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How Tito Drew the Borders of the Yugoslav Republics

- Kosta Čavoški -



Why were the borders for different federal units based on different historical moments — for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878, for Montenegro and Serbia in 1912, before the First Balkan War, for Slovenia in 1929 and for Croatia in 1939? Why wasn't the same year chosen for all? These are not merely academic questions but far-reaching political ones, as the choice of different years placed certain federal units in unequal positions.

The far-reaching decisions about which federal units would form the new Yugoslavia and within which borders they would be constituted were made by the narrowest leadership of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY). During the war, this leadership consisted of a



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small group of leaders around the General Secretary Josip Broz Tito, whose word was usually decisive. A more notable role in these decisions was also played by Edvard Kardelj, followed by the remaining two members of the so-called “Big Four” — Aleksandar Ranković and Milovan Đilas.

Now, it remains for us to show how and on what basis the narrow leadership of the CPY carried out the territorial demarcation. We come across these unusually significant and far-reaching historical facts quite by chance, as they are almost never mentioned in the preserved and published minutes of the wartime meetings of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the CPY. These facts are revealed in the reconstructed stenographic notes from the session of the Presidency of the AVNOJ (Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia) on February 24, 1945. This session was held in response to the demands of the Anti-Fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia and the State Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH) that four, or respectively three, of their representatives be included in the AVNOJ Presidency — proportionally to the population size of their territories, given that the AVNOJ was a unicameral representative body.

Different Measures

On that occasion, Secretary Mile Peruničić stated: “All our lands, all our federal units, are not proportionally represented in the AVNOJ. Such were the circumstances under which we worked.” On average, the representation from federal Serbia in the AVNOJ was the lowest. Peruničić reached this conclusion by comparing the population sizes of the federal units within their then-existing borders (February 1945) based on the 1931 census and the number of their representatives in AVNOJ. From this perspective, we first learn that, in addition to the six federal units that still exist today, there were four regions at that time whose status and affiliation had not yet been resolved: a) Vojvodina, b) Kosovo and Metohija, c) the Sandžak, and d) Pančevo and Zemun. The note then provides the following explanation regarding the borders of individual federal units:

“Slovenia was taken within the borders of the former Drava Banovina; Croatia within the borders of the former Sava Banovina with 13 districts of the former Littoral Banovina and the Dubrovnik district of the former Zeta Banovina; Bosnia and Herzegovina within the



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borders determined by the Treaty of Berlin; Serbia within its pre-Balkan War borders, with districts taken from Bulgaria by the Treaty of Versailles; Macedonia — the Yugoslav territory south of Kačanik and Ristovac; Montenegro within its pre-Balkan War borders, with the Berane and Kotor districts and Plav and Gusinje...”

This, therefore, was the original territorial status that the narrowest leadership of the CPY assigned to each federal unit during the war. What is most surprising is the fact that, except for Macedonia, the different federal units were taken within borders that existed at different historical moments spanning over 60 years — from 1878 to 1939. And, worst of all, for some federal units, the borders taken were the most favourable for them, while for others, the borders taken were the least favourable. This we will demonstrate immediately.

Slovenia was taken within the borders of the Drava Banovina, which were established by the *Law on the Name and Division of the Country into Administrative Areas* in 1929. Compared to the rest of Yugoslavia, these are also its current borders. There is no doubt that this was the most favourable solution for Slovenia, as practically all Slovenes within the territory of Yugoslavia at the time were included in one federal unit. Even the Plenum of the Liberation Front, without prior consent from the AVNOJ, passed a decision on the annexation of Slovene Littoral and all annexed parts of Slovenia, which encroached on relations with neighbouring foreign states — Italy and Austria.

Macedonia received the most favourable territorial status. The border about 10 to 15 kilometres south of Kačanik and Ristovac is still today's border of Macedonia with Serbia. The favourability of this solution is reflected in the fact that there were no Macedonians north of this border, while a significant number of Serbs, Albanians, Turks and Muslims remained within Macedonia's borders. Even on August 3, 1945, the Presidency of the AVNOJ passed a *Law on the Revision of Land Allocation to Colonists and Agrarian Interests in Macedonia and the Kosovo-Metohija region*, which practically sanctioned the expulsion from Macedonia, and partly from Kosovo and Metohija, of colonized Serbs and Montenegrins who, for their wartime merits, had most often received land that had not been cultivated until then, namely village pastures, or had purchased it with their own money. Only the Macedonian leadership was denied the opportunity, unlike the Slovenian Liberation Front and the Croatian ZAVNOH, to make its own decision on annexing parts of



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neighbouring states populated by Macedonians.

