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Dušan T. Bataković
Institute for Balkan Studies
Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Belgrade

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On Parliamentary Democracy in Serbia 1903–1914 *Political Parties, Elections, Political Freedoms*

Abstract: Parliamentary democracy in Serbia in the period between the May Coup of 1903 and the beginning of the First World War in 1914 was, as compellingly shown by the regular and very detailed reports of the diplomatic representatives of two exemplary democracies, Great Britain and France, functional and fully accommodated to the requirements of democratic governance. Some shortcomings, which were reflected in the influence of extra-constitutional (“irresponsible”) factors, such as the group of conspirators from 1903 or their younger wing from 1911 (the organisation Unification or Death), occasionally made Serbian democracy fragile but it nonetheless remained functional at all levels of government. A comparison with crises such as those taking place in, for example, France clearly shows that Serbia, although perceived as “a rural democracy” and “the poor man’s paradise”, was a constitutional and democratic state, and that it was precisely its political freedoms and liberation aspirations that made it a focal point for the rallying of South-Slavic peoples on the eve of the Great War. Had there been no firm constitutional boundaries of the parliamentary monarchy and the democratic system, Serbia would have hardly been able to cope with a series of political and economic challenges which followed one another after 1903: the Tariff War 1906–11; the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina 1908/9; the Balkan Wars 1912–13; the crisis in the summer of 1914 caused by the so-called Order of Precedence Decree, i.e. by the underlying conflict between civilian and military authorities. The Periclean age of Serbia, aired with full political freedoms and sustained cultural and scientific progress is one of the most important periods in the history of modern Serbian democracy.

Keywords: Serbia 1903–1914, parliamentary democracy, political freedoms, democratic culture, cultural progress, Radical Party

Cultural progress. National élan

After a brief period of full parliamentary democracy in Serbia – between the adoption of a liberal constitution in 1888 and king Alexander Obrenović’s coup d’état in 1893 – it took a decade until a true parliamentary system was restored. The reign of Peter I Karadjordjević from 1903 to 1914 (nominally to 1921) is sometimes dubbed a “golden” or “Periclean” age of Serbia on account of the effective exercise of political liberties, and a rapid national and cultural rise combined with the pursuit of economic independence. Socially and culturally, Serbia had already been one of the countries in which the process of modernisa-

tion, europeanisation and westernisation had been increasingly pushing aside the traditional mores of patriarchal Balkan society.¹

By 1910 Serbia had already had a population of 2,922,058 and a five-year population growth of about 190,000 people in a total state area of 48,303 km² (unchanged from the independence in 1878 to the Balkan War in 1912). Immigration from the two neighbouring empires was steady. There were about two million Serbs living in Austria-Hungary, and about one million under Ottoman rule. This situation, along with a vigorous foreign policy, acted as a boost to the aspirations for national unification which, after 1903, became complementary to the new ideology of South-Slavic (Yugoslav) unity.²

Although a free country in political terms, Serbia was still seen as the same “poor man’s paradise” by many foreign travellers³ since the pace of her economic growth fell short of the speed required by her ambitious foreign policy plans. It was a predominantly agrarian society, with peasants accounting for as much as 87.31 per cent of the total population. The process of urbanisation was under way, but the cities were still quite small by European standards. The twenty-four settlements officially designated as cities had a little more than 350,000 inhabitants combined. Only six of them had a population of more than 10,000 people, 13 up to 10,000, and three fewer than 5,000. The approximate number of persons that formed the bourgeoisie may be obtained by subtracting from the total number of persons living in the cities, approximately 350,000, or about 30 to 40 per cent. The composition of that social stratum in 1905 was as follows: 46.4 per cent craftsmen, 22.2 per cent merchants, and 18.9 per cent civil servants. With a population of 70,000 at the beginning of the 1900s and 90,000 a decade later, Belgrade was still far behind the criterion which counted as cities only the settlements with a population of more than 100,000. The middle class was urban almost without exception. For instance, only two per cent of Belgrade’s population in 1905 were civil servants, craftsmen accounted for 23 per cent and merchants for 13 per cent.⁴

¹ For more see Milan Grol, *Iz predratne Srbije* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1939); see also Wayne S. Vuchinich, *Serbia between East and West. The Events of 1903–1908* (Stanford: Stanford University Publications, 1954); Dimitrije Djordjević, “Srbija i Balkan na početku XX veka (1903–1906)”, in *Jugoslovenski narodi pred Prvi svetski rat* (Belgrade: SANU, 1967), 207–230.

² The number of immigrants may be deduced indirectly from the 1900 census data for Belgrade: of the total number of inhabitants of the capital city 48,000 were born in it, 19,000 were immigrants from the neighbouring empires, and 3,000 came from other European countries. Cf. statistical data in *Nova istorija srpskog naroda*, ed. D. T. Bataković (Belgrade: Naš dom, 2002), 185–192.

³ An idealised picture of Serbia by Herbert Vivian, *Servia. The Poor Man’s Paradise* (London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green and co., 1897).

