Jure Gašparič

THE PARLIAMENT IS NOTHING BUT A FAIRGROUND

On the Characteristics of Parliamentary Debate in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes/Yugoslavia (1919–1939)

THE PARLIAMENT'S PLACE IN FIRST YUGOSLAV STATE[232]

The date was picked with great care. On Friday, 14 January 1921, a "veritable spring sun" was shining upon the Yugoslav capital of Belgrade, despite the winter season. But more importantly, the citizens were celebrating the Orthodox New

232 The paper is based on the following monograph: Jure Gašparič: *Izza parlamenta. Zakulisje jugoslovanske skupščine (1919–1941)* [From Behind the Parliament. Behind the Scenes of the Yugoslav Assembly (1919–1941)]. Ljubljana, 2015.

Year, so the streets were full of hustle and bustle. On that Friday, buildings had been decked out with flags since the morning, and the old royal palace and the streets were lined with soldiers, with curious and festive masses gathering behind them. Many people wanted to see what was about to happen with their own eyes, many wanted to be there, to participate in a political event reaching beyond the everyday understanding of politics. For what was announced for the 14 January was no party-related political curiosity but rather something that would be, or was at least supposed to be, of extreme importance for the country and its citizens. In the recently converted cavalry barracks, Regent Alexander Karađorđević opened the session of the Constituent Assembly of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the first elected national parliament.

The scenario for the ceremonious opening session was elaborated to great detail. At 10.45, Alexander, who was dressed in his formal general's uniform, joined Prime Minister Nikola Pašić, boarded a quadriga and headed off towards the parliament. In front of the building, Alexander was greeted by the royal marching band that played all three national anthems, i.e. the Serbian, Croatian and Slovenian, after which he was received, still in front of the building, by the Presidency members headed by Ivan Ribar.[233] Inside, the Assembly representatives immediately stood up and gave a standing ovation, cannon fire thundered off the fortress, and bells of the Belgrade churches started ringing. The setting was truly amazing. The Regent then brought out the text of his speech and took about fifteen minutes to read it with a "firm voice" to the excited audience who often interrupted with thunderous applause and cheers. Alexander's speech was inspiring and statesmanlike.[234]

At the end, great ovations broke out again and everyone was bursting with excitement. Alexander left slowly, shaking Ribar's hand again as they parted. He boarded his chariot right before Prime Minister Pašić. However, at the moment when the old Prime Minister sat down, a curious incident occurred, which involved a rather charming faux pas in the protocol. Pašić noticed he was missing his top hat. He was immediately rescued from the awkward situation by President of the Parliament Ribar, who gave him his own. Alexander, who noticed the mishap, just smiled and said: "Look, there is Pašić under Ribar's hat!" One of the Assembly representatives, who happened to be there, added: "It's a symbolic reflection of today's political situation!"[235] In the young country, the parliament was coming to the forefront, becoming a central political body that would use a guided democratic debate to make key political decisions, supervise ministers and gradually build a strong country in the Balkans.

233 *Jutro*, 15 January 1921, Svečana otvoritev konstituante.
234 Ibid., Prestolni govor regenta.
235 *Jutro*, 15 January 1921, Svečana otvoritev konstituante.

However, the symbolic position of the Parliament, as it appeared when Pašić boarded the quadriga in 1921, was only momentary and merely symbolic. Soon enough, both the people as well as some politicians started to notice that the parliament was not performing its intended function, that it failed to function properly, and that it became a rather big disappointment. As had happened many times before and also at that time, and as it would happen time and time again in the future, most political parties and the people, who wanted *political democracy*, were left unhappy with its implementation in the form of *parliamentary democracy*. In his typically vivid hyperbole, Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža described the Belgrade Assembly as nothing less than an "unintelligent and wholly primitive negation of even the most rudimentary parliamentary form".[236] As one representative noticed, the Assembly was becoming increasingly similar to a "fairground".

ON PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE

Among the many reasons for disappointment with the Yugoslav parliamentary democracy, the events occurring at the Assembly Hall during parliamentary debates were not at all insignificant. Besides voting, a parliamentary debate was the central characteristic and distinctive feature of any parliament, not just the one in Belgrade. The debate at that time included bursts of heated interpersonal exchanges, including physical confrontations, supported by various arguments and illustrated by cases etc. The dry legislation proposals, formerly empty of anything redundant, now suddenly became the subject of extensive explanations and the catalyst of political passions. As such, the debate was a reflection of the parliament as a whole and represents the point we can use to evaluate the perception of problems in the country and general democratic standards.

