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Andrej Uršič: The Yugoslav Youth and the Cvetković– Maček Agreement

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About the author

Andrej Uršič (1908, Kobarid–?) was a politician and journalist. Intellectually and politically adhering to the Slovenian “progressive camp,” rooted in traditions of national liberalism, he belonged to the younger generation of interwar Yugoslav nationalists.

Born in the town of Kobarid (then part of the Austrian province of Görz-Gradisca) into the family of shopkeeper Anton Uršič, who for some time also served as mayor and the leader of local *Sokol*, he attended primary school in his hometown. In 1918, Kobarid, along with the rest of the former Austrian Littoral, became part of Italy. Uršič moved to Yugoslavia to continue his education, attending grammar school in Novo mesto. He finished his secondary education in

1928, and afterwards attended the University of Ljubljana, where he studied law, graduating in 1943. Due to rising fascist pressure at home, which directly affected his family, after 1928 he ceased visiting Kobarid. Uršič became a Yugoslav citizen in 1929.

Publicly active since his secondary school years, Uršič ideologically adhered to the “liberal,” that is, anti-clerical and Yugoslav nationalist camp of interwar Slovenian politics. He became an important member in numerous associations and institutions within that camp, most notably the Yugoslav Progressive Academic Association “Jadran” (later, AD Jugoslavija) and the Club of Yugoslav Academics from Trieste, Gorizia, and Istria. Tracing its tradition back to the first Slovenian academic association, the Viennese club *Slovenia* founded in the mid-nineteenth century, “Jadran” carried a firmly “liberal” earmark, bringing together mainly Yugoslav nationalist students of moderate political leanings. In 1935, he co-founded and afterwards co-edited the Yugoslavist academic journal *Naša misel* (Our Thought, 1935–41), also acting as co-editor of the main Slovenian liberal daily newspaper *Jutro* (Morning, 1920–1945). Being one of the main programmatic shapers for “Jadran” and *Naša misel*, his writings revolved primarily around the subjects of Yugoslav national unity and Yugoslav nationalism.¹

As an adherent of the Yugoslav National Party (*Jugoslovenska nacionalna stranka*, JNS),² he, together with Jože Rus, Stojan Bajič, Branko Vrčon, and Boris Sancin, acted as one of the main representatives of its youth wing (*Omladina Jugoslovenske nacionalne stranke*, OJNS). During late 1930s, the *Omladina* began to emancipate itself from the mother party, adopting critical stances toward its leadership. Its central aim was to invigorate Slovenian liberal politics by bringing them closer to the broader masses. In 1940, the *Omladina* published its own programmatic manifesto, entitled “*Politična, gospodarska in socialna načela*” (Political, Economic and Social Principles), meant to provide a joint platform for the rejuvenation and programmatic reform of Slovenian liberal politics. It was published without formal approval by the JNS leadership. Among other things, the Principles emphasized the need for democratization, far-reaching social reform, the increased role of the state in the economy, as well as a solution of the Slovenian national question and the adoption of a “Slavic” foreign policy. Uršič wrote the parts dealing with domestic politics and social policies, which in many

1 Most of Uršič's writings were published anonymously or under pseudonyms. Only two of his texts in *Naša misel* carried his full name.

2 The Yugoslav National Party (JNS) was founded in 1932 as the Yugoslav Radical Peasant Democracy and renamed into JNS in the following year. Originally meant to act as a tool for implementing the policies of King Alexander I, it functioned as the regime party until 1935, afterwards being pushed into opposition. Within the narrower Slovenian context, its membership almost fully coincided with adherence to the “progressive camp” and it represented its sole political organization until the end of the 1930s.

ways signified a move toward the left, pointing toward the need for an increased governmental role in social and economic life and the alleviation of social differences. Simultaneously, the Principles preserved some basic liberal elements by putting emphasis on personal and civil liberties, especially freedom of conscience, and acknowledging the irreplaceable role of private initiative in the economy.

