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GETTING OUT FROM THE ISOLATION: SOVIET-YUGOSLAV MEETINGS IN PRAGUE, 1923–1925

**Kilépés az elszigeteltségből: Szovjet–jugoszláv találkozók
Prágában, 1923–1925**

**Izlazak iz izolacije: Sovjetsko-jugoslovenski susreti u Pragu,
1923–1925**

Based on the documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation and published materials, the author of the article examines the informal negotiations of Soviet representatives in the Czechoslovak Republic with Ambassador Ljuba Nešić and members of the Embassy of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS) in 1923–1925. The Soviet and Yugoslav diplomats exchanged information and discussed issues of recognizing the USSR and establishing official interstate relations. The Soviet side insisted on *de jure* recognition of the USSR, which Belgrade could not accept. King Aleksandar I Karađorđević and many prominent Yugoslav politicians did not intend to recognize the power of the Bolsheviks. The situation was aggravated by the activities of the Communist International and Moscow's open support for separatist movements in Yugoslavia, in particular, Stjepan Radić, the leader of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party (HRSS). Therefore, the Yugoslav diplomats in Prague primarily tried to make Moscow recognize the 'integrality' of the Kingdom of SCS and enlist its support in the confrontation with Italy, but at the same time they avoided any specific obligations.

Keywords: Soviet–Yugoslav relations, Georgy V. Chicherin, Konstantin K. Yurenev, Vladimir A. Antonov-Ovseenko, Roman O. Jakobson, Momčilo Ninčić, Ljuba Nešić, Stevo Kljuić

Introduction

The USSR and Yugoslavia did not have diplomatic relations until 1940, although the first attempts to establish contacts were made as early as in the 1920s. Various aspects of the formation of Soviet–Yugoslav relations have so far been studied by Russian, Yugoslav, and modern Serbian historiography: the policy of the Soviet state and the Communist International in South-Eastern Europe, the fate of Yugoslavs in Soviet Russia / the USSR and Russian emigrants in Yugoslavia, etc. (see Јовановић 1996; Kosik 2024; Lobacheva 2017; Zelenin 1977; etc.). Belgrade's policy on the issue of recognition of the Soviet state is examined in the monograph by B. Krizman (Krizman 1975, 68–78). The monograph by S.A. Romanenko pays considerable attention to the formation of Soviet–Yugoslav relations in the first decade after the formation of the Kingdom of SCS and to the analysis of domestic and foreign policy factors that influenced that process (Romanenko 2011, 142–153). The articles by V. Vinaver and A. Životić are devoted to the Soviet–Yugoslav negotiations on the establishment of diplomatic relations in the 1920s (Животић 2018; Životić 2023; Vinaver 1965). The authors focus on Belgrade's position on the 'Russian issue' and, accordingly, Moscow's policy towards Yugoslavia, the first contacts between Soviet and Yugoslav representatives, and the negotiations between the People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR Georgy V. Chicherin and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS) Momčilo Ninčić in Genoa and Lausanne in 1922. The negotiations between Yugoslav and Soviet diplomats in foreign countries have been studied to a lesser extent, although, at the suggestion of Belgrade, they were conducted mainly in Berlin, Prague, and other European capitals where both countries had missions (Životić 2023, 19).

The present article attempts to study the negotiation process between the members of the Plenipotentiary Representation of the USSR and the Embassy of the Kingdom of SCS in Prague in 1923–1925. It will help to complete the picture of the formation of Soviet–Yugoslav relations in one of the least studied periods of their history.

The official diaries and reports of the Soviet plenipotentiary representatives Konstantin K. Yurenev, Sergei S. Aleksandrovsky, and Vladimir A. Antonov-Ovseenko to the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID) of the USSR about meetings with Yugoslav diplomats in Prague and the instructions they received from Moscow constitute the source base of the article.

First contacts

The policy that the Kingdom of SCS pursued during the first years of its existence in relation to Soviet Russia was far from friendly. Neither Aleksandar Karađorđević, regent-heir to the throne and king from 1921, whose closest relatives became victims of the Bolshevik terror, nor many prominent political figures intended to recognize the Soviet government. In its turn, Moscow regarded the policy of the Kingdom as hostile (since the latter provided asylum to numerous emigrants from Russia, including the troops of General Pyotr Wrangel). Despite the fact that during conferences in Genoa and Lausanne in 1922, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the RSFSR Chicherin and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of SCS Ninčić agreed to exchange official delegations, Belgrade was in no hurry to implement those agreements. It was only in the summer of 1923 that Soviet diplomats noted the appearance of 'Sovietophile' publications in the Yugoslav press, which they explained by the deterioration of the international position of the Kingdom of SCS after the coup d'état in Bulgaria on 9 June 1923 and especially in connection with the high activity of Italy in South-Eastern Europe. At the end of August 1923, Italian troops occupied the island of Corfu and the Italian–Yugoslav relations worsened because of Fiume (Rijeka). There was information that Rome also supported S. Radić, the leader of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party, who defended the right of Croatia to self-determination and separation from the Kingdom of the SCS. His trip to London in July 1923 to enlist the support of Great Britain caused concern in the ruling circles of the Kingdom, which also did not exclude that the Soviet Union might also support Radić (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53954, l. 64, M.V. Levitsky to G. V. Chicherin, [Vienna], 25 August 1923). In connection with those events, Soviet diplomats considered it no coincidence that the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the USSR received information about the intentions of some Yugoslav politicians to enter into negotiations with Moscow.

