Essay

IN THE GOVERNMENT'S SERVICE AND IN THE SHADOW OF THE STATE: CIVIL SERVANTS IN THE SERBIAN AND YUGOSLAV SOCIAL CONTEXT IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES[1]

By Milan Ristović

Critique of bureaucratic careerism of senior and junior civil servants was among the frequent topics in comedies of character written by the most famous Serbian writer Branislav Nušić (1864–1938). In their effort to "earn the rank" they stopped at nothing to get a promotion, like some of his characters whose greatest desire, regardless of abilities and education, was to succeed in getting into civil service. Throughout the nineteenth century, from the gradual expansion of the autonomy of the Principality of Serbia, as an Ottoman vassal, to an independent Principality (1878) and the Kingdom of Serbia (since 1882), the Serbian society, predominantly rural, was slowly changing its structure, experiencing all "birth pangs" of modernisation. Rudimentary administration of the autonomous Principality of Serbia rested on a few literate domestic clerks as well as educated Serbs and other immigrants from the Habsburg Monarchy. Since the 1840s the state started to send an increasing number of students to study at foreign universities with state scholarships. After returning to the country, in addition to the Belgrade Higher School (founded in 1863, since 1905 the University of Belgrade), they largely filled the ranks of civil servants as the state administration expanded. High schools, both lower and higher, and teacher's schools produced the more numerous, poorly paid echelon of civil servants. The "European experience" of the Serbian political and intellectual elite until 1914, with many among them having diplomas from European universities, was extremely important in shaping the Serbian variant of middle-class culture, modernisation of society and state, and development of institutions. However, this experience was not strong enough to set an example for the change of attitude toward practical skills and professions associated with them. After all, even Nikola Pašić (1845–1926), the patriarch of Serbian politics at the turn of the century, with a diploma from the Zurich Polytechnic, did not choose to pursue his career as a civil engineer but opted for politics and civil service.

Commonplace in the request of all opposition parties at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly populist radicals, was the reduction in the number of civil servants, who were seen as incarnations of an alienating and – for the rural majority – hostile state. Laza Paču (1855–1915), Radical Party ideologue, wrote in 1881 in his book *Bourgeois Society* about "contradiction between a bureaucrat and people" which, in an undeveloped and socially non-stratified society, leads "ultimately to contradiction between the state and the people". By idealising rural municipality and demanding its self-government, which would restrict the right of government bureaucracy and the "state", another prominent radical, Pera Todorović (1852–1907), stressed its democratic and anti-bureaucratic significance.

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[1] Essay on the source: Civil Servants in the Serbian and Yugoslav Social Context: Report by the Belgrade City Administration about Improper Conduct of Junior Civil Servants (1901) and Law on Civil Servants and Other Civil Public Employees of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia) (1923). A printed version of the essay is published in: Isabella Löhr, Matthias Middell, Hannes Siegrist (Hgg.): Kultur und Beruf in Europa, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag 2012, S. 241–248, Band 2 der Schriftenreihe Europäische Geschichte in Quellen und Essays.

In a poor, economically backward state as Serbia, which it had been for a long time, civil service and the position of a government employee – in addition to (relative) material security, further "reinforced" by corruption that, nevertheless, was not the main motive for choosing it – also brought about the sense of belonging to a "higher" social status of "authority" and the "state". This explains the long-standing attraction of civil servant's calling, even if only as a scribe in a remote small provincial town surrounded by countless villages. According to the 1890 census, among Serbia's two million inhabitants at the time, only 4.7 percent belonged with regards to their social status to the educated and diverse stratum composed of employees in government administration, justice, education, as well as officers, medical doctors in state-run hospitals, journalists. Ten years later, less than 2 percent of the population were employed in public services.

The middle-class lifestyle model, including the concept of privacy, as well as the relationship between the public and private, continued to strengthen among young Serbian bourgeoisie during the last third of the nineteenth century. The bourgeoisie had been accepted in the society and had increasingly spread in the numerous stratum of educated people, members of the civil servants' and officers' ranks, a new generation of merchants and the first entrepreneurs in the national manufacturing. Since the time of the second reign of Prince Mihailo (1860–1868), and particularly during the reign of King Milan (1872–1889), their model was based on the court, whose internal rules of conduct, interior decoration, customs imported from abroad – combined with certain local specifics – were comparable with the standard and lifestyle of (Central) European bourgeoisie.