The content and spirit of the Rules of Procedure of the debate in Belgrade were modern and practical, but, first and foremost, they were wholly comparable to the rules of procedure and other arrangements in numerous other European parliaments. Speakers had to take turns in the sequence of standpoints for – against – for – against etc., and had to limit the duration of their speeches (to a rather generous one hour and a half for parliamentary group leaders and one hour for other representatives during the discussion of principles, and to an hour for group leaders and 30 minutes for representatives in the special debate), but most of all they had to be careful to strictly stick to the topic of the agenda item under discussion. They had to memorize the text and then speak. The Rules of

236 Miroslav Krleža: *Deset krvavih let in drugi politični eseji*. Ljubljana, 1962, p. 323.

Procedure also explicitly specified that a discussion of anybody's private matters was off limits.[237] In practice, however, representatives often ignored the agenda, talked about anything they wanted to and sometimes read their speeches.[238] But this was not the most problematic issue. The parliament was the venue of events that brought about much more aggravation. In the following section, I will look at some of the key characteristics of the parliament and a few typical stories of what went on in the Assembly Hall. The focus will be on illustrating the general mood as well as the practices of the representatives.

THE BUDGET IN EARNEST AND IN JEST

The longest assembly debates, which were, on average, the most critical but also the most practical and problem-focused were the ones concerning the state budget. Discussions about the budget were carried out by individual particulars (items), meaning that the opposition was able to scrutinize the work of every minister individually.[239] Debates on the budgetary exposés of the ministers were often reminiscent of interpellations as opposition representatives pointed out problems in individual sectors, documented errors, identified corruption etc., naturally blaming everything on the politically responsible minister or even the whole government. Representatives always took their time to debate, usually all of the time provided for by the Rules of Procedure, i.e. two months. The budgets, although frequently unrealized and planned for a utopian economic situation, were also among the most important political documents regularly adopted by the Assembly. In addition to the very gradually developing Yugoslav legislation, these documents made sure the country was able to function at least to a certain degree.

The budget was always accompanied by what was called the financial act. This was a sort of a collection of figures and various ministerial decisions, government decrees and other instruments that needed to be covered by the budget. From 1922 onward, i.e. from the first budgetary debate after the adoption of the constitution, the financial act was known by a humorous moniker – it was called the omnibus. The term was used to convey that the financial act was "jumped on" by numerous individuals who added their own interests to the needs of the country. The financial act was so chaotic that it was frequently unclear even to

237 Ilija A. Pržić: *Poslovnik Narodne skupštine Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca sa objašnjenjima iz parlamentarne prakse i zakonskim odredbama*. Belgrade, 1924, § 38, 40, 43.

238 Ibid., pp. 125–126. As one representative read his speech in March 1931, the assembly lashed out with cries that no one is "allowed to read". The representative apologized saying he was merely using the notes "for his own reference". – *Stenografske beleške Narodne skupštine Kraljevine Jugoslavije*, 5 March 1932.

239 Pržić, *Poslovnik sa objašnjenjima*, § 66.

the ministers, who were thus unable to answer specific questions posed to them in the parliament. The true "masters" of the financial act were senior officials, heads of various public and private offices etc. For a little counter favour, they were able to include (almost) anything into the financial act. It is true, however, that some cases of absurd protectionism were often exposed, usually those that involved ministers or representatives. A well-known representative of the Serbian National Radical Party Stevan Janković was able to sneak in an interpretation according to which the high school of forestry in the French city of Nancy, finished by Janković's son Đura during World War I, was equivalent to the Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry in Belgrade.[240] Đura was thus able to become a senior state official and doors were open for him to enter politics. He was a representative, even a minister in the government led by Milan Stojadinović in 1935; initially a minister without portfolio was later responsible for forests and ores. In the 1930s, he successfully advanced his career, becoming chief of propaganda,[241] a self-styled Yugoslav Goebbels, all thanks to his father and the almighty financial act. After the occupation of Yugoslavia in 1941, he supported General Milan Nedić and his quisling government.

The fact that the budgetary materials were complicated and extensive and that the debate was difficult, heated and strenuous is attested by a detail from the first budgetary session of 1922. It was Saturday, just after eight in the evening, when the agenda indicated that the debate should now focus on the Ministry of Postal Services. According to Assembly President Ivan Ribar, Minister Žarko Miladinović had been very serious in preparing his exposé. His presentation was supposed to take two hours. However, the previous items of the budget had drained the representatives, they were exhausted and had had enough of debates. On a Saturday evening, they just wanted to go home. But the item could not be postponed as the budget was overdue. Stjepan Barić, a Croatian representative of the opposition thus rose to speak. Speaking on behalf of the opposition, Barić noted that the post and the telephone and telegraph services were in such "total disarray" that it was better not to speak about them or else the discussion would have lasted for weeks. In protest against the state supported by the Minister, the opposition said it was leaving the session. They glanced at the Minister and went home.

Only the representatives of the government's majority remained in the hall. They looked at each other, glanced enviously at the empty seats of the opposition and then charged at the Minister. "Don't speak if there's no opposition representatives present," they called out to him, and by that point the troubled Minister did not dare to get up and have a speech. None of the other representatives discussed

240 Ivan Ribar: *Politički zapisi*. Belgrade, 1948, pp. 48–49.
241 Todor Stojkov: *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića (1935–1937)*. Belgrade, 1985, pp. 57–58.

anything either. The discussion was thus over and the only thing left to do was to vote. Enough representatives of the majority were present, and so the budget of the Ministry of Postal Services was voted through.[242] Ribar was able to conclude the session and everybody could go home. The next day was Sunday.