⁴ Dimitrije Djordjević, “Serbian Society 1903–1914”, in Dimitrije Djordjević and Bela Kiraly, eds., *East Central European Society and the Balkan Wars* (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Mon-

The most conspicuous advance was made in the area of education, and understandably so, because Serbia was aware that her more dynamic development directly depended on the level of education in the general population and an adequate pool of educated workforce. Intellectuals were proud to point out that the number of elementary schools rose from 534 in 1885 to 1,425 in 1911, which is to say in thirty years within the same state borders. By 1910, the number of 19 secondary grammar and vocational schools with 386 teachers and 6,049 students rose to 49 schools with 723 teachers and 12,892 students. Although the number of educated persons was small by European standards (the illiterate still accounted for 76.97 per cent of the total population and 45 per cent of the urban population), the growth of elite classes was clearly felt in political life. Secondary and higher education, marked mostly by French-inspired liberal models, was conducive to a more dynamic rise of middle classes, which now were to interpret the democratic ideals of the social strata only recently detached from their rural roots from the perspective of a citizen.⁵

The *Great School* established in Belgrade in 1838 was in 1905 transformed into a university with five faculties. In comparison with no more than 58 teachers and 450 students in 1900, on the eve of the First World War the University of Belgrade had 80 teachers and 1,600 students, and there were more than one hundred Serbian students at foreign universities, mostly in France but also in Switzerland, Belgium, Germany and Russia. These figures highlight the cultural progress made since the 1890s. The political and academic charisma of some university professors, notably the Independent Radical leaders Jovan Skerlić, a literature professor, and Jovan Cvijić, a geographer, drew many students from Bosnia and Dalmatia, and in 1907 even a large group of young Bulgarians enrolled in the University of Belgrade.

The *Royal Serbian Academy*, founded in 1886 as a new institution following in the tradition of the *Serbian Learned Society*, soon asserted itself as a leading scientific institution in the Slavic South. Scientists of European renown (Mihailo Petrović "Alas", Sima M. Lozanić, Stojan Novaković, Jovan Cvijić, Branslav Petronijević, Živojin Perić, Slobodan Jovanović, Jovan Žujović, Mihailo

ographs; Highland Lakes, N.J.: Atlantic Research and Publications; New York: Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1987), 204–214.

⁵ On French influences in Serbia see D. T. Bataković, "French Influence in Serbia 1835–1914: Four Generations of 'Parisians'", *Balkanica* XLI (2010), 93–129; D. T. Bataković, "Srbija na Zapadu. O francuskim uticajima na politički razvoj moderne Srbije", in *Susret ili sukob civilizacija na Balkanu*, ed. S. Terzić (Belgrade: Istorijski institut SANU; Novi Sad: Pravoslavna reč, 1998), 307–328; D. T. Bataković, "L'influence française sur la formation de la démocratie parlementaire en Serbie", *Revue de l'Europe Centrale* VII/1-1999 (2000), 17–44; D. T. Bataković, "Le modèle français en Serbie avant 1914", in *La Serbie et la France: une alliance atypique. Les relations politiques, économiques et culturelles 1870–1940*, ed. D. T. Bataković (Belgrade: Institut des Etudes balkaniques, 2010), 13–99.

Gavrilović, Bogdan Popović, Jovan Skerlić...) were members of the Academy and/or university professors. *Srpska književna zadruga* (Serbian Literary Cooperative) with its 11,000 members in Serbia and the Balkans primarily operated as a publishing house, but its actual role was that of an educational institution that carefully fostered national culture, promoted the ideology of Yugoslav mutuality, and cultivated the literary taste of its ever-growing circle of readers and subscribers. Many of its books – from domestic authors to translations of Greek and Roman classics and contemporary French literature – with large print runs based on subscription publishing, were smuggled into Bosnia, Herzegovina, Dalmatia, Slavonia and other provinces under Austrian rule, because the Austrian authorities deemed them liberally and nationally charged reading matter.⁶

The restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1903

After the overthrow of the Obrenović dynasty by the coup of May 1903, a “revolutionary government” composed of all parties was formed under the premiership of Jovan Avakumović. The election of the king at the joint session of the Assembly and the Senate of 15 June 1903 opened with an acclamation: “Long live Peter Karadjordjević, King of Serbia!” Each of the 119 Assembly members and 39 senators pronounced himself for the election of Prince Peter as king with the right to hereditary succession.⁷ Then they issued a public statement: “The body of popular representatives unanimously decides that the Constitution of 22 December 1888 shall be reinstated as well as all political laws that were passed under it with amendments and supplements and those that will be passed during the term of this body of popular representatives even before the elected Monarch takes his oath of office on it.”⁸

An aspirant to the throne for whole forty years, Prince Peter was not elected king only because he was a member of a dynasty which had always enjoyed much popular support, or because of his unquestionable patriotism and personal bravery. He was elected new king of Serbia because of his unwavering commitment to liberal and democratic principles, which stood in stark contrast to the Obrenović dynasts’ absolutist leanings. Although a soldier by education – he graduated from the Saint-Cyr Military Academy – Peter I had developed his political outlook in France and then, during his long exile in Geneva, in the atmosphere of harmonious democratic evolution of Swiss society, he had had the

⁶ For more see Ljubinka Trgovčević, *Istorija Srpske književne zadruge* (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1992).

⁷ According to some sources, Žujović subsequently refused to sign the act on the election of Prince Peter as king. See also Jovan Žujović, *Dnevnik*, vol. I (Belgrade: Arhiv Srbije, 1986), 112–116.