After Yugoslavia was occupied and dismembered by the Axis powers, the OJNS seceded from JNS and formed an independent group called New Yugoslavia (*Nova Jugoslavija*, NJ) in the summer of 1941. During that same time, Uršič took part in negotiations between NJ and the communist-dominated Liberation Front of the Slovenian Nation, which, after the German attack on the USSR, called for an immediate armed resistance against the occupiers. These negotiations ultimately fell apart and NJ did not join the Liberation Front. Invoking the Slovenian nation's right to self-determination and claiming the exclusive right to speak on its behalf, the latter particularly disputed the continuity of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Firmly advocating the principle of state continuity, NJ in contrast remained loyal to the Yugoslav government-in-exile in London and also lent support to General Draža Mihailović and the Yugoslav Army in the Homeland (*Jugoslovenska vojska u otadžbini*).

During 1942–43, Uršič participated in the *Slovenska zaveza* (Slovenian Covenant), the key political body, formed underground in the spring of 1942, of representatives of the main pre-war parties (Slovenian People's Party, liberals, socialists). Its political platform included a restored and expanded Kingdom of Yugoslavia built on a federal basis, which was to include all the Slovenian-speaking territories, multi-party democracy, and radical social reform. Meant to act as the political representation of the entire Slovenian nation, *Slovenska zaveza* was largely crippled by behind-the-scenes disputes and intrigues, as well as independent actions by some of the constitutive groups and individuals. Although the three main political camps were evenly represented within the organizational bodies, in practice and on the ground the Slovenian People's Party acted by far as the strongest force.

In May 1945, when Slovenia was taken over by the communists, he moved back to his hometown of Kobarid, until 1947 located in the Allied-administered zone of the former Italian Julian March. Still active in Slovenian politics in Gorizia and Trieste in the early post-war period, he acted as one of the leading members of the liberal Slovenian Democratic Union and editor of the weekly *Demokracija* (Democracy, 1947–72), dedicated to pursuing national rights for Slovenes in Italy and the Allied zone of the Free Territory of Trieste, while criticizing the communist regime.

In 1947 he was kidnapped by the Yugoslav secret police, most probably transferred to Ljubljana. After having been secretly interrogated, he was killed sometime between 1948 and 1950.³

MOST IMPORTANT WORKS: Andrej Uršič, “Za strnitev jugoslovenskih sil,” *Naša misel* 5, no. 2 (January 1, 1940): 1–2; [Andrej Uršič with B. Sancin, B. Vrčon, J. Rus, D. Verbič], *Politična, socialna in gospodarska načela, sprejeta kot osnova delovnega programa na seji banovinskega odbora OJNS, v Ljubljani 5. Septembra 1940* (Ljubljana: Banovinski odbor OJNS, 1940); Andrej Uršič [under the pseudonym Slavko Hribovec], “Misli o demokraciji,” *Demokracija* 1, no. 1 (April 25), no. 2 (May 2), no. 3 (May 9), no. 6 (May 30), and no. 18 (August 15, 1947).

Context

The text “*Jugoslovenska omladina in sporazum*” (The Yugoslav Youth and the Cvetković-Maček Agreement) was published on December 1, 1939—the Yugoslav day of “national unification”—in *Naša misel*. The journal was published bi-weekly by the academic association “Jugoslavija” in Ljubljana, closely linked to the OJNS in the Drava Banovina, encompassing the Slovenian part of Yugoslavia. Authored by Andrej Uršič, the editor of *Naša misel* and a leading OJNS member, the text presented a critical commentary to the August 1939 Cvetković-Maček Agreement, written from a Yugoslav nationalist perspective. As such, the text presents a firm defense of the idea of unitary Yugoslavism at a time when it was being widely considered as a thing of the past, offering a good outline of the principles and considerations that continuously guided its proponents.

The August 1939 agreement made between Yugoslav Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković (1893–1969) and Vladko Maček (1879–1964), the leader of the Croatian Peasant Party, created an autonomous Banovina of Croatia with its own parliament (*sabor*), its own judiciary, and wide administrative powers. It was tied to the rest of the country only via personal union in the king, foreign policy, the army, a common currency and trade policy, internal security, and transport. Broadly acknowledged as a necessary step towards solving the so-called Croatian Question that had haunted the Yugoslav state since its inception, it however left many problems open. Moreover, the Cvetković-Maček Agreement immediately gave ground to further demands in other parts of the country, including