The assembly debate, especially discussions about the budget, exposed the Yugoslav society and its problems, pointed out mistakes and showcased the country's inability to face its problems. In this sense, the debate was certainly relevant as it articulated the heartbeat of the "nation". However, speakers often broke the rules of decorum, insulted other representatives and acted in a destructive or even violent manner. The inability of achieving a fundamental political consensus did not manifest itself in gentlemanly parliamentary banter typical of the halls of Westminster Palace, but rather in intolerant slander and open intimidation. The key problem of the Yugoslav Parliament was not the debate as a whole, and not even moments of commotions and bouts of yelling, but the *manner* in which these occurred. From the very beginning, the parliamentary hubbub was tinged by insults and personal attacks.

UNPARLIAMENTARY EXPRESSIONS, COMMOTION AND SESSION INTERRUPTIONS

In 1924, Ilija A. Pržić, a young Assistant at the Belgrade University, compiled an amazing handbook with the boring and unpretentious title: Poslovnik Narodne skupštine Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca sa objašnjenjima iz parlamentarne prakse i zakonskim odredbama (Rules of Procedure of the National Assembly of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes with Clarifications from Parliamentary Practice and Statutory Provisions).[243] Pržić, who was a young doctor of philosophy at the time and later became a distinguished professor of international law, filled the book's 264 pages with examples of practical application of every single article of the Rules of Procedure. On the one hand, his work is a comprehensive source for the study of history of parliamentary law, and on the other hand an illustration of numerous procedural situations that occurred in the parliament. In the manner of a good Austrian clerk, Pržić listed countless cases, events, statements etc., from bureaucratically long-winded to captivating, from ordinary to extraordinary, and from occasional to those quite common. For articles for which no event worth mentioning had ever occurred, he sometimes merely provided literary references, while other articles were furnished with entire lines

242 Ribar, *Politički zapisi*, p. 50.
243 Pržić, *Poslovnik sa objašnjenjima*.

and paragraphs of page citations from short-hand notes. The articles that were best supplied with various cases were from one revealingly entitled section of the Rules of Procedure: Disciplinary Sanctions (for Representatives).[244]

Interventions by the assembly chairman, calls for order, admonitions, interruptions of speeches, expulsions from and interruptions of sessions were common enough to have come to define the operation of the parliament. The approximate statistics of the use of the Rules of Procedure thus highlight the features of parliamentary debate in the Kingdom of SHS during its early years. With all their gravity, contentiousness, arguments etc., speeches were all to often disrespectful, as were also the responses. Political passion, a necessary component of good politics, broke out of the boundaries of decency, of the "dignity of the assembly". All too often, the parliament witnessed the utterance of "unparliamentary expressions": words that were either insulting or generally inappropriate (or labelled as such by the assembly chairman).

Pržić appended his Rules of Procedure with a brief dictionary of unparliamentary terms, which grew to the impressive size of 74 entries in the first few years of the Yugoslav parliamentarism; some of the terms were more popular and had been used more than once. The representatives insulted each other with the following expressions: "You're a deadbeat", "shameless", "nincompoop", "layabouts", "traitor", "good-for-nothing", "crook", "scoundrel", "lowlife". Sometimes, the insult was coated in a pre-emptive apology: "You're a parliamentary, please excuse my French, idiot." The assembly itself was called the "tower of Babel" and the country a "police state". Words deriving from the root "to lie" were particularly popular, i.e. "you're lying", "liar", "you lie", as were also the words "bandit" and "criminal". Catholic representatives were often called "clericals" by their opponents, and Catholic priests were called "monks". Some statements were openly threatening, such as "I'll spill your guts out", "you old bitch", some were jokingly insulting, such as "A man who's a few screws short of a hardware store shouldn't speak!" and "You're one of the worst and laziest members of the parliament!", while some bordering the grotesque, such as one representative's scoff against another: "You used to be a cook!" Although true, it was considered unparliamentary to mention the private lives of representatives in the parliamentary debate.[245]

Every time a representative used an unparliamentary expression, it was followed by a tumultuous reaction. Barely a session went by without the chairman ringing his bell and yelling "Order!" while pandemonium raged at the benches. The tireless and precise assembly stenographers, the wakeful scribes of everything that was said, industriously noted every verbal and vocal interruption from the

244 Ibid., § 96–105.
245 Pržić, *Poslovnik sa objašnjenjima*, pp. 247–255.

background as long as they were able to make anything out of the yelling. Past that point they would usually put down words like "ranting" or "noise", and sometimes "commotion" or "great ranting and tumult". Nothing could be understood at that point as everybody was yelling over each other and the chairman was forced to suspend the session, which was usually for ten minutes.[246] This was enough for heads to cool down so that the representatives were able to start working again until the next interruption. The commotion was sometimes not even (directly) caused by the speaker, as one would naturally expect to occur in the parliament, but rather broke out spontaneously on the back benches. In July 1922, during a speech by representative Stevan Mihalđić, an incomprehensible "hubbub" broke out, instigated by a duel between representatives Sima Šević and Mihajlo Vidaković at the back of the session hall. "You're lying, you're a good-for-nothing!" Šević was yelling, while Vidaković approached him and their colleagues served as seconds, forcing President Ribar to suspend the session in front of the bewildered speaker.[247]