⁸ Milivoje Popović, *Borba za parlamentarni režim u Srbiji* (Belgrade: Politika A.D., 1939), 86.

opportunity to see for himself the beneficial effects of the democratic principles that he had been steadfastly championing.⁹

Unlike the last Obrenović kings, detested by the people not only for their autocratic rule but also for reducing Serbia to the position of Austria-Hungary's client state, Peter I was seen as a proponent of the country's reliance on imperial Russia, traditionally popular in Serbia. His sons Djordje (George) and Aleksandar (Alexander), born of his marriage to the Montenegrin Princess Zorka Petrović-Njegoš, had been trained at the Imperial Corps of Pages in St. Petersburg. When he was elected king, he was already sixty-one. The long and difficult years of exile had taken the edge off his irascible nature and gave him the experience and temperance needed for the constitutional monarch of a country where cooling down heated political passions was not an easy challenge.¹⁰

King Peter I's political affinities undoubtedly lay more with Ljubomir Stojanović's Independent Radicals than with Pašić's Old Radicals. He believed coalition cabinets on the French model to be a better solution than homogeneous majority cabinets of the British type which seemed to him a form of participatory. More or less consistently, except when the interests of the army officers, former conspirators to whom he owed the throne were involved and, on one occasion, when he authorised the minority Independent Radical government to call the election, King Peter I was careful not to overstep his constitutional powers.¹¹

As a result of the bitter experience with the last Obrenović kings and their autocratic rule, the constitutional boundaries were laid down with precision. The new unicameral Constitution of 1903, in fact the amended Constitution of 1888, was an important step towards a fully-fledged parliamentary system: it strengthened the role of the National Assembly, limited the role of the monarch to its constitutional boundaries and, by reducing the tax-based qualification for voting, practically introduced universal male suffrage. Serbia was defined as a constitutional and parliamentary monarchy. The legislative power was exercised equally by the king and the unicameral body of popular representatives (National Assembly), with the State Council as an advisory body. The king had the right to sanction laws (Art. 43), but the consent of the Assembly was required for every law to enter into force (Art. 35), and no law could be passed, revoked or interpreted without the consent of the Assembly (Art. 116). Every bill signed by the king had to bear a ministerial countersignature to become a law (Art. 135). Since the cabinets were as a rule formed from the ranks of the

⁹ Dragoljub R. Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I Karadjordjević*, vol. I: *U izgnanstvu 1844–1903. godine* (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1988), 420–446.

¹⁰ Dragoljub R. Živojinović, *Kralj Petar I Karadjordjević*, vol. II: *U otadžbini 1903–1914. godine* (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1990), *passim*.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See also Peter Karadjordjević's preface to his translation of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty: O slobodi* (Belgrade: Sveslovenska knjižarnica M. J. Stefanovića, 1912).

parliamentary majority (even though this was not a constitutional requirement given that the ministers were appointed by the king and were not necessarily Assembly members), the ministerial countersignature ensured the Assembly's control over all royal acts. The more significant of the amendments to the Constitution show that there was a general will for further democratisation, even though the process involved a number of halfway solutions which resulted from the pragmatic wish of the strongest party, the Old Radicals led by Nikola P. Pašić, to secure favourable election conditions for themselves and the Independent Radicals, with whom they sought to achieve reconciliation¹² after the latter had split from their common People's Radical Party. The changes to the articles relating to the proportional representation system, requested by the Old Radicals who had grudgingly given up the majority election system in 1888, actually advantaged larger parties.¹³

With the tax-based qualification for voting reduced to a symbolical amount, voting rights encompassed most males over twenty-one years of age: in the parliamentary election of 1903, 53 per cent of the registered voters took to the polls, and as many as 70 per cent five years later. The elections were reasonably free by the European standards of the time despite the fact that the police machinery was able to influence the outcome of the voting process locally, but on a quite limited scale. Peasants held less than 30 per cent of parliament seats, while lawyers, schoolteachers, merchants and priests accounted for more than 30 per cent.

The political scene in Serbia in 1903–1914 was dominated by the Radicals divided into two opposing factions. In 1904 one faction finally split to form the *Independent Radical Party*. The other retained the original name, the *People's Radical Party*, and therefore was commonly known as Old Radicals. The Independent Radicals took a markedly opposition stance even though the two parties shared the same or quite similar programmatic goals. Taking together more than 80 per cent of the vote, the two Radical parties governed the country alternately or in coalition, but the Old Radicals led by Nikola P. Pašić fared better with voters. In eight years, they formed as many as eight homogeneous majority cabinets, and remained in power alone during the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) as well. The Independent Radicals, led by Ljubomir Stojanović, were able to form

¹² Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères [hereafter: AMAE], Paris, Nouvelle série [NS], Serbie, vol. 3, no. 66, Belgrade, le 5 août 1903.

¹³ Popović, *Borba za parlamentarni režim*, 89–91. See also different, unconvincing and frequently one-sided views which, based on strictly legal analyses or on press or parliament debates, play down the level of democratic achievement and relativize the existence of democratic values in Serbia, such as Olga Popović-Obradović, *Parlamentarizam u Srbiji 1903–1914* (Belgrade: Službeni list, 1998); Dubravka Stojanović, *Srbija i demokratija 1903–1914. Istorijska studija o "zlatnom dobu srpske demokratije"* (Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2003).

only one homogeneous cabinet, and it remained in office for less than a year (1905–1906).¹⁴ Both the Old and the Independent Radicals held that the Serbian king should behave the same as the British monarch did: he should refrain from exercising the right of veto (which turned out to be the case), and appoint the cabinet ministers only nominally; the government should emerge from the parliamentary majority (which was to cause some debate). Finally, they believed that the king was not entitled to dissolve the Assembly at will, but only at the request of the government. The Old Radicals, and especially their parliamentary ideologue Stojan M. Protić, prone to a simplified interpretation of the British parliamentary system, openly stated their belief that the king “must not have a different opinion from that of the government.”¹⁵

The former Liberals of Jovan Ristić divided into two fraction after the coup of 1903 merged again in 1905 and created a unified party under the new name of the *National Party* (1905) presided by Stojan Ribarac and Vojislav Veljković. The dissolved Progressive Party (1896) was renewed (1906) owing to the repute of one of its original founders (1881), the famous historian and philologist Stojan Novaković.¹⁶ Neither the Nationals (Liberals) nor the Progressives were able, however, to garner any significant support from the electorate, both being perceived as worn-out political parties generally loyal to the overthrown Obrenović dynasty, and the Progressives also as Austrophiles. Neither of them took part in government except for the concentration cabinet of the Progressive Stojan Novaković (1908–1909) put together for the purpose of joint resistance to the Austro-Hungarian annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Social Democratic Party at first had one, and later two, out of 160 parliament seats.