3 *Enciklopedija Slovenije*, vol. 16 (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2002), 203–04. Ivo Jevnikar, “Neznani Slavko v zaporih udbe: Novi podatki o usodi Andreja (Slavka) Uršiča,” in *Koledar Goriške Mohorjeve družbe*, ed. Jože Markuža (Gorizia: Goriška Mohorjeva družba, 1994), 83–89. Katja Ozebek, “URŠIČ, Andrej. (1908-1950),” in *Obrazi slovenskih pokrajin* (Kranj: Mestna knjižnica Kranj, 2020), accessed: August 29, 2024, <https://www.obrazislovenskipokrajini.si/oseba/ursic-andrej-slavko/>.

demands for the creation of an autonomous Banovina of Slovenia, ideas of a special Banovina of Bosnia, or of uniting the rest of the country within the frame of the "Serbian lands" (whose borders towards the Banovina of Croatia were being disputed at the time). The never-concluded process of state re-organization was halted by war and the dismemberment of Yugoslavia by Axis forces in April 1941. Symbolically and practically, the Cvetković-Maček Agreement acted as the ultimate confirmation of the political death of unitary Yugoslavism.

Acknowledged as a measure necessary for preserving the Yugoslav state, the agreement was given formal approval both by JNS and its youth wing. While confirming the most basic acceptance of the Agreement from the side of his party, Uršič's text simultaneously offered words of caution concerning possible further implications and already developing facts on the ground. He objected to the various claims concerning the range of powers delegated to the newly-created Banovina of Croatia, particularly those that had been circulating in the Croatian press. Conversely, Uršič stressed that the ultimate legitimacy of the new arrangement rested solely on the extent to which it served the cause of Yugoslav national unity. The text thus recognized the agreement first and foremost as a "temporary sacrifice" necessary to overcome Croat discontent as the central "state problem" of Yugoslavia, while also being in line with the earlier JNS demands for administrative decentralization on the widest possible scale. In Uršič's view, although various paths may lead toward the goal, the goal itself remained only one: Yugoslav national unity. The compromise with the Croatian Peasant Party might thus also act as a detour on the way leading towards greater unity, Uršič argued, as the possible future triumph of Yugoslavism might eventually again arise from the "Croat part of our nation, as it did in the past, when Croat mother gave birth to its strongest creators: Gaj, Strossmayer, Rački..."

Uršič's text is a paradigmatic example of Slovenian liberals' continuous advocacy of unitary Yugoslavism. Uršič outlined all of the key reasons underpinning the Yugoslavist orientation: The first is their belief in the necessity of achieving spiritual unity through overcoming historically-conditioned differences. Second, their belief in the necessity of a common market, which they considered important particularly from the economic perspective of Slovenia. Third, and most notably, their belief that integration into one nation was necessary for consolidating a strong state that could resist irredentist pressures from neighboring countries, as well as act as a guardian for Yugoslav minorities abroad. This factor concerning minorities was especially important for the émigrés from Italian territory such as Uršič himself. However, the text stands out in comparison to earlier Yugoslavist discourses employed by Slovenian liberals. Its tone and argumentation is more down-to-earth, stressing the practical reasons for maintaining national unity and

a common national consciousness in the face of rising tendencies toward disintegration within and outside of Yugoslavia. It also notably stressed the special economic needs of Slovenia. Compared to the high-flying phrases and categorical invocations of indissoluble unity that had characterized some earlier proclamations, such as the Pohorje Declaration (1935), Uršič's text thus reveals a more pragmatic and less rigid type of the Yugoslavist discourse, stemming from the urgency of the moment.

At the same time, Uršič's text was characteristic of the younger generation of Yugoslav nationalists, whose Yugoslavism was however no less principled and determined than that of the older ones. It reflected the concerns, experiences and the horizons of expectation of a generation that had been brought up and politically formed in Yugoslavia and did not possess memories of the old Austria. In contrast to the generation of the "progressive" leader Albert Kramer (1882–1943), who became politically active at the beginning of the twentieth century, Yugoslavia was the sole political reality that the younger generation of nationalists knew and which they had fully internalized. At the same time, the younger generation had stepped forward as the main champions of Yugoslavism at a point in time when this ideology came to represent a minority position in politics. In other words—as Uršič observed in 1937—it was no longer a time when many politicians spoke "about the Yugoslav nation but about the nations of Yugoslavia, in the same manner as the Habsburgs spoke to their subject 'graceful nations,'" and a time when Yugoslav nationalists were "not treated much differently than during times when they had been the only bearers of the struggle for our liberation."⁴ All of this was also reflected in the fact that, by arguing in favor of a unitary Yugoslav nation, the Yugoslavists of this younger generation thoroughly and consistently applied the vantage point of the national whole. This came in contrast to the Yugoslavist discourses of the older generations, which, especially when addressing the practical reasons for unitarism, more often than not revolved around distinctly Slovenian problems and topics, thus merely mirroring the particularism of their particularist opponents. In Uršič's text this is shown most clearly in the passage discussing the impossibility of drawing internal borders along ethno-confessional lines and pointing directly to the Bosnian Question as a case in point. Labelling it the "Gordian knot for the supporters of the theory of three nations," Uršič stated in an almost prophetic fashion that precisely "this religiously and tribally intertwined terrain" of Bosnia demonstrated "that the Yugoslav community is inseparable and cannot be divided without a brutal rupture and general loss."