After 1925, the assembly operation was completely paralysed and the debates became even more heated. Representatives of the opposition were frustrated as they were not really participating in the decision-making on the level of state politics any more. Because of the uncertain and unusual relations among the parties of the ruling coalition, the crises were resolved outside of the parliament, with representatives merely being notified of what had happened. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the parliament was sinking, while the star of the monarch, King Alexander Karađorđević, shone ever brighter on the political sky.[248] The events that followed after the elections in 1927 only deepened that impression. Debates in the Assembly were becoming increasingly reminiscent of angry outbursts and frequently escalated to physical violence. Outbursts kept piling up and the boundaries of political competition were being crossed. Anything was possible at this point.

A NAKED MAN IN THE PARLIAMENT

On Friday, 25 February 1927, a single word was printed all over the covers of all Yugoslav papers: Scandalous. Be it the liberal newspaper *Jutro*, the Catholic *Slovenec* or the prestigious Belgrade-based *Politika*, all editorial boards agreed, no matter their differences in policy, opinion, national affiliation or anything else.[249]

246 E.g.: *Stenografske beleške Narodne skupštine Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenac*a, 90. redovna sednica, 6 July 1922, pp. 261–262.

247 *SBNSKSHS*, 91. redovna sednica, 7 June 1922, p. 286.

248 Branislav Gligorijević: *Parlament i političke stranke u Jugoslaviji (1919–1929)*. Belgrade, 1979, pp. 225–230.

249 *Jutro*, 25 February 1927, Nečuven škandal v Narodni skupščini; 26 February 1927, Gol človek v

On the previous day, a scandal took place the likes of which the South Slavic world had never seen before; a scandal that occurred nowhere else than in the parliament. Not just the Yugoslav journalists, who had already been familiar with the assembly and its work, even foreign correspondents noted that something truly remarkable had happened. The 25 February issue of the eminent Vienna-based *Neue Freie Presse* newspaper published the story on its cover as well. "Eine beispiellose Szene in der jugoslawischen Skupschtina," read the sensational bold Gothic script, and continued: "Denn alle Beispiele solcher Entblössungen aus dem Altertum, sie waren doch nur Episoden, nicht zu vergleichen mit dem Schauspiel, das gestern in der Skupschtina geboten wurde."[250]

What could have been so "scandalous" as to draw such attention? The Belgrade Assembly had previously witnessed outbursts of all types, vulgarities, sparklingly primitive verbal duelling, screaming, "tumult" and hurling of personal insults. Milan Stojadinović, the future Prime Minister, wrote (incorrectly and tendentiously) the following in his memoirs: "The atmosphere in the National Assembly has been extremely stuffy for a long time now. The bad habits of the Austrian and Hungarian Parliaments had wormed their way into our Assembly as well. We Serbs, with our old National Assembly, were not used to scenes such as representatives slamming the covers of their benches until they break, yelling and noise intended to prevent a representative from speaking, personal insults of the worst kind and other such things."[251] However, even in Stojadinović's opinion, the listed scenes were overshadowed by the event that was universally deemed scandalous and that, in light of the circumstances, truly did brutally shatter the established norms of the time.[252] The moral framework, as much as it still existed in politics and in the society, was damaged. A naked man had appeared in the parliament; a nude body was displayed.

The detailed press reports offer the same facts, diverging to a certain degree when it comes to the details, key points and exaggerations while leaving the basic structure of the story intact. The genesis of the scandal was wholly spontaneous. On that day, the Assembly was discussing the interpellation of Minister of Internal Affairs Božo Maksimović, who was also called Kundak (butt of a rifle). Numerous witnesses of encounters with Maksimović's police indicated that the moniker was quite fitting. The police violence was also one of the focal

Narodni skupščini. *Slovenec*, 25 February 1927, Žalosten dogodek; 26 February 1927, Vpijoča dejstva. *Slovenski gospodar*, 3 March 1927. *Politika*, 25 February 1927, Skandal u Narodnoj skupštini.

250 *Neue Freie Presse*, 25 February 1927, Eine beispiellose Szene in der jugoslawischen Skupschtina.

251 Milan M. Stojadinović: *Ni rat ni pakt. Jugoslavija između dva rata*. Rijeka, 1970, p. 252.

252 Deviation from the consensual value system is the key characteristic of a scandal. – On the theory of the scandal: Bodo Hombach: Zur definition des Skandals. In: *Skandal-Politik! Politik-Skandal! Wie politische Skandale entstehen, wie sie ablaufen und was sie bewirken.* Bonn, 2013, pp. 11–17. Frank Bösch: Wie entstehen Skandale? Historische Perspektiven. *Gegenworte*, Frühjahr 2013, pp. 12–19.

points of the interpellation. Since there was great interest in the session, the representatives' benches were packed, as were the galleries and diplomatic seats. There was no shortage of well-dressed ladies (their reactions to the incident later became the subject of numerous risqué but mostly fictitious anecdotes).