There was little difference between the Old and Independent Radicals in party programme. After the May coup in 1903, the Old Radicals argued for maintaining the bicameral Constitution of 1901, whereas the Independent Radicals demanded the reinstatement of the unicameral Constitution of 1888, and their proposal was accepted in parliament by majority vote. Parliamentary democracy, representative government, local self-government and the “unification of Serbian lands” were the objectives reiterated since 1881, the year the People’s Radical Party was officially founded. Of all the parties in Serbia whose pro-

¹⁴ For more detail see Djordjević, “Serbian Society 1903–1914”, 210–214.

¹⁵ Slobodan Jovanovic, “Perić o vladalačkoj vlasti”, *Arhiv za pravne i društvene nauke* XXXVI/1–2 (1938), 2. For more see Stojan M. Protić, *Odlomci iz ustavne i narodne borbe u Srbiji*, 2 vols. (Belgrade: Štamparija D. Obradović, 1911–1912).

¹⁶ Mihailo Vojvodić, “Stojan Novaković i obnovljena Srpska napredna stranka”, *Zbornik Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu. Spomenica Radovana Samardžića XVIII* (1994), 251–281. See also D. T. Bataković, “Nacija, država, demokratija. O političkim idejama Stojana Novakovića”, in *Stojanu Novakoviću u spomen*, ed. Andrej Mitrović (Belgrade: Srpska književna zadruga, 1996), 147–176.

grammes stated as their imperative the liberation and unification of different Serbian lands, the Independent Radicals were the only who included the “cultivation of the spirit of Yugoslav community” among their objectives. Intending for themselves the role of a “moral gendarmerie”, they kept accusing the Old Radicals for abandoning the original principles of radicalism, for identifying the party and the state, and for being prone to corruption. The Nationals (Liberals), for their part, criticised the Radicals for betraying the sacred national cause for narrow party interests, and the Progressives, favouring a gradual, evolutionary process towards a parliamentary system, denounced the Old Radicals for their demagogic methods and complete lack of restraint in what they saw as unlimited democracy.¹⁷ If compared with the most advanced European democracies, parliamentary democracy in Serbia worked quite well despite all difficulties.

Political and cultural newspapers and periodicals: the flourishing of democratic culture

From among several dozen dailies there stood out the independent *Politika* (established in 1904) and two party organs, the *Samouprava* (Self-governance) of the Old Radicals, and the *Odjek* (Echo) of the Independent Radicals. The liberal law of 1904 provided for an unqualified freedom of the press, so much so that many foreign diplomats deemed it to be excessive. Out of a total of 218 papers in Serbian in 1911, 125 were printed in Serbia with a total distribution of 50 million copies. There were 90 papers, of which 15 dailies and 15 periodicals, printed in Belgrade alone. Of 302 papers and magazines published in Serbian in 1912, 199 were printed in Serbia with a total distribution of about 50 million copies. Of these, 126 were printed in Belgrade alone, of which 24 dailies and 20 (literary and scholarly) periodicals, and 84 technical papers and magazines.¹⁸

All political parties and groups had their organs. At first the *Pokret* (Movement), then the *Mali žurnal* (Little Journal) and, finally, the *Pijemont* (Piedmont), were considered mouthpieces of the 1903 conspirators, while their political opponents were assembled around the *Narodni list* (People’s Newspaper). Two leading parties, the Old Radicals and the Independents, published the *Samouprava* (print run of 2,000 copies) and the *Odjek* (2,000–4,000 copies) respectively. The former Liberals (renamed Nationals) published the *Srpska zastava* (Serbian Flag). Austria-Hungary’s interest in Serbia was promoted quite overtly by the anti-dynastic papers subsidised by the Vienna government: the organs of the Progressives the *Štampa* (Press) and the *Pravda* (Justice). Con-

¹⁷ On the political parties’ programmes in more detail in Vasilije Krestić and Radoš Ljušić, *Programi i statuti srpskih političkih stranaka do 1918. godine* (Belgrade: Književne novine, 1991).

¹⁸ J. Škerlić, *Istorija nove srpske književnosti* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1967), 436; originally published in 1914 (Belgrade: Izdavačka knjižara S. K. Cvijanovića).

sidered as a paper discreetly promoting Russia's interest in Serbia, the *Politika* kept a critical distance to all parties, thereby ensuring the highest daily circulation of 8,000 copies. The Montenegrin dynastic interest was promoted by the *Beogradske novine* (Belgrade Newspaper), while the *Večernje novosti* (Evening News), with a print run of 4,000 copies, voiced the position of the Metropolitan of Belgrade and ecclesiastical circles. The Socialists had two little-read dailies. A dozen more papers were published irregularly, mostly in Belgrade, ceasing publication and being restarted under a different name. The number of newspaper readers was much larger than the number of copies because every pub in the capital city and in the interior offered its customers free use of daily papers. Apart from two prestigious literary and scholarly magazines, the *Srpski književni glasnik* (Serbian Literary Herald) and the *Delo* (Action), foreign diplomats in Belgrade had a high opinion of an exemplarily edited economic daily, the *Trgovinski glasnik* (Trade Herald).¹⁹ Freedom of the press, fair political competition and freedom of political association were the features of this "golden age" of political liberties which subsequently brought it the epithet of Serbia's "Periclean" age.²⁰