Bosnia and Herzegovina also received a very favourable territorial status, given that they were taken within their historical borders confirmed by the Congress of Berlin in 1878. Thanks to this, this federal unit has access to the sea at Neum, which, however, cuts Croatian Dalmatia into two parts. This favourability of the territorial status of Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, has different meanings for the peoples living within it. The borders confirmed by the Congress of Berlin are, from the standpoint of the interests of one nation to have all its members within a single federal unit, only favourable for Muslims. They would have been even more favourable if Muslims living in the Sandžak, which was later divided between Serbia and Montenegro, had also been included within these borders.

However, these borders are not the best solution for Croats and Serbs, who are thereby separated from their mother units. If the principle of national homogeneity of federal units is taken as the basis for federalization, then the fact that a large number of Croats and Serbs remain outside the borders of Croatia and Serbia is in serious discord with that principle. To this, many will certainly respond that, due to the mixed population, just as in Switzerland, ethnic boundaries between Croats, Serbs and Muslims cannot be drawn in Bosnia and Herzegovina at all. This is undoubtedly true, but it shows not only the validity but also the shortcomings of the principle of national homogeneity, since it could be consistently applied in the case of the Slovenes, as far as Yugoslav borders allowed, but it could not be applied in the same way in the case of other Yugoslav peoples.

Montenegro was taken within its pre-First Balkan War borders, meaning that, like Serbia later, it was not recognized for the results of its liberation war against the Turks. However, unlike Serbia, Montenegro was largely compensated for this, as it was given the districts of Berane, Plav and Gusinje, which Montenegro had gained in its last war against Turkey, as well as the Kotor district (from Herceg Novi to Bar), which during the Balkan Wars and earlier had been part of Austria-Hungary. Outside the thus-defined wartime AVNOJ Montenegro remained the districts of Pljevlja, Bijelo Polje, Đakovica and Peć, which Montenegro had gained in the war against Turkey.

The territorial status that Croatia received during the war is the subject of various interpretations. The starting point for its territories was the Banovina of Croatia, established



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by the Cvetković-Maček Agreement on August 26, 1939, which, in addition to the Sava and Littoral Banovinas and the Dubrovnik district, also included the districts of Ilok, Šid, Brčko and Gradačac. It should also be added that, within the historical borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Littoral, or Banovina of Croatia, included the districts of Travnik, Fojnica, Bugojno, Livno, Prozor, Konjic, Mostar, Ljubuški and Duvno, i.e., a significant part of Herzegovina and central Bosnia. This was, in fact, after so many centuries, the first territorial and administrative entity that encompassed the three historical Croatian regions — Croatia proper, Slavonia and Dalmatia. During the Austro-Hungarian period and earlier, Dalmatia was part of Austria, while Croatia proper, Slavonia and later the Military Frontier were part of Hungary.

However, the mentioned territory established during the war did not fully coincide with the territory of the Banovina of Croatia but was adjusted, or rather reduced, to align with the historical borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which were given precedence over the borders of the former Banovina of Croatia. Thanks to this, the Herzegovinian municipalities predominantly inhabited by Croats were excluded from the Banovina of Croatia. The same was done with the districts of Brčko and Gradačac in northern Bosnia. Thus, AVNOJ Croatia had a slightly smaller territory than the pre-war Banovina of Croatia. However, it should not be forgotten that even then, plans were being made for the expansion of Croatia. Without prior consent from the AVNOJ, a decision was made to annex Istria, Rijeka, Zadar and the annexed parts of Croatia and Croatian Adriatic islands to a free Croatia.

The territorial status of AVNOJ Serbia raises significant doubts. Serbia was taken within its pre-Balkan Wars borders (so-called pre-Kumanovo Serbia), with the addition of two districts taken from Bulgaria after World War I. This means that AVNOJ Serbia was not recognized for the results of the liberation wars against Turkey and Austria-Hungary, which it had fought from 1912 to 1918. In other words, Serbia, through the wartime decisions of the highest party leadership, was given a status as if it had never fought those wars at all.

A particularly interesting comparison can be made between the borders of AVNOJ Serbia and the so-called Nedić's Serbia under German occupation. They coincide in almost every aspect, except for their southern and southeastern borders. Wartime AVNOJ Serbia included two districts populated by Bulgarians, which were taken from Nedić's Serbia. However,



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Nedić's Serbia included Novi Pazar and part of Kosovo around the Trepča mines, including Kosovska Mitrovica, which AVNOJ Serbia did not encompass.