From the very beginning, the atmosphere was tense. Verbal interruptions and provocations occurred throughout the entire reading of the interpellation and one minor commotion broke out. As Minister Maksimović stepped to the podium and presented his reply, however, the hubbub was transferred to the hallways of the Assembly. A loud altercation was echoing through the corridors, and suddenly the developments in the hall were no longer interesting. Everybody looked towards the door as it flew open. In the narrow space, they were able to see opposition representatives, including two former ministers, pushing through and yelling "Shame!", "Terrible!" and "Down with the government!". They were carrying a man, terribly beaten up and bleeding. Somewhere in the distant, absent background, President of the Assembly Marko Trifković was yelling, "Order, gentlemen! This is the Assembly," but nobody heard him. With their mouths open, everybody watched the unprecedented scene that unfolded in the next few moments. A confused man appeared in the middle of the Assembly Hall, with his head bent down and his clothes all torn. The opposition representatives who had carried him inside took off his clothes in front of everyone, lifted the man up and carried him towards the benches of the coalition. The image of the bleeding body mixed with hysterical screams from the galleries was drowning in the all-enveloping commotion. Every now and then, one could hear the opposition: "This is your doing! Here's your proof for the allegations!"

The beaten man was Jovan Ristić, a municipal clerk from Belgrade and the unwilling and accidental "hero" of the scandal. The previous day, Jovan Ristić was talking politics with a friend in a café and accidentally crossed paths with Sokolović, the notorious Commissar of the Topčider Police. After a brief verbal duel, Sokolović took him away and beat him up. The following morning, representatives of the opposition found out about the incident and managed to get Ristić out of prison. They immediately came up with the distasteful idea that they had found the "corpus delicti" for their interpellation; the beaten Ristić, who was reportedly bleeding from the nose and eyes, became a "living illustration" of their allegations.

Although even the mildest of reporters wrote that the "event went far beyond the formal boundaries of parliamentary propriety and did nothing to improve the decorum of national representation", they also warned that blood did indeed flow under the current government. The liberal newspaper *Jutro* smugly wrote that the ministers were afraid for their lives at the brutal session, and that their

faces reflected "fear". Prime Minister Uzunović was pale as death.[253] The political situation was truly "incredibly tense". The session concluded with shots and casualties on the bloody floor of the Assembly. Parliamentarism was soon ended, and, in January 1929, King Alexander declared a personal dictatorship.

THE QUIETER (BUT NEVERTHELESS TURBULENT) 1930s

In 1931, King Alexander softened his dictatorial rule to a certain extent. He imposed a new constitution and reinstated the parliament, but the latter operated more like a makeshift parliament. In the early 1930s, the benches of the new, "post-dictatorial" assembly which was, quite symbolically, housed in a different building, were being warmed by carefully selected supporters of the King's regime. But did it mean that they paid any more heed to the new procedural provisions regarding order and discipline at the sessions? Initially, there were virtually no incidents; the assembly mostly unanimously cheered for King Alexander, welcomed the "Yugoslav unity" and encouraged the already elated speakers with cries of "Hurrah!". It was common to hear "protracted approval and frantic applause".[254] Only sometimes, as more critical representatives called attention to an infraction or irregularity, verbal interruptions as well as "incensed mutual persuasion" took place.[255] One of most notable amongst such representatives was Alojzij Pavlič, a controversial and often misunderstood eccentric. Although his statements usually (yet not always) set him apart from the others, they always caused a reaction from the restless representatives of the ruling majority. Even though Pavlič was greatly outnumbering, they reacted similarly to the representatives from 1928.

In November 1932, Pavlič started one of his speeches in a very populist manner: "Not a single government on this Earth except for ours, except for our poor Kingdom of Yugoslavia, has ministers without portfolios. So I ask of the ministers without portfolios, appealing to their patriotic sentiment, to submit their resignation to the ministry without portfolio, so that the money otherwise spent on them might go to the hungry and unemployed." This was during the great economic crisis. Pavlič specifically named his compatriot, minister without portfolio Albert Kramer. Kramer was not present in the hall at the time, and this resulted in the first wave of disapproval, interruptions and protests. Assembly's President Kosta Kumanudi issued the speaker with his first admonition. Pavlič continued: "The intelligentsia, workers and peasants do not like Dr Kramer," which immediately resulted in a new wave of protests. With Pavlič's every word

253 *Jutro*, 25 February 1927, Nečuven škandal v Narodni skupščini.
254 *SBNSKJ*, 11. redovna sednica, 25 January 1932, p. 23.
255 *SBNSKJ*, 15. redovna sednica, 29 February 1932, p. 158.

the noise intensified and Kumanudi issued warnings and slamming against the benches being slammed on again. "Kramer's" representatives Ivan Urek and Rasto Pustoslemšek yelled "This is criminal!", after which verbal duelling broke out and Kumanudi had to suspend the session.[256] It was just like the old times.