4 Andrej Uršič, "Naš čas, program Jugoslovenske nacionalne stranke in njena mladina," in *Omladina Jugoslovenske nacionalne stranke: Banovinska skupščina 12. septembra 1937 v Ljubljani* (Ljubljana, 1937), 9–15, 18.

ANDREJ URŠIČ**The Yugoslav Youth and the Cvetković-Maček Agreement**

No one has embraced the policy of the Agreement with as much self-denial, sacrifice, and sincerity as the Yugoslav nationalists, guided—as always—by the highest national and state interests. Their decision was based on a realistic assessment of the international and domestic political situation. The fatal conflicts in Europe urgently demanded a timely settlement of the state's most pressing issue that had burdened our development, weakened our strength, and debilitated our international position throughout the twenty years of the state's independence. The Yugoslav nationalists have given their manly word. Given the present circumstances and the current mood of the Yugoslav people, especially its Croatian part, they will undoubtedly refrain from taking any action against a loyal implementation of the Agreement as of August 26 of this year. *However, this does not mean that this Agreement binds present Yugoslav generations in the free struggle for their ideas, and, of course, it is even more impossible that it should bind future generations who are not responsible for the development of the general circumstances during the first twenty years of our state's independence.* In principle, it is necessary to establish that the Yugoslav nationalists have not supported the policy of the fraternal Agreement at the price of their belief in the national unity of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The future forms of state organization and the relations between the various parts of the Yugoslav nation will depend on the success of Yugoslav thought in the country, especially among the Croats themselves. The future does not exclude the possibility of Yugoslav thought emerging victorious again precisely from the Croatian part of our nation, as it did in the past through its greatest Croatian originators like Gaj, Strossmayer, Rački, etc. Each fall is followed by a rise, and every action by a reaction. We await the future with thorough optimism and are convinced of the imminent positive reactions to the Agreement and the positive development of the spiritual forces in the Croatian part of the nation itself, on which the upcoming forms of national coexistence will depend. All that is being done today may be an experiment, and perhaps the experience will—sooner than we could hope for—command the present centrifugal powers to return to the greatest possible political, cultural, social, and economic solidarity of all Yugoslavs. The organization of the state that is now being conceived may also prove beneficial

in many ways and could contribute to the spiritual fusion of the individual parts of the nation. This will depend on the spirit of the political decision-makers in the constituent parts of the state and on the success of the intervention of the superior central state authorities, whose task will be to watch over the supreme common state and national interests and coordinate them with the individual banovine.

Today, we demand loyalty from both sides in the implementation of the Agreement. We are against the attempts of the centralist hegemonic elements to sabotage the Agreement, as well as against the separatist tendencies that go beyond the words and spirit of the Agreement. Any manipulation of the Agreement from the left or the right could turn this document, which is supposed to represent the beginning of a new, more peaceful coexistence and organic development, into a reason for new conflicts. What sense can be made of the words introducing the Agreement ("considering that Yugoslavia is the best guarantee for the independence and progress of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes") if they are deprived of their substance by severing all ties, even in matters which both parties have recognized as vital for the national and state community? *It is a fatal error to believe that by dividing and weakening unity, success and benefits will be achieved for the individual parts of the nation and country. The division must stop where common interests begin because their obliteration could destroy the sense of mutual solidarity, its necessity, and its usefulness, thus exposing the country to danger when it should stand united against external threats.*

In this context, we will address some of the issues arising from the words and spirit of the Agreement, the Decree on the scope and competencies of the Banovina of Croatia and its implementation, as well as some questions which have been put on the agenda by the altered state organization and the subsequent final settlement of the relations between the various parts of our nation:

...