In areas beyond the borders of the Principality/Kingdom of Serbia, Serbian rich middle class, landowners, military, nobility, merchants and intellectuals in the Dual Monarchy were the promoters of this lifestyle and cultural pattern, which became increasingly influential and were imitated, depending on material capabilities, among the lower classes of urban population. This included further processes of *nationalisation*, in line with the penetration of national ideology and greater politicisation of the Serbian population in the Habsburg Monarchy. In the complex discourse and plurality of the forms of Serbian culture among the middle-class and civil servants' circles, both within and outside of Serbia, family continued to be equally sacralised as a part of a specific *nation* in miniature.

Social modernization of the Serbian society at the end of the nineteenth century had a strong adversary in the populism of the radicals, who claimed to be acting in "defence of the people" against what was perceived as "foreign influences" and accused the Progressive Party for spreading such influences. The radicals' demagoguery encouraged animosity among the lower urban strata and peasants for anything that bore the "Schwabian" mark (as sublimation of negative foreign influence) – including police uniforms, bourgeois attire, tailcoats, and top hats – and fuelled fear against the big Austrian neighbour. The critique of social order in an increasingly stratified Serbian society at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, launched by the first socialists, proceeded from a more complex analysis of the unfavourable situation in which the lower social strata lived, which resulted from a combination between the capital and police-bureaucratic state system. However, when they assumed power, radicals in practice departed from their verbal anti-civil-servant vocabulary, continuing with further bureaucratisation of the state with their “cadres”.

Expansion of the civil servant apparatus and state administration in Serbia, with the high school diploma opening up the opportunities of finding a livelihood in government employment, caused at the end of the nineteenth century not only political resistance but also criticism that the obsolete educational system cannot respond to the needs of social modernisation, particularly in the economy. Increasing interest among the lower social strata to continue education in high schools was, in the opinion of one contemporary critique, the sign of “tendency for gentility”. This argumentation was support by claims that acquiring a high school diploma served this purpose as well as was a means to finally break away from the village, even from the family.

Many new high schools opened after World War I and the creation of the Yugoslav state in many smaller towns in Serbia, often in inadequate conditions, were symptomatic of this situation. High schools were opened after the Balkan Wars in towns in Kosovo and Macedonia. In the 1930s there were fifteen state high schools in the territory of Vojvodina. There was also an increasing number of female children who attended and graduated from high schools. Having in view the limited possibilities for their employment, the increasing number of young women continuing their education and obtaining a high school diploma was seen as a part of an “emancipating package”. Insistence on education of their daughters was also the result of the parents’ awareness of the importance of the education of women as well as, among other things, a compulsory element of social identification of young urban women. Their entry into the labour market provoked numerous and hostile reactions that criticised the situation as “unfair competition” to unemployed men and alleged that women enjoyed “preference” in recruitment, particularly in the civil service. Proposals presented during the 1930s how to deal with this “problem” – as their authors perceived it – was to substantially reduce salaries of married women in civil service or by dismissing married employed women whose husbands worked.

Toward the 1920s this situation resulted in the saturation of this educational profile and caused problems in their employment, prompting debates about the need for change in the educational system. This led to a gradual modification of parents’ attitude and discouraged them from the obsessive effort to ensure for their children, at any cost, a future in civil service, having been regarded as the only “worthy” occupation as opposed to practical occupations in the economy, trade or crafts. Instead of enrolling female children in high schools, their parents were advised to enrol them in public secondary schools, which provided them with more practical skills necessary for them to be “good mothers and homemakers” on whom “the home would rest” one day, rather than employees in civil service. The lack of attraction of economic occupations was noticed after World War I as a “national problem” in ethnically mixed communities in Vojvodina. Critiques, such as politician Vasa Stajić (1878–1947) or philosopher and ethnologist Vladimir Dvorniković (1888–1956), blamed the parents for “hypertrophy of high schools” as a social anomaly. Attention has also been drawn to the fact that the economic bourgeoisie was becoming increasingly composed of members of non-Yugoslav minority nations, Germans and Hungarians, while Yugoslavs predominantly belonged to “civil-service proletariat”.

The Civil Service Laws of 1923 and 1931 established in detail the conditions for entering civil service in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS)/Yugoslavia.[2] The political profile of the civil servant, i.e. unreserved loyalty to the present order, was of crucial importance, therefore the candidate was required to produce a certificate of good conduct to this end. Entering civil service, in addition to status and material aspect, imposed a limitation of freedom and complete submission, including waiving of certain political rights, i.e. membership in political parties. If the needs of the service required, civil servants were obliged to accept reassignment to another post, even to the most remote areas. They were required to safeguard "their reputation and reputation of their superiors", both "in service and outside it", to avoid everything "that may harm the reputation and trust entailed by this position". This obligation also extended following retirement, which was granted at the age of 70. Service could be terminated in case of the deprivation of civil rights, conscription, illness, three consecutive negative evaluations out of six evaluations, as well as when the competent authorities decided on the termination of service.

