their profession without obstacles, "minority" teachers had to take exams in the state language and prove that they could teach in Serbian if necessary. Moreover, the positions of inspectors were held exclusively by Serbs, who strictly controlled the implementation of regulations (Auerhan, 1924, p. 150). Even among Slovak teachers, there were "*such great demands on mastering the state language and national subjects that there is no time left for teaching the mother tongue; the supervisory authorities do not care about knowledge of the mother tongue...*" (Klátik, 1925, p. 10).

The textbooks used in minority schools were practically literal translations of Serbian ones. For example, the reading book for the 3rd and 4th grades of Slovak schools contained only articles on Serbian history and geography of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, but nothing about Slovakia or its history. *"Only the Slovak language in which the reading book is written, the title of the book, and the anthem Hey, Slovaks reveal that the reading book is intended for Slovak schools.* However, textbooks for minority schools should not look like this one" (Auerhan, 1924, p. 151). Another specific problem was that only pupils who were clearly members of the minority, primarily by their name, could attend minority schools. For example, children of Slovak parents with German surnames were forcibly enrolled in Serbian schools (cases documented also from Bački Petrovac).

According to Karol Lilge, the state of elementary schools had deteriorated and depended on momentary political decisions. For that reason, on December 18, 1927, a congress of Czech and Slovak teachers, cultural workers, delegates of cultural associations, and priests of the *Slovak Evangelical Church* was organized in Kysáč with the main goal of finding ways to improve conditions in schools. Thanks to this effort, the *Ministry of Education* issued a regulation (No. 7271-98), according to which in the 1st and 2nd grades teaching was to be exclusively in Czech or Slovak, in the higher grades (from 3rd to 6th) "national subjects" (Serbo-Croatian language, geography, history) were to be taught in the state language, other subjects in the mother tongue (out of 26 hours, it was 19 hours). In the higher grades, Czechoslovak history was also to be taught in the mother tongue. Previously, only the state language was taught in schools for children repeating grades, but now the following subjects were taught in the mother tongue: Slovak/Czech language, mathematics, and basics of economics. Other subjects were to be taught in the state language (Lilge, 1928, pp. 8-9).

Slovak representatives tried to establish cooperation in the interest of promoting the national demands of their community. Therefore, the *Slovak*

National Party concluded a pre-election agreement with the *People's Radical Party*. The agreement was approved at the party assembly on December 29, 1924. In the agreement, the Serbian party accepted the following conditions: 1. The *People's Radical Party* will support Slovaks in church affairs. 2. In localities where Slovaks live together with Serbs, or with Croats and Slovenes, they will receive representation in the municipal, district, and county councils. In Novi Sad, Slovaks will receive two representatives in the city council. 3. Slovaks will put forward two substitute candidates in the elections. 4. Where Slovaks have a high number of pupils, teaching in the Slovak language will be introduced. Teaching of the Serbian language will begin only in the 3rdgrade of municipal schools. Slovak teachers will teach in Slovak schools. 5. In Slovak municipalities, qualified Slovaks will have priority in filling official positions. 6. In the allocation of land, Slovaks will be equal to Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (*Slovenský týždenník*, 1925, p. 1). The *Slovak National Party* chose Andrej Labáth as its candidate-substitute in the city of Novi Sad and the Novi Sad district, and Samuel Širka as its candidate-substitute in the Banat. The two candidates were ultimately not elected, but the party hoped that the *Radical party* would be "*morally forced to at least partially comply with its obligations*" (*Naše zahraničí*, 1925, p. 57). It is clear from the given formulation that there was no question of equal status between Slovak and Serbian political representation.

The orientation towards the *Radical Party* can be assessed as a pragmatic (but also opportunistic) stance, as it had a dominant influence in the Serbian political environment. During this period, there was also significant political tension between Serbs and Croats (and within their camps), which often manifested in excesses in the form of physical violence (Pelikán, 2019, p. 322). The political situation was further complicated by the resistance of the majority Serbian society to the radical left—the communists. The pragmatic focus on cooperation with the dominant party was also appreciated by the well-known Slovak official and financier Ivan Grúnik, according to whom *"a practical, realistic policy has begun, the only one that is appropriate and beneficial to the Slovaks there in today's conditions" and supposedly "the majority of the Serbian public is starting to look at Slovaks differently and no longer sees them as an anti-state or subversive element, but as a loyal and state-building one."* According to Grúnik, Slovaks *"must always adhere to the direction of the majority of their Serbian brothers who surround them."* He also added that *"although Slovaks did not win their own representative to parliament even in the last elections, great friends of Slovaks were elected in both Bačka and Banat, who are also a guarantee that Slovak causes will not be forgotten."* After several years, the Slovak intelligentsia, mainly due to problems in education, decided on a rational policy of cooperation with the ruling party and the pursuit of mutual concessions and compromises.