The story continued the next day, when Kramer's supporters tried to "mend" the damage and presented the Assembly with a statement expressing their "outrage" and condemning Pavlič's "cowardly" attack. Text of the statement incited the few critics of the regime in the parliament and a "great commotion" broke out again. Chairman of the session, Vice-President of the Assembly Kosta Popović, was forced to suspend the debate. Two interruptions in two days. "Gentlemen, national representatives," pleaded Popović after the interruption, "I beg you to preserve the dignity of the National Assembly and to refrain from similar incidents in the Hall, as episodes such as this hurt the reputation of the Assembly as well as every one of us here."[257]

Representative Pavlič continued debating in his recognizable style for the rest of his term. He made appeals, pointed things out and talked about issues that had nothing to do with the agenda. He was increasingly grating on his colleagues' nerves. In November 1933, his speech was even interrupted by calls and protests from his own people in the opposition. As Pavlič's words caused the representatives of the majority to join in, the situation in the hall was again reminiscent of that from the 1920s. The stenographers noted: "Banging against the benches, protests and shouts: enough of this, enough!" Upon the suggestion of Vice-President Karlo Kovačević, Pavlič was penalized with exclusion from five sessions.[258]

That year, i.e. 1933, would have been a very average one in terms of disturbances in the Assembly, comparable to the years before and after it, were it not for a tiny wintertime drama that was not at all typical for the heated atmosphere of the Assembly. What occurred on 16 February seemed downright cheerful and mocking at the same time. The commotion was incited by a controversial report submitted by the committee that reviewed the proposed new municipalities act. The protracted document thoroughly dissected the totally new conceptions of the role and significance of municipalities: the composition of municipal boards, responsibilities, conditions for their creation, land consolidation – as well as suffrage. According to the proposal, voting at the municipal elections would be open to all residents on the electoral roll, asc said by Miloslav Stojadinović, which was an ordinary statement, but with a charged continuation. Stojadinović went on to add: "Gentlemen, the general tendency within the committee seemed

256 *SBNSKJ*, 9. redovna sednica, 17 November 1932, pp. 108–109.
257 *SBNSKJ*, 10. redovna sednica, 18 January 1932, pp. 119–120.
258 *SBNSKJ*, 5. redovna sednica, 15 November 1933, p. 74.

to be that women should receive the right to vote as well." Calls of "By God!" immediately resounded and intensified into a torrent of yelling, comments etc. The chairman had to admonish the representatives not to disturb the speaker. Stojadinović then calmly and eagerly explained the idea: "I know that discussions of this type tend to provoke both dispositions and indispositions. Such is the very nature of the matter." He reminded his colleagues that women's suffrage would be constitutional as the imposed constitution provided that women's suffrage would be determined by a separate act, and pointed out that many "cultural and national" aspects spoke in its favour. Stojadinović talked about equality, mentioned some possible compromise solutions (to enfranchise only a limited number of women in independent professions), but all he got in return were verbal interruptions and noise. Representative Dragović interrupted to yell: "Women have more courage than people!" and mirthful laughter resounded in the hall.[259] Most representatives rejected such ideas out of hand. It seems that the matter of women's suffrage was not perceived as a politically relevant issue, as something important, meaningful, something that would change or modernize the political landscape. In light of all issues tormenting the country, this was really to be expected.[260] As the 1906 grand electoral reform made Finland (then part of tsarist Russia) the first to enfranchise women, this was not done solely out of a profound awareness of female equality but primarily by the desire to send a message that Finland was not such a backwards woodland province after all.

The period of relatively peaceful assembly sessions in the first Yugoslavian state was short. It ended in mid 1930s, after the assassination of King Alexander was, under the patronage of the late king's cousin Prince Paul Karađorđević, followed by a formation of a new government led by former opposition representatives Milan Stojadinović, Anton Korošec and Mehmed Spaho. The three politicians, particularly Prime Minister Milan Stojadinović, found themselves under crossfire from the fervent supporters of the previous, Alexander's, regime in the Assembly. Although, or precisely because, they were in the minority, they often carried out brutal obstructions reminiscent of the former atmosphere in the Viennese National Assembly. Because they were sitting on the left side of the assembly hall they were called "the Left".[261] Procedural entanglements again had to be disentangled and the Assembly was left stuck in perpetual pandemonium, with interruptions of sessions, again, becoming very common. On 18 February

259 *SBNSKJ*, 26. redovna sednica, 16 February 1933, pp. 103–120.

260 About positions taken by the Slovene politicians (particularly the liberals) on women's suffrage, see: Jurij Perovšek: *O demokraciji in jugoslovanstvu. Slovenski liberalizem v Kraljevini SHS/Jugoslaviji* [On Democracy and Yugoslavism. Slovenian Liberalism in the Kingdom of SHS/Yugoslavia]. Ljubljana, 2013, pp. 77–83 (and literature listed therein).