2. According to Article 2, point 11, of the Decree on the Banovina of Croatia, state authorities shall retain the right to determine the basic principles of educational policy because of its special importance for the general interests of the state. This provision is included in the Regulation without any reservations or restrictions. The central state authority has the exclusive right to determine the educational basis for the Yugoslav youth and thus prevent their spiritual divergence. This provision cannot have any other logical meaning. This was certainly well understood by the signatories to the Agreement and by all those who recognized the Decree as its integral part. *The youth*

from various parts of the country cannot receive their basic education in the spirit of the harmful differences and negative traditions of the past. Instead, educators must instill in young souls a sense of the crucial connection between Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes based on our heritage, linguistic unity or distinct similarity, and most profound common interests in life, while at the same time considering the positive particularities of the individual parts of the nation.

...

In the common interest, the economic solidarity of the Yugoslav community cannot and must not be broken up in such a manner that the industrial areas of the country in particular, whose development was conditioned by natural preconditions and adapted to the consumption capacity of the entire country, are forced to restrict their production to the consumption capacity of their own Banovina alone and to the reciprocal exchange of economic goods between the Banovine. The atomization of our internal market could lead to the most severe economic and social perturbations. Such economic isolation would turn what are nowadays highly active parts of the country into profoundly passive ones. This represents a danger for Slovenia in particular. It is an issue that deserves our utmost attention in relation to the final organization of the entire state and the settlement of the relations between the individual Banovine. *The existence of Yugoslavia is justified not only by the national arguments but also by its economic viability as a whole, which, however, depends on the maximum degree of Yugoslav economic internal solidarity and our united economic performance in the international economic life.* On November 1, the newspaper *Hrvatski dnevnik* stated: "Pursuant to the Decree on the Banovina of Croatia, we are entitled to financial and economic independence and are only obliged to contribute to the community for common matters and needs; and such matters and needs do not include the specific economic needs of Slovenia." If this sentence is interpreted as a subversion of the state's solidarity as an economic union, then it is contrary to the words and spirit of the Decree. Slovenes do not ask for any charity. *We only wish to be considered in every aspect as an integral part of the Yugoslav economic community and request that the economic relations between the individual Banovine are not regulated in the same manner as between different states.*

...

6. In the south of the country—more so than in our parts—a lively debate is taking place regarding the number of future Banovine and their delimitation. These discussions focus primarily on Bosnia and Herzegovina. The issue is highly controversial. Not even the parties represented in the current

government or the supporters of the same parties are in agreement. In this domestic political alliance, the slogan “We will not claim what is not ours and will not surrender what belongs to us!” is being used when it would be much more appropriate for it to represent our firm position in current international events. Some are in favor of the status quo, some support a fourth autonomous Banovina of Herzegovina and Bosnia, some the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, and some want them divided between the Banovine of Serbia and Croatia. Typically, the justification for all four of these theses is based on the same supreme state interests. *This issue definitely represents a Gordian knot for the supporters of the theory of three nations because this religiously and tribally intertwined terrain will make them realize that the Yugoslav community is inseparable and cannot be divided without a brutal rupture and general loss.* We want this issue to be solved in terms of genuine national and state interests rather than local religious and partisan considerations so as to benefit the Yugoslav community, of which this diverse territory is a true example.

We have touched upon some pressing questions and answered them with Yugoslav thought, which is the only one that can give us a positive answer. We are deeply convinced that these questions, which are of vital importance for our entire nation, will be solved in its spirit. All those who wish well for themselves and the community must recognize themselves as Yugoslavs.

We reaffirm our faith in the triumph of Yugoslav thought that has created this country, given it substance, justified its existence, and guaranteed its future. We are not discouraged by the current failures because we believe that, ultimately, everyone will realize that the people rather than the thought should be blamed for our mistakes and problems. Today, we are putting borders between us. *The Yugoslav genius that has led us through the issues of the Cyrillic and Latin script, the religious, cultural, regional, and tribal differences, the inhuman suffering, and the ruins of mighty empires to finally unite us in a free country will transcend these borders. We have overcome others, and we will overcome ourselves.*