The *Slovak National Party i*n 1927 was evidently in a stage of slow decline, as voters tended towards Serbian parties, from which they expected solutions to social and other problems. Chairman Ľudovít Mičátek proposed transforming the political party into a national-cultural representative of all Slovaks, regardless of political affiliation, but this proposal was not accepted. Ferdo Klátik

reacted as follows: *"Is a special Slovak political organization necessary at all? It is indeed difficult to answer, especially for those who were its enthusiastic supporters. It is impossible to artificially maintain any organization. Each organization must be a living organism. Our people have not yet shown any great interest in the Party, which means that the people do not find in it a sufficient guarantee for the fulfilment of not only their Slovak needs, but also their needs as citizens and human beings"* (Klátik, 1927, p. 163).

Probably the most significant event in the cultural history of Yugoslav Slovaks was the founding of *Matica slovenská in Yugoslavia* during the national celebrations of August 14-15, 1932. Andrej Vrbacký wrote that the founding of Matica slovenská in Yugoslavia was based on the will of Samuel Baláž, who donated over 50,000 dinars for this purpose. The founding of *Matica* received a huge response among the Slovak minority in Yugoslavia. Even before the founding of *Matica*, over 500 members had applied, of which 130 were founders contributing 1,000 dinars each. Delegates from *Matica srbská*, *Matica slovenská* from Slovakia, the Ministry of Education from Belgrade, etc. were present at the founding general assembly. Ján Kvačala, a professor from Bratislava and a native of Petrovac, was elected honorary chairman of the *Matica slovenská in Yugoslavia*, and Ján Bulík, a lawyer in Novi Sad, was elected executive chairman. Michal Topoľský became the general secretary. The cultural and national activities of the *Matica slovenská in Yugoslavia* were to be carried out in seven branches (Vrbacký, 1932, p. 215). The following year, the *Matica* already had over 20 local branches, with teachers in individual Slovak localities playing a significant role (Čechoslovák, 1933, p. 53). To be more active, the *Matica* began organizing *Days of Matica* in 1932 (for the first time in Hložany). This was primarily aimed at arousing the interest of the wider Slovak public (*Krajan*, 1934, p. 7).

Although Vojvodina Slovaks entered the Yugoslav state with their own political party, it turned out that its operation was not effective in the established political system and finally, after several years of passive development, it ended its activities. On the contrary, the organization of a national cultural institution, fulfilling several functions in the life of Slovak communities, was of particular importance.

The collapse of the Czechoslovak Republic in the context of the *Munich Agreement* and pressure from Nazi Germany significantly strengthened the cooperation between Yugoslav Slovaks and Czechs. Many Slovaks (as O. Druga pointed out) even began to emphasize their Czechoslovak orientation more. At the meeting of the *Executive Committee of the Czechoslovak Union* on April 22, 1939, the Slovaks manifested Czecho-Slovak unity and the fact that the union remained their common organizational platform (Druga, 2021, pp. 94-95). Milan Hodža's faction of the Czechoslovak foreign resistance also operated in Belgrade through the person of the lawyer Ján Bulík (transportation of soldiers and other persons to the West, intelligence activities). Evangelical priest Pavel Šuľan organized fundraisers to support the resistance movement. Slovaks from Vojvodina, Pavel Šuľan (as a military chaplain) and Dušan Čaplovič, after fleeing Yugoslavia, became soldiers of the Czechoslovak Foreign Army in the Middle East. Both survived the battle for the Libyan city of Tobruk in 1941, surrounded by the Afrika Korps (Druga, 2021, p. 215, 246).

Conclusion

The analysis of Serbian-Slovak relations in the context of the Slovak minority in the Yugoslav state during the interwar period highlights the complexity and multi-layered nature of this historical process. The emergence of a common Yugoslav state after World War I created new political, social, and cultural frameworks in which the Slovak minority had to redefine itself—not only in relation to the majority population but also in relation to the mother nation and the newly formed Czechoslovakia. The Slovak community in Vojvodina and other parts of the kingdom managed to maintain a significant degree of cultural and linguistic identity, primarily through education, church institutions, community life, and the press. These institutional supports played a fundamental role in preserving national consciousness and contributed to the stabilization of the minority community amid political changes and the centralizing tendencies of the state. At the same time, however, it cannot be overlooked that the degree of autonomy and support was conditioned by broader political circumstances, particularly the internal political development of the Yugoslav state and its national policy.

Relations between the Yugoslav state and Czechoslovakia had a significant impact on the position of the Slovak minority. Diplomatic contacts, cultural exchange, and support for educational and cultural activities created a bridge between the mother country and the community abroad. These ties strengthened the national consciousness of Slovaks in Yugoslavia, while at the same time placing them in a specific position between loyalty to the state of which they were citizens and cultural and emotional ties to their historical homeland.

The interwar period can therefore be characterised, after overcoming a certain crisis in Serbian-Slovak relations in the first half of the 1920s, as a stage of relative consolidation and institutionalisation of Slovak minority life, albeit under conditions of a changing political reality. The Slovak minority in this period profiled itself as an active and organised element of society, able to articulate its interests and adapt to shifting state and legal conditions. Research into Serbian-Slovak relations in the chosen period thus confirms that minority communities were not passive objects of history, but active agents shaping the cultural and social space of Central and Southeastern Europe. Exploring their position contributes to a deeper understanding of interwar nationalist policies, as well as to reflection on contemporary issues of identity, plurality, and intercultural dialogue.

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