French influence was particularly visible in the literary production which increasingly drew on French models. The spread of this influence was considerably facilitated by a "strong spiritual similarity between the French and Serbian mentalities and the French and Serbian languages".²¹ In lyrical poetry and literary criticism, and increasingly also in the novel genre, French influence ennobled Serbian culture insofar as the Serbian literary language, abandoning the unnatural punctuation modelled on German in favour of French punctuation and French literary model in fact came to conform to the logic of Serbian. The style which originated from this combination – and which was to predominate in Serbia throughout the twentieth century – has become known as the "Belgrade style".²² Following in the footsteps of André Cheradame and Victor Bérard, a contemporary French traveller subscribed to their view that "Serbia is the most Francophile country in the world".²³

¹⁹ The National Archive, Foreign Office, London [hereafter NA, FO], 881/9254, Annual Report 1907, chap. XII; for more on the press see AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 114, Belgrade, le 24 octobre 1910.

²⁰ Grol, *Iz predratne Srbije*, 9–13.

²¹ Pierre de Lanux, *La Yougoslavie. La France et les Serbes* (Paris: Payot, 1916), 222–223.

²² Radovan Samardžić, "La langue littéraire serbe et l'influence française à la fin du XIX^e et au début du XX^e siècle", in *Relations franco-yougoslaves. Actes des colloques franco-serbes tenus à Belgrade en 1989 et à Paris en 1990 à l'occasion de 150 ans de l'ouverture du premier consulat français en Serbie* (Belgrade: Institut d'histoire, 1990), 85–90.

²³ De Lanux, *La Yougoslavie*, 223.

The substantial cultural growth and broad political liberties made up to an extent for the absence of a modern economy and stronger urban middle classes. The belief that an educated and enlightened cultural elite would be able to activate economic development was yet to be proved in practice. That it was not completely unfounded was shown by the economic results which, despite major challenges such as the Tariff War with Austria-Hungary (1906–1911) which commanded the search for new markets for Serbia's agricultural commodities, were not at all insignificant. When presented to the Assembly by the finance minister in 1911, they received applause of members of all parties: Serbian exports increased from 117 million francs in 1902 to 183 million in 1910, and at the beginning of 1911 Serbia's foreign-exchange reserves exceeded 20 million francs.²⁴

Elections, election battles and parliamentary procedure

Frequent elections became common in Serbia in 1903–1914 and were an indicator of political instability. Under the Constitution of 1903 it was the monarch's prerogative power to dissolve the Assembly and order that an election be called within two months, and to convene the Body of Popular Representatives within a month of the election. In 1903–1914 five general elections were held. After the first election, which took place on 8 October 1903 in relative peace, the ensuing four were marked by heated political campaigning which, due to the supremacy of two Radical parties, enabled the creation of pre-election alliances, the practice King Peter I found desirable. Until 1914, when the election was called but did not take place because the war broke out, there had been no true coalitions (apart from the period of the Annexation crisis in 1908/9). A pre-election coalition of parties in opposition to the Old Radicals was not formed until shortly before the Sarajevo assassination of 28 June 1914, i.e. for the election called for the autumn that year.

At the 1905 parliamentary election the two Radical parties won 70.7 per cent of votes: the Independents took 38.4 and the Old Radicals 32.3 per cent of the votes cast. Support to the Nationals (Liberals) slightly dropped, to the Progressives slightly rose: the two old parties combined took 24.2 per cent of the votes. A newly-founded agrarian party (1903), the Peasants' Concord, with its 3.7 per cent of votes cast by disgruntled Old Radicals' supporters, was unable to satisfy the ambitions of the Progressives, who had founded the party hoping to challenge the dominance of the Radicals not only in the numerically preponderant agrarian stratum of Serbian society but also among the younger generation of educated people who saw support to the peasantry as an opportunity for their

²⁴ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 154, Belgrade, le 5 décembre 1911.

own political promotion. The liberal opposition expected that the government would be formed from both Radical parties.²⁵

A look at the distribution of seats shows how decisively the introduction of the election quotient favoured the party that won the largest number of the votes. In 1905 the Independents won 107,706 votes or 81 seats, the Old Radicals 88,834 votes or 55 seats, the Nationals (Liberals) 44,912 or 17 seats, the Progressives 23,000 votes or four seats. *Srbija*, the newspaper of the Serbian Nationals (Liberals) wrote: "A vast majority of voters give their votes to Radical candidates for the nth time. They extolled Pašić's Radicals even yesterday, and now they're turning to the Independent Radicals. And it has been going on for 25 years. All of us who fight against radicalism and its theories will remain a minority. The Radicals quarrel, splinter and make mistakes, but people stay at their side."²⁶ The king was disappointed at the Independents' victory because he had expected a decisive majority for one Radical party, which would have ensured a stable and continuous functioning of the National Assembly.²⁷

All in all, the Independent Radicals won 81 seats, the Old Radicals 55 seats, the Nationals 17, the Progressives four, the Socialists two, and the Peasants' Concord one seat; which means that their 38.4 per cent of votes brought the Independent Radicals 50.6 per cent of the total number of seats. The situation produced by the use of the largest remainder method – meaning that the votes for the parties that remained below the quota prescribed for a constituency were allotted to the party-list which won most votes – was slammed by the political opponents of the Radicals, above all the Progressives and the Nationals (Liberals), as a "vote robbery" and a "proof of the Radicals' Jacobinism".²⁸ On account of the clause on the use of the electoral quotient the voting system functioned in practice as a majority rather than as a proportional one. The electoral system forced the weakened Nationals (Liberals) to form a pre-election coalition, and in the only electoral district where they had failed to win a seat at the previous election; their joint party list brought them two seats. It was the first, if modest, sign of future alliances.