Uncomfortable Questions

The establishment of borders for federal units during the war raises numerous uncomfortable questions. Why were the borders for different federal units based on different historical moments — for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1878, for Montenegro and Serbia in 1912 (before the First Balkan War), for Slovenia in 1929 and for Croatia in 1939? Why wasn't the same year chosen for all?

These are not merely academic questions but far-reaching political ones, as the choice of different years placed certain federal units in unequal positions. Let's take Croatia and Serbia as an example. What would have happened, for instance, if the same year had been chosen for both federal units — 1912 or 1939? If 1912 had been chosen, Serbia would have been within the borders of pre-Kumanovo Serbia, and Croatia would have been within its administrative borders as part of Hungary, which included Croatia proper, Slavonia, and the Military Frontier, but excluded Dalmatia. In that case, Dalmatia, Vojvodina, the Sandžak, Kosovo and Metohija would have had the opportunity to decide their own status, as they would have been outside these borders.

Each of these regions could then have independently decided whether to join Croatia or Serbia at all, and under what conditions — whether as an integral part or as a separate region with greater or lesser autonomy. If, by chance, 1939 had been chosen, Croatia would have been established within the borders of the Banovina of Croatia, while Serbia would have been established on the entire Yugoslav territory east of the Banovina of Croatia, after the prior separation of Bosnia, the territory that once belonged to Montenegro, the territory 10 to 15 kilometres south of Kačanik and Ristovac (today's Macedonia), and the Sandžak, as a disputed territory to which Bosnia, Montenegro and Serbia could have laid claim. In such a case, Vojvodina, Kosovo and Metohija would have been considered integral parts of Serbia and would not have had the opportunity to decide for themselves whether to join Serbia and under what conditions — whether as an autonomous province or as an integral part.

An even more uncomfortable question can also be raised. If the same year had been chosen



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for different federal units, why weren't their borders determined in the same way? The differing approaches can be illustrated by the examples of Serbia and Montenegro. Both Serbia and Montenegro were established within their pre-First Balkan War borders, with the addition of the districts of Berane, Plav and Gusinje to Montenegro, which it had gained during the First Balkan War, and the two districts populated by Bulgarians to Serbia, which it had conquered during World War I.

The difference lies not only in the size of the annexed territories but also in the nature of the claims to those territories. Berane, Plav and Gusinje are national territories for which Montenegro fought a liberation war, while the districts populated by Bulgarians were annexed after Bulgaria's defeat in World War I. Additionally, Montenegro was granted the Kotor district, stretching from Herceg Novi to Bar, which during centuries of Ottoman rule in the Balkans did not belong to Montenegro but first to the Venetian Republic and later to Austria. Serbia, on the other hand, was not granted any territories populated by Serbs that had been outside Serbian borders during Ottoman rule until 1912.

Another set of doubts arises from the drawing of the border between Croatia, on one side, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the other. Here, the historical borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1878 (established much earlier by the Treaty of Karlowitz in 1699) clashed with the borders of the Banovina of Croatia from 1939. Preference was given to the former at the expense of the latter. However, it was not explained why this decision was made. The borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina are indeed historical but not ethnic. The borders of the Banovina of Croatia were determined in accordance with the principle of national homogeneity.

Since the wartime leadership of the CPY opted for the creation of national federal units — rather than, say, Swiss-style cantons, which are mostly established within their historical borders, or Soviet republics based on the principle of national self-determination — it remains unclear why, in this case, preference was given to historical rather than ethnic borders. The reasons for this decision were clearly not principled but pragmatic.

The Question of Autonomous Regions

Finally, there remains the question of why certain federal units were not granted their most



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favourable borders, even when no other federal unit laid claim to specific territories within those borders. In this case, the focus is on Serbia. Although no neighbouring federal unit — neither Croatia, nor Macedonia, nor even Montenegro — laid claim to the territory of Vojvodina (taken in its entirety) or Kosovo and Metohija, and there was no explicit mention of their special status in the decisions of the Second Session of the AVNOJ, the wartime leadership of the CPY did not include these regions within Serbia.