Civil servants were prohibited from engaging in any other activity, particularly trade, crafts, and manufacturing. They were subject to continuous supervision, arbitrary dismissal, often toward the very end of their career, and coercion. Except for those on the top and senior positions (numbering some 20.000 in Yugoslavia in the mid-1930s) – which entailed significant material benefits and influence on the career of subordinated lower-level civil servants – earnings of middle and lower ranks of civil servants, classified into grades based on education and position, did not ensure significant material security. Teachers, also a specific part of the civil servant army, had the hardest time to make ends meet, as they were poorly paid and were under close scrutiny of the community, which assumed the role of moral judges. They often were transferred to different areas as a form of punishment, forced to live a very meagre existence, which caused great problems in their private lives.

Authorities often resorted to political pressure and coercion against civil servants, including judges. Official documents ordered that civil servants, which became particularly numerous after the mid-1930s, should join the ruling party and vote for it under the threat of transfer or dismissal from service. The general characteristic of the situation in this heterogeneous, disunited stratum was inefficiency, insufficient motivation and inclination to corruption.

The number of students in law schools and similar faculties and colleges, both in the Kingdom of SCS/Yugoslavia and in the post-war period, was continuously rising, which the socialist state also filled the ranks of its burgeoning "army" of civil servants with. After 1945 and the establishment of the communist system, the term used to refer to civil servants was *službenici* (officials) instead of *činovnici* (officers). Nevertheless, the attitude did not change much toward these occupations that offered the "security of office" in the government or party bureaucracy and far less toward desirable ones in factory plants or construction sites, irrespective if they were managerial positions.

The new stratum of civil servants, predominantly originating from rural communities or small towns, with a secondary education, since the early 1960s, in "mature self-management socialism" (increasingly with junior college or university diplomas), replaced their “déclassé” predecessors in socialist Yugoslavia, although accepted the same behavioural pattern, attitude to work, and opinion about the importance of being a member of an oversized and inefficient bureaucratic mechanism, even as its smallest screw. A part of the old bureaucratic apparatus, nevertheless, survived the ideological “purge”, particularly middle- and lower-rank civil servants, which were absorbed into the new system. Dependency and submission to “higher instances” and Communist Party membership as a prerequisite for further promotion, with a modest average salary and long waiting time to solve one’s housing problem, was the framework within which the active life of civil servants in socialism took place. They were, however, the most numerous part of the socialist “middle class”, as well as were promoters of the new socialist consumerism, accepting and copying the western provincial rather than the bourgeois model of privacy and private life in housing culture, clothing, entertainment and leisure, while incorporating their legacy, which was still visible in family relations. In smaller communities they were members of the “local elite”, who had pronounced influence on social life, where they introduced new customs and fashions as well as set standards, even in the organization of privacy.

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[2] See, Narodna Skupština Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca. Zakon o činovnicima i ostalim državnim službenicima građanskog reda [Peoples' Parliament of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Law on Civil Servants and Other Civil Public Employees], Belgrade 1923.

In all states and systems that changed in the Serbian territory in the past two centuries the officers’ corps was a closed professional group, with great political leverage, which was also a very specific social group of “civil servants” in respect to its lifestyle, family relations and connections. The state took early care of education of military elite. In societies, such as in Serbia and Yugoslavia, the elite assumed a part of tasks that in other more developed societies were assigned to separate, professionally and socially distinct strata. Officers played many roles in politics, diplomacy, cultural life, and economy, including the role of the military in the social modernisation of the Serbian society. Sending the most talented young officers to foreign military academies was a part of a practice that contributed, on the eve of the Balkan Wars, to the Serbian army’s modernisation and capacity to fulfil ambitious national-political tasks. Among the officers in active service in 1912, 160 were educated outside of Serbia in 11 European countries, while 235 attended advanced professional training, spent internships at foreign academies or studied foreign languages.

Research of the social background of generals in Serbia and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia has shown that two out of three generals came from urban communities and that their fathers were mainly in civil service. The military profession, which typically ran through several generations of the same family, in the predominant peasant society in Serbia was a form of substitution for a non-existent “informal nobility”. This particularly refers to high-ranking officers originating from families of *vojvode* (war lords) from the early nineteenth-century uprisings (the Cincar-Markovićs, the Čolak-Antićs, the Dokićs, the Dimitrijevićs, the Uzun-Mirkovićs, etc.). In the officers’ corps of the Austro-Hungarian army, particularly among the lower- and middle-ranking officers, there were traditionally many officers of Serbian origin, mainly having completed lower-ranking cadet schools. Advancement toward higher and top ranks, reserved for the members of nobility, entailed for them many obstacles, including the requirement to convert from Orthodox Christianity into Catholicism (like in the case of Field Marshal Borojević).