The sitting of the Assembly in 1905 was one of the most productive in the post-1903 period: the government submitted 74 proposals, of which 51 concerned public finances and the economy; members of parliament submitted 96

²⁵ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 4, no. 94, Belgrade, le 1 août 1905.

²⁶ *Srbija* no. 33, Belgrade, 13[26] July 1905.

²⁷ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 4, no. 98, Belgrade, le 8 août 1905. For more detail see D. Djordjević, "The 1905 Parliamentary Crisis in Serbia", *Balkanica* XLVII (2016), 197–216.

²⁸ Olga Popović-Obradović, "Političke stranke i izbori u Kraljevini Srbiji 1903–1914: Prilog istoriji stranačkog pluralizma", in *Srbija u modernizacijskim procesima XX veka* (Belgrade: Institut za noviju istoriju, 1994), 333–348.

proposals, and 197 interpellations to the government. The ministers replied to 50 interpellations.

The election campaign in 1906 was vigorous and conducted with unprecedented fierceness because the Independent Radicals now, after the definitive split from the Old Radicals, entered a battle in which the latter showed little mercy. The opposition parties accused the Pašić government of abuse of power and unacceptable political pressures, the accusation that continued to resonate even after the election. Of a total of 520,000 voters, 376,796 cast their ballots. Of these, 166,354 went to the Old Radicals, 109,945 to the Independent Radicals, 45,907 to the Nationals (Liberals), 28,640 to the Progressives, and 3,212 to the Socialists.²⁹ The clause on the election quotient made the Old Radicals' 13 per cent advantage (a 55 per cent victory) over the Independent Radicals into 27.5 per cent. Finally, they had 91 seats, the Independent Radicals 47, the Nationals (Liberals) and the Progressives each had five seats, and the Socialists had one, whereas the Peasants' Concord failed to enter Parliament.³⁰

The Parliament elected in 1906 showed that a stable parliament majority, believed to be a requisite for the successful pursuit of government policies, was not enough in itself.³¹ Even though the efforts of Old Radical leaders to enforce party discipline on their MPs had more success than those of other parties, there still were irregular attendees or those who voted contrary to the party line, thereby weakening the position of the party and the government. The latter group ("les radicaux intrasigeants") was characteristic of both Radical parties because small differences between the two in ideology and the tradition of voting in keeping with personal convictions undermined even the sizeable majority of about a dozen seats. Between the autumn of 1904 and the spring of 1905 the Old Radicals had managed to win over six Independent Radical MPs and, on top of it, their leader Ljubomir Živković.³² The Independent Radicals, on the other hand, had managed in early 1906 to bring around General Sava Grujić and another six Old Radical MPs to their side.

In 1906/7 four government proposals were submitted to the Assembly, five proposals by MPs, and there were also 28 interpellations and 75 questions from MPs. None of the proposed bills was enacted into law. Faced with a homogeneous Old Radical majority, the opposition, availing itself of the opportunity

²⁹ AMAE, NS, vol. 5, Serbie, no. 103, Belgrade, le 27 juin 1906.

³⁰ Ibid. The Assembly elected in 1906 voted twice to verify the mandates of Old Radical MPs. Between six and eight MPs gave up their seats and were replaced by the next candidates on the appropriate election lists, which did not affect the balance of forces among the parties. Cf. PRO, FO, 881/9254, Annual Report 1907, chap. IV: Parliamentary Proceedings.

³¹ PRO, FO, 371/130, no. 58, Belgrade, 16 October 1906.

³² The winning over of Živković, by then already with little influence among the Independent Radicals who were informally led by Ljuba Stojanović, would turn out to be a miscalculated move because it did not cause dissent among the Independent Radicals.

provided by the Rules of Procedure, resorted to parliamentary obstruction as the only way to stop the government from carrying out its programme.³³

Local election held in December 1907 gave the opposition further reason for discontent on account of pressures exerted by the government.³⁴ The opposition resorted to obstruction again in March 1908, calling for the dissolution of the Assembly and a new general election. It was believed that without government pressure exerted through the police, which had marked the election in 1906, the distribution of parliamentary seats might be different. The obstruction was overtly joined by the Nationals (Liberals), whose leader Vojislav Veljković in an open letter to the king made it clear that he would be considered the king of a party unless he supported the demand for the dissolution of the Assembly and new elections. One of the Independent Radical leaders, Jaša Prodanović, in a series of articles, sought to justify the demand with the argument that an “outlawed minority” has a legitimate right to use obstruction and, if that method fails, even “revolution”.³⁵

Even though the common opposition towards Pašić’s caretaker government gave rise to the expectations that a new pre-election coalition with Independent Radicals would be formed, that did not happen because the parties could not agree on a common election platform and the distribution of seats. A small coalition, an important novelty in Serbian post-1903 parliamentary history, was brought into being by the agreement between the Progressives and the Nationals (Liberals) whose common platform amounted to anti-radicalism. In the 1908 election held on 31 May and 7 June (second round), the Old Radicals won 175,667 votes or 84 seats, and the Independent Radicals 125,131 votes or 48 seats. The public had finally begun to perceive the two Radical parties as two separate political blocs.³⁶ The Socialists remained at one seat, and the Peasants’ Concord left the political scene for good. As a result of the strengthening of the non-Radical opposition, the distribution of seats corresponded more to the numbers of the votes won.

Contrary to expectations, the joint list of Progressives and Nationals, who had teamed up motivated by the assessment that “radicalism is experiencing an abrupt decline” and that an “anti-radical majority is no longer impossible”,

³³ Georges Pavlovitch, “Serbie. Notice générale sur les travaux de l’Assemblée nationale en 1905”, *Annuaire de législation étrangère* (Paris: Société de législation comparée) Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence 1906), 547–554.