261 Stojkov, *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića*, pp. 125–134.

1936, one stenographer of the Assembly put down the following entry in the brackets: "Outraged, furious protests from the Left. – Representatives of the Left and the Right are rising from their seats in excitement, approaching each other and discussing things very angrily. – Loud commotion and arguments between individual representatives of the Left and the Right."[262]

The mood was no longer much different from the one in 1928. Chaos and constant unendurable yelling ... Jovan Gašić, head of Stojadinović's office, had the following to write about one Assembly session: "Session will continue in one hour. Commotion on the Left and demands for open ballot voting. Secretary Mulalić is trying unsuccessfully to speak over the noise, then saying from the podium that he resigns from his function. Afterwards, Mulalić leaves his seat and vanishes into the hallways of the Assembly. … The commotion lasts for 15 minutes, it's impossible to work and President Ćirić concludes the session at 1.20 pm, announcing the continuation for 10 am on the next day. – After interruption of the session, Drag. Milovanović protests in the centre of the hall, burning a copy of *Vreme* (the semi-official weekly of the government – author's note) ..."[263] Gašić's report is probably from February 1936. Less than a month later, shots from a revolver again achoed through the parliament.

DEMOCRACY IS A DISCUSSION

If the point of parliamentarism and a democratic assembly is a thoroughly free clash of opinions, arguments for and against and conceptions held by different representatives of the people (advocating different wills of the people), it means that it is always possible for a reasoned assembly debate to devolve into a commotion or flogging a dead horse. This is the reason why disciplinary norms, along with sanctions that the Assembly had prescribed for itself in order to preserve its reputation and ensure effective procedure, were so much needed in the first Yugoslavia. We should thus not look for the reasons for (dis)order and (in)discipline in the disciplinary provisions of the Rules of Procedure as these were formulated in a modern manner, comparable to those used in Western democracies[264] and sometimes also quite effective. The reasons for the stormy assembly mood stem from the type of political culture, which was in turn primarily the result of different cultural, historical and political traditions of the territories that had joined to form the country of Yugoslavia. This eventually resulted in an

262 *SBNSKJ*, 14. redovna sednica, 18 February 1936, p. 198.
263 Stojkov, *Vlada Milana Stojadinovića*, p. 128.
264 Maximilian Weigel: *Die Lehre von der parlamentarischen Disziplin in rechtsvergleichender Darstellung*. Leipzig, 1909.

overly literal interpretation of democracy and a particular understanding of the democratic process.

Developing his idea of democracy in the years before World War I, Czech philosopher and statesman T. G. Masaryk summed up all his thoughts in the famous but often truly misinterpreted sentence: "Demokracie – toť diskuse.", which means "Democracy is a discussion". Masaryk was trying to say that democracy is not merely something formal, encompassed by the general and equal suffrage, but rather much more than that. Democracy is a manner of social communication that applies to everyday life, not just to politics. However, Masaryk also realized that democracy is not to be taken for granted, but rather requires a condition that is to fulfil – a tolerant society.[265] In its absence, it is impossible to lead a cultured dialogue. In such a case, formal democracy may result in numerous problems, and it could be said that this is what happened in the first decade of the first Yugoslav state, and also later, after its dissolution.

THE CRISIS OF PARLIAMENTARISM

Of course, the crisis encountered by the parliament as an institution and parliamentarism as a political system was not just typical of the inter-war period and the first Yugoslavia, but was rather a European phenomenon that occurred at other times as well. In truth, we cannot see an end to it even today. Many influential law scholars, theorists and politicians of the 1920s and 1930s pondered the shortcomings of the parliament, searched for causes of the crisis and proposed improvements. For Carl Schmitt, a distinguished German political theorist and philosopher of law, who later became the leading legal lawyer of the Third Reich, political parties were an important part of the problem,[266] while Joseph Barthélémy,[267] a professor and representative from Paris, saw the reasons for public mistrust in the selfish aspirations of representatives, their trivial disputes, intrigues and futile agitation, in the faulty method and in impossibility of achieving results through parliamentary democracy. Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was later the post-Masaryk President of Czechoslovakia, Eduard Beneš[268] mused that the nations of Central Europe were still raising

265 Dušan Kováč: Demokracia, politická kultúra a dedičstvo totality v historickom procese. In: *Z dejín demokratických a totalitných režimov na Slovensku a v Československu v 20. storočí. Historik Ivan Kamenec 70-ročný*. Bratislava, 2008, pp. 349–350.

266 Carl Schmitt: *Die geistesgeschichtliche Lage des heutigen Parlamentarismus*. Berlin, 2010.

267 Joseph Barthélémy: Das parlamentarische Regime muss sich umbilden. In: *Demokratie und Parlamentarismus. Ihre Schwierigkeiten und deren Lösung – Eine Rundfrage der „Prager Presse"*. Prague, 1926, pp. 18–28.

268 Eduard Beneš: Hic Rhodus, hic salta!. In: *Demokratie und Parlamentarismus*, pp. 29–31.

themselves for democracy, while G. L. Duprat,[269] a professor from Geneva, made a bold claim that parliamentary representatives interfered with everything, usually with "universal incompetence", and were, in the spirit of local tyrants, interested only in the success of their own intrigues. In his opinion, parliaments were closed circles where private interests joined in unstable and scandalous coalitions.