It is important to highlight a certain distinction between Vojvodina, on one hand, and Kosovo and Metohija, on the other. From the very beginning, it was clear that Vojvodina would remain part of Yugoslavia, but its exact status was unclear. Thus, in the AVNOJ proclamation to the peoples of Yugoslavia on November 30, 1943, reference is made to the heroic and freedom-loving children of “Serbia and Croatia, Slovenia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, Vojvodina and the Sandžak.”

According to available sources, during the war, the narrow leadership of the CPY was not inclined to establish autonomous regions or provinces within individual federal units. There is evidence that Moša Pijade reviewed the municipalities in the former Croatian Military Frontier, which were predominantly inhabited by Serbs, and proposed the establishment of an appropriate regional autonomy. This proposal was rejected at a meeting of the CPY’s top leadership. When the *Law on the Constitutional Assembly* was adopted, it became apparent that Vojvodina and Kosovo and Metohija would have a special status, i.e., they would elect 15 and 10 representatives, respectively, to the Assembly of Nations, in addition to the 25 representatives elected by Serbia as a federal unit.

Particular attention deserves the explanation for why this was done. Since there was no basis in the explicit decisions of the Second Session of the AVNOJ for the creation of autonomous provinces or regions within one or more federal units, an explanation was resorted to that is still used today. It was said that this was done in the spirit of the AVNOJ. And it is precisely from this spirit that the so-called AVNOJ principles were later derived, which, according to the vision of their creators, were intended to have a constitutional character.

With the adoption of the federal *Law on the Constitutional Assembly*, it was finally revealed that the establishment of two autonomous units within Serbia was not within the



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independent jurisdiction of its highest bodies. Instead, as in the Soviet Union, it was a matter for the highest federal body — the Provisional People's Assembly. This significantly limited Serbia's right to self-organization. It remains to be seen whether this restriction applied only to Serbia or whether it was universalized and thus applicable to other federal units where the population of a specific region desired a special status.

The draft of the first post-war constitution of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia seemed to support this interpretation. Article 2, Paragraph 1 of this draft provided for the formation of two autonomous units within Serbia (the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Autonomous Region of Kosovo-Metohija). However, Article 22, Paragraph 2, Subparagraph 2 also foresaw the possibility of "establishing new autonomous provinces and autonomous regions." Had this possibility been utilized at least once in another federal unit — and there were both historical and ethnic reasons for this — the creation of autonomous regions and provinces within individual federal units would have become a matter of universal principle, applicable to all federal units under equal conditions.

Such a possibility re-emerged at the end of 1945 during the nationwide debate on the draft of the first constitution of the new Yugoslavia. According to Vicko Krstulović, Dr. Š. Sinovčić and Franić proposed the establishment of an autonomous region of Dalmatia within the Republic of Croatia. On behalf of the Minister for the Constituent Assembly, Edvard Kardelj, Milovan Đilas firmly rejected this proposal as unacceptable and reactionary. "If we were to grant autonomy to Dalmatia, we would be dividing the Croatian nation as a whole and hindering its unimpeded development."

The most important reason for rejecting this proposal was the principle of national homogeneity, on which the federalization of Yugoslavia was based. As Milovan Đilas stated: "We do not establish the federation on any other basis but that of nationality. Can anyone claim that Dalmatians are anything other than Croats?" This is undoubtedly true, but it immediately raises the question of why the wartime leadership of the CPY rejected Moša Pijade's proposal to establish regional autonomy for the former Military Frontier, predominantly inhabited by Serbs, since it is indisputable that this involved a different nationality, which as such would not "divide the Croatian nation as a whole."

In the practical approach to resolving the national question during the war, traces of the



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previous policy pursued by the CPY in this area between the two wars are evident. That policy reached its peak in the decisions of the 4th Congress of the CPY in October 1928 in Dresden, which recognized the legitimacy of aspirations for national self-determination, including secession, not only for the South Slavic peoples but also for national minorities. It called on the working class to fully support all “mass actions leading to the formation of an independent Croatia” and “an independent Montenegro,” as well as to support the “struggle for an independent and united Macedonia,” the “struggle of the fragmented and oppressed Albanian people for an independent and united Albania,” recognized “the right of the Hungarian national minority in northern Vojvodina to secede” and endorsed the slogan of “an independent Slovenia.” These traces are particularly visible in the recognition of the status of nations (hence only five nations were recognized) and the prolonged hesitation regarding the status of Kosovo and Metohija.

The most important decisions regarding the federalization of Yugoslavia and the mutual demarcation of federal units were made without prior consultation of the peoples of Yugoslavia through a referendum or any other democratic means.

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