³⁴ PRO, FO, 881/954, Annual Report 1907, chap. IV: Parliamentary Proceedings.

³⁵ *Odjek* nos. 51, 53 and 54, Belgrade, 8 February/13 March, 3/16 March and 4/17 March 1908, respectively.

³⁶ Georges Pavlovitch, “Serbie. Notice générale sur les travaux de la Skoupchtina et les lois promulguées en 1908”, *Annuaire de législation étrangère* (Paris: Société de législation comparée) Librairie générale de droit et de jurisprudence 1909), 620–627.

won 65,605 votes. (The separate lists of the former won 16,449, and of the latter 11,855 votes.) Of their 27 seats, 20 went to the Progressives, and seven to the Nationals. In comparison with their results in the 1903 election, these two parties recorded an increase of 11 seats.³⁷ The Socialists remained at one seat, and the Peasants' Concord disappeared from the political scene of Serbia for good. As a result of the strengthening of the non-Radical opposition, the distribution of seats reflected more closely the number of votes won.³⁸

According to the opposition, the election once again took place in an atmosphere of pressure by local officials and police. It was therefore expected that the opposition, being somewhat stronger, would continue to apply obstruction to hamper the work of the government led again by Nikola P. Pašić.³⁹ Since the Old Radicals saw their four-seat majority as too thin to escape obstruction, they reached a compromise with the Independent Radicals: the Pašić cabinet stepped down, and on 20 July a moderate Old Radical, Petar (Pera) Velimirović, put together a new government.⁴⁰ The Independent Radical leadership's decision to join the Velimirović cabinet was explained to the party membership by the need to create the conditions for a new election which would be free from political influence and police pressure. Before that, it was necessary to settle the issue of the government budget and of a trade agreement with Austria-Hungary. The Liberals and Progressives had also negotiated about joining the government in a bid to overcome their chronic marginalisation, but they lacked the numerical strength to rival the Independent Radicals.⁴¹

The election that the Independent Radicals expected would take place in a few months was postponed until as late as April 1912 by the onset of the Annexation crisis in October 1908. The Assembly elected in 1908 was the longest-serving one in the period between 1903 and 1914, it coped with the Annexation crisis in 1908/9, and it was the only that served nearly the whole constitutional term four years.⁴²

³⁷ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 51, Belgrade, le 11 juin 1908.

³⁸ With a similar number of votes to that won in the 1906 election the Old Radicals now saw a decline of seven seats because the Progressive-National coalition took six seats, and the Independent Radicals won a seat more. For more see Radul Veljković, *Statistički pregled izbora narodnih poslanika za 1903, 1905, 1906, 1908. godinu* (Belgrade: Izdanje Narodne skupštine, 1912).

³⁹ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 58, Belgrade, le 29 juin 1908.

⁴⁰ Arhiv SANU [Archives of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade], no. 7940; Georges Pavlovitch, "Serbie. Notice générale sur les travaux de la Skoupchtina et les lois promulguées en 1908", 625–626.

⁴¹ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 62, Belgrade, le 19 juillet 1908.

⁴² Alex N. Dragnich, *The Development of Parliamentary Government in Serbia* (Boulder: East European monographs, 1978; distributed by Columbia University Press), 95–114.

The coalition of two Radical parties lasted until June 1911. By then some important new legislation had been in place: from the law on elections to the rules of procedure of the Assembly which considerably narrowed the room for obstructionism. Faced with the strengthening of the Radical bloc, which effectively exercised the executive and legislative powers despite constant internal friction, the Progressives and Nationals (Liberals) sought to establish the necessary balance of political power by resorting to new forms of collaboration, which culminated in an attempt to create a firm “anti-radical” agreement in 1910. The announcement of the “fusion” of Progressives and Nationals into a conservative bloc envisaged to take place before the next election was received well by both party memberships,⁴³ but the negotiations unexpectedly ran aground over a doctrinal issue. The Progressives insisted on a constitutional reform to introduce an upper house, whereas the Nationals (Liberals) were adamant in rejecting it as incompatible with their fundamental political tenets.⁴⁴ Instead of the announced organisational fusion, the relationship between the two parties remained where it had been brought by political necessity, a pre-election coalition.⁴⁵

On the other hand, the Radical coalition operated with increasing difficulty because the Old Radicals were skilful in using the thin parliamentary majority to marginalise the Independent Radicals and push their own bills through the Legislature. Independent Radical supporters in the interior of the country were aware that the party was losing its *raison d'être* before the much better organised and far more disciplined Old Radical party machinery, and that it acted inefficiently in the legislative process: for example, the adoption of changes to the Rules of Procedure of the Assembly limiting the possibility of obstructionism which the Independent Radicals had hitherto used with much success.⁴⁶

A four-party coalition government with party leaders as cabinet ministers was in office from 24 February to 24 October 1909, a period when tremendous pressures resulted eventually, in March, in recognition of the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. After the external challenges ended, the coalition which had little authority and was marked by the rivalry of two Radical parties fell apart on internal political issues: the apportionment of civil service positions

⁴³ PRO, FO, 371/982, no. 11, Belgrade, 3 February 1910.

⁴⁴ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 114, Belgrade, le 24 octobre 1910.

⁴⁵ Georges Pavlovitch, “Serbie. Notice générale sur les travaux de la Skoupchtina et les lois promulguées en 1910”, *Annuaire de législation étrangère* (Paris: Société de législation comparée, 1911); Popović-Obradović, “Političke stranke i izbori u Kraljevini Srbiji 1903–1914”, 341.