Immediately after the end of war, the officers’ corps in socialist Yugoslavia, regardless of major ideological and other differences compared with the “old Yugoslavia”, in addition to most officers who were members of the wartime partisan command cadres, accepted into its ranks former officers and members of enemy formations at war (Independent State of Croatia's *Domobrani* (Home Guard), the Royalist Chetnik movement, German Wehrmacht, and the Italian and Bulgarian armies). When social background of the top Yugoslav Peoples' Army command cadre until 1980 is concerned, data indicate that there was a significant shift in the later period toward lower social classes and visible reduction of those who originated from middle-class families. Benefits afforded by free education in military schools – along with the coverage of all material costs for a cadet (accommodation, food, clothing, teaching aids), the attraction that this profession retained in rural communities, and the declining interest for "epaulets" among urban male population – caused changes in the social background of officers' cadre in the last decades of the existence of the Yugoslav state. In addition, regional differences and traditions caused uneven ethnic representation, despite the "national key" (Montenegrins, Serbs from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, lower participation of Serbs from Serbia, particularly from Vojvodina, same as Slovenes and national minorities).

Creation of a tight-knit network of family and in-law relations within this professional and social milieu, through several generations of marriages with young women originating from officer's families, made the generals' ranks in the period 1918–1941 a closed, extremely compact group, whose widespread influence "covered" a good part of the political scene, in addition to being well-connected with the business sector. Marriages of Serbian and Yugoslav royal officers, with their rigid conventions, were to some extent a part of the "planned elite creation". Social engineering included direct interference of the state in the professional segment of their life as well as interference in and supervision of their privacy, decisions on under what circumstances they can marry and whom they can marry, and an unstable residence with continuous movement. Territorial mobility, particularly after 1945, resulted, among other things, in a higher percentage of ethnically mixed marriages, which were concluded with less (at least visible) interference of military authorities, except in the case of top-ranking military commanders. This brought about more pronounced "Yugoslavianisation" of the officers' ranks, in line with the declared policy in the Communist Party and army.

Reputation enjoyed by the members of the military profession in the Yugoslav and Serbian societies did not always have an adequate reflection of their earnings. In addition to salary, there were special benefits (for family, movement, heating fuel) at different times. Nevertheless, the life of officers with families, particularly younger ones, who often moved from one garrison to another, where they lived in rented quarters, was far from the privileges enjoyed by colonels or generals. In the meagre reality of average Yugoslavs in the 1960s, these privileges, such as official cars, the opportunity to spend vacations in numerous exclusive tourist resorts, luxurious apartments and villas, access to exclusive stores where goods were sold at privileged prices, were another reflection of stratification within a declaratively egalitarian system.

As an important part of state-party nomenclature, high military representatives also had a fundamental role in other public segments of society, including in sports clubs and different social organisations, and were trusted pillars of Tito's personal power. Military personnel and members of their families were provided medical care in hospitals and clinics built specially for them, with the best medical staff and equipment; compared with the civilian part of society, military personnel enjoyed legal autonomy and were exempt from the authority of civil courts and law enforcement authorities.

In the post-war period, military professionals were a part of Yugoslav society, which, in addition to their special status, by their characteristics bore all the marks in many ways of the controversial process of accelerated *urbanisation-ruralisation* and modernisation, as the result of the predominant non-urban origin of those who chose this profession. Officers' corps in socialist Yugoslavia were often criticised for their ideological hard-line orthodoxy and as a (extremely expensive) conservative obstacle to faster development. On the other hand, with their education they, particularly those belonging to technical branches or medical corps, provided significant contribution to technological and professional progress of the society. Despite their specifics and the role in the Yugoslav state, this part of the power structure both in 1941 and during the 1990s has demonstrated all inherent weaknesses, splitting primarily at its "national seams".

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Dieser Essay bezieht sich auf folgende Quelle: Civil Servants in the Serbian and Yugoslav Social Context: Report by the Belgrade City Administration About Improper Conduct of Junior Civil Servants (1901) and Law on Civil Servants and Other Civil Public Employees of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia) (1923). In: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte (2013), URL: <http://www.europa.clio-online.de/2013/Article=624>.