At the time, Europe was swarming with various surveys, thematic issues of reputable newspapers, and discussions regarding the uncertain future of the "best of the bad forms of government". Nevertheless, most critics supported the idea of parliamentarism but were dissatisfied with the technical execution. The leitmotif of the discussions was that parliaments, in their current form, were no longer fulfilling their role effectively. Parliamentary democracy would have to be *improved*. This is the line of thought that was joined by the parliamentary theorists and practicians in the first Yugoslavia. The keenly intelligent sociologist and minister Andrej Gosar,[270] politician Milan Grol,[271] minister Mehmed Spaho[272] and Dragoljub Jovanović,[273] one of the most insightful Yugoslav authors of the time, a politician and frequent political prisoner in the first and second Yugoslavia, as well and many others, were just as astute and intellectually passionate about dissecting problems, proposing improvements etc. as their foreign colleagues. They were even joined by Anton Korošec, the most influential Slovenian politician in the country and a man who rarely put things in writing. Korošec's thoughts are particularly interesting as they were not the result of theoretical speculation but rather of thoroughly practical experience at the highest levels of politics. "The slogan is: for the nation," he wrote, "but everybody works to fill their own pockets, to fulfil their own ambitions, they work for their personal or at least the benefit of their respectful parties. Political idealism is dead and political programmes have become a big lie."[274] (Quite unusual for the head of the leading Slovenian party?!) According to Korošec, the problem was causing people to become increasingly apathetic. Furthermore, the parliament was hardly dealing with legislation at that point. "The main function of the representatives is no longer to legislate and control the administration but rather to intervene and write endless letters in

269 G. L. Duprat: Arbeit zum Heil der Demokratie. In: *Demokratie und Parlamentarismus*, pp. 50–58.

270 Peter Vodopivec: O Gosarjevi kritiki parlamentarne demokracije [On Gosar's Criticism of Parliamentary Democracy]. *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino*, 2009, No. 1, pp. 243–253.

271 Milan Grol: Naš parlamentarizam (njegove vrline i njegove mane). *Nova Evropa*, 11 January 1926, pp. 12–19.

272 Mehmed Spaho: Kriza parlamentarizma. *Srpski književni glasnik*, September–December 1926, pp. 53–56. Available at: *Digitalna Narodna biblioteka Srbije,* www.digitalna.nb.rs, 22 September 2014.

273 Dragoljub Jovanović: Kriza parlamentarizma. *Srpski književni glasnik*, September–December 1926, pp. 214-217. Available at: *Digitalna Narodna biblioteka Srbije*, www.digitalna.nb.rs, 22 September 2014.

274 Anton Korošec: Kriza parlamentarizma. *Srpski književni glasnik,* September–December 1926, pp. 363–368. Available at: *Digitalna Narodna biblioteka Srbije*, www.digitalna.nb.rs, 22 September 2014.

response to requests for interventions. Nowadays, a conscientious representative will waste his day intervening at various ministries and, without exaggeration, he would need a dedicated secretary for all his correspondence." Therefore: parliamentarism is in crisis due to their inability to evolve a *political and economic democracy*, their adaptation to social opportunities and due to a *moral crisis*.

According to Korošec, the essence of politics was reduced to the magic word *intervention*, and this fact indeed remains the best illustration of all problems related to the Yugoslav Parliament in the inter-war period.[275] After taking a peek at the parliament's public face and its operation behind the scenes, and following an analysis of its critics,[276] it can be said that the National Assembly was not an environment where problems would be solved efficiently or transparently and most certainly not on the basis of a reasoned confrontation of demands, wishes, expectations etc. Nobody wanted that – neither the king nor the government or the parties in power. The parliament was therefore weak and unable to function most of the time; it was a venue of conflicts rather than a venue of confrontations and resolutions of conflicts.

Discussing the paradoxical "golden age" of the Serbian parliamentarism in the period before World War I, the renowned Serbian historian and politician Latinka Perović wrote that when a normative system falls on a ground not yet ready for it, "practice compromises the form".[277] A similar conclusion could be drawn regarding the time of the first Yugoslavia. The constitutionally mandated system (the norm) was exemplary, at least in the first decade; however, the parliamentary form was compromised by parliamentary practice. In public, representatives were usually merely *giving performances* and were venting, like actors, while their true work consisted of minuscule *interventions*. The manner in which the parliament functioned led to its demise in the 1920s and its ineffectual form in the 1930s.

275 This is confirmed by the representatives' folders preserved by the Assembly Archives. These folders hold an incredible amount of various requests for interventions (for the recognition of years of service, for transfers, appointments, approvals, consents, promotions etc.). The petitioners never forgot to mention that they were supporters of the representative in question. – AJ 72, box 68 and 69.

276 Cf. Gligorijević, *Parlament i političke stranke*, pp. 269–333.

277 Latinka Perović: Počeci parlamentarizma u Srbiji. Ograničenja i dometi, foreword to the book by Olga Popović – Obradović: *Parlamentarizam u Srbiji od 1903. do 1914. godine*. Belgrade, 2008, pp. 7–16.