⁴⁶ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 65, Belgrade, le 18 juin 1910.

among parties.⁴⁷ After the formation of a new government led by Milovan Dj. Milovanović on 7 July 1911, the balance of power in Parliament could for some time be maintained only owing to the “great restraint” of the Independent Radicals who considered the new prime minister a moderate politician noticeably sympathetic to their political tenets.⁴⁸ Despite the Liberals’ harsh attacks against the Milovanović cabinet over inter-party clashes which had left a few dead in their wake in the interior of the country, the Independent Radicals abstained from vote of no confidence which would have led to a new election.

A new election did not, however, bring the Old Radicals the desired stable majority. Pašić’s assessment that the dissolution of the Assembly, for which he had trouble obtaining the king’s assent, would secure such a majority proved wrong.⁴⁹ Electoral support to both Radical parties dropped by 5.5 per cent in comparison with the previous election, and slid below 70 per cent of the total number of voters for the first time since 1903. The Radicals also had a separate dissident list which practically repeated the 1908 results (a total of 44.1 per cent). Insignificant shifts within the electorate showed not only the people’s weariness of frequent elections but also a certain amount of dissatisfaction, above all with the Radicals. Yet, owing to the latter’s strong tradition and efficient organisation, their position remained relatively stable.

Of 166 parliamentary seats – the number varied from one election to another, growing with the growth of the electorate – the Old Radicals under the leadership of Nikola Pašić took 84 plus seven dissident seats, the Independent Radicals had 38 seats, the Nationals (Liberals) 22, the Progressives 12, and the Socialists two seats. With a total of 91 seats the Old Radicals only had a weak majority, and Milovan Dj. Milovanović, the former prime minister, grumbled to the French minister about the election system which made it impossible to establish a stable majority.⁵⁰

Obstructionism was one of the main features of parliamentary life in Serbia in 1903–1914, but it did not become a significant practice until 1907, when it was used by the Independent Radical MPs with tacit support from the Progressives and National (Liberals). After a while, the method proved effective. By countless interpellations and extended debates, the opposition delayed the progress of parliamentary business, forcing the extension of one year’s budget into the following year. The practice strengthened the habit of dissolving the As-

⁴⁷ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 64, Belgrade, le 20 juillet 1910. On the coalition in detail see D. Djordjević, “Obrazovanje i raspad četvorne koalicije u Srbiji 1909. godine”, *Istorijski časopis XI* (1960), 213–230.

⁴⁸ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 94, Belgrade, le 11 juillet 1911.

⁴⁹ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 56, Belgrade, le 2 mai 1912.

⁵⁰ AMAE, NS, Serbie, vol. 5, no. 53, Belgrade, le 22 avril 1912.

sembly and holding new elections as a way out of the blockade, which resulted in the frequent change of government and chronic governmental instability.⁵¹

There were other practices that departed from constitutional procedures. Stojan M. Protić, for example, had in the late 1880s advocated the French model of the budget process as opposed to the one laid down in the Constitution of 1888, and after 1903, the practice adopted in the British House of Commons, which had already largely given up control of the government's budget policy.⁵² The purpose of raising the question of the budget was not parliamentary control of the government; it was only a means for bringing it down for completely different reasons. When there was a compromise between two strongest parliamentary parties, as in December 1908, the Assembly, at the request of the finance minister, extended that year's budget indefinitely, i.e. until the adoption of a new budget. In 1912, the Assembly adopted only the total amount of the budget, leaving it to the government to allocate it as it saw fit.⁵³

Conclusion

Parliamentary democracy in Serbia in the period between the May Coup of 1903 and the beginning of the First World War in 1914 was, as compellingly shown by the regular and very detailed reports of the diplomatic representatives of two exemplary democracies, Great Britain and France, functional and fully accommodated to the requirements of democratic governance. Some shortcomings, which were reflected in the influence of extra-constitutional ("irresponsible") factors, such as the group of conspirators from 1903 or their younger wing from 1911 (the organisation Unification or Death), occasionally made Serbian democracy fragile but it nonetheless remained functional at all levels of government.

A comparison with crises such as those taking place in, for example, France clearly shows that Serbia, although perceived as "a rural democracy" and "the poor man's paradise", was a constitutional and democratic state, and that it was precisely its political freedoms and liberation aspirations that made it a focal point for the rallying of South-Slavic peoples on the eve of the Great War. Had there been no firm constitutional boundaries of the parliamentary monarchy and the democratic system, Serbia would have hardly been able to cope with

⁵¹ Jaša Prodanović, "Odlaganje Narodne skupštine", *Srpski književni glasnik* XVIII (1913).

⁵² Vojislav S. Jovanović, "Parlamentarna hronika", *Arhiv za pravne i društvene nauke* XIII (1913), 54–56; see also Vladislav Koyitch, *Le Contrôle du budget en Serbie*, Thèse pour le doctorat, Paris 1920.

⁵³ Milan M. Stojadinović, "Budžet za 1913. godinu", *Arhiv za pravne i društvene nauke* XVI (1914), 74–78.

a series of political and economic challenges which followed one another after 1903: the Tariff War 1906–11; the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina 1908/9; the Balkan Wars 1912–13; the crisis in the summer of 1914 caused by the so-called Order of Precedence Decree, i.e. by the underlying conflict between civilian and military authorities.⁵⁴ The Periclean age of Serbia, aired with full political freedoms and sustained cultural and scientific progress is one of the most important periods in the history of modern Serbian democracy.

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⁵⁴ D. T. Bataković, “La Main Noire (1911–1917): l’armée serbe entre démocratie et autoritarisme” *Revue d’histoire diplomatique* 2 (1998), 95–144.

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