On 10 September 1923, Chicherin informed K. Yurenev, the Soviet plenipotentiary representative in the Czechoslovak Republic, that Branko Lazarević, the envoy of the Kingdom of SCS in Prague, would soon enter into negotiations with him (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53960, l. 137, G.V. Chicherin to K. K. Yurenev, Moscow, 10 September 1923). Yurenev was sceptical about that information because Lazarević had left Prague and was not supposed to return, and L. Nešić was appointed the new envoy. Reporting that to the People's Commissar, Yurenev also pointed to the information from the Yugoslav newspaper *Obzor* as of 5 September, according to which Živojin Balugdžić, the new Yugoslav envoy in Berlin, was entrusted with conducting negotiations with

the Soviet side (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53954, l. 115. K. K. Yurenev to G. V. Chicherin, Prague, September 14, 1923).

While the correspondence between Chicherin and Yurenev was clarifying the question of who, where, and with whom negotiations would begin, Stevo Kljuić, the press attaché of the Yugoslav embassy, contacted the Soviet mission in Prague. On Yurenev's instructions, Roman O. Jakobson, head of the press department of the Soviet plenipotentiary mission, met him on September 21, 1923. Kljuić began the conversation by explaining Belgrade's policy towards the USSR. He explained the 'protracted nature of the preparatory steps for the negotiations' by the need for propaganda work among the Yugoslav public in order to overcome mistrust towards Soviet Russia and, in particular, 'to eliminate traces of the Wrangel propaganda.' Kljuić assured Jakobson that 'Wrangel's men no longer enjoyed great credit in the country.' But at the same time, as follows from the records of the conversation, the Yugoslav diplomat essentially placed the blame for Belgrade's anti-Soviet policy on them. Kljuić said that Wrangel followers were in close contact with the Serbian Orthodox Church and right-wing radicals, that they were trying to influence Nikola Pašić, the leader of the People's Radical Party and Chairman of the Government of the Kingdom of SCS, who occupied a somewhat unstable evasive position on the Russian issue.' Kljuić claimed that Pašić's role in shaping the Kingdom's foreign policy had weakened and that 'progressive and young radicals, who were gaining influence in the party, including Ninčić, were beginning to play an increasingly important role.' The Serbian Orthodox Church also had 'progressive figures,' Bishop Dositej (Vasić) being one of the main ones. According to Kljuić, it was him who became very active in inducing Yugoslavia to render aid to the starving people in Russia in 1922. The establishment of relations with the USSR was advocated by the left radicals, the left wing of the Democratic Party, and the Agrarian Party led by Jovan Jovanović Pižon. 'At present, the question of relations with Russia has been established on solid ground,' the Yugoslav diplomat assured Jakobson (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53954, ll. 134–135, K. K. Yurenev to G. V. Chicherin, Prague, 21 September 1923).

At that point Kljuić outlined the domestic and international situation of the Kingdom of SCS and suggested that 'Chicherin or any other prominent Soviet figure should emphasize in an interview, at least in passing, the fairness of the Yugoslav position on the issue of the Italo–Greek conflict or especially on the Fiume conflict' [emphasis in the original]. Kljuić insistently emphasised that this 'would greatly facilitate the establishment' of Soviet–Yugoslav relations (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53954, ll. 136–141, K. K. Yurenev to G. V. Chicherin, Prague, 21 September 1923).

At the same time, Kljuić proposed that even before the exchange of the relevant missions between Moscow and Belgrade, the Soviet mission in Prague should begin repatriation, i.e. allow several Russian intellectuals from the Kingdom of SCS to return to Russia and allow the Yugoslav citizens for whom Belgrade had already petitioned to leave for Yugoslavia. According to Kljuić, ‘that would make a good impression.’

The Yugoslav diplomat also noted the importance of propaganda in favour of Soviet Russia in the Yugoslav press in order to ‘provide ground for the restoration of normal Russian–Yugoslav relations.’ He expressed the wish that the Soviet mission in Prague supply the Yugoslav press with positive information about life in the USSR in recent times, especially in the spheres of culture and economy. Kljuić offered to translate those articles and reports himself and forward them to the Belgrade newspapers *Vreme* and *Tribuna* (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53954, ll. 140–141, K. K. Yurenev to G. V. Chicherin, Prague, 21 September 1923).

Informing the NKID about the conversation of Jakobson and Kljuić on 21 September 1923, Yurenev noted that the latter clearly downplayed the role of Wrangel followers and Pašić. At the same time, Yurenev believed that Kljuić’s proposals deserved attention and should be accepted, except for ‘the solidarisation of the Sov[iet] gov[ernment] with Yugoslavia – “especially in the Fiume issue”, which should ‘remain a voice crying in the wilderness’ in the opinion of the Soviet diplomat (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53954, l. 141, K. K. Yurenev to G. V. Chicherin, Prague, 21 September 1923). Moscow could not burden its relations with Italy with Yugoslav problems because Soviet–Italian negotiations on a new treaty during which Moscow sought *de jure* recognition of the USSR had begun in Rome in September 1923 (See Sevost’ianov, ed., 2002: 77–98, Doc. 26–34).

On September 22, 1923, Kljuić visited the Soviet mission and had a meeting with Yurenev, who pointed out to the Yugoslav diplomat ‘the somewhat frivolous way in which the Serbian press raised the question of relations with Russia; the strange “periodicity” in the discussions on this issue in the press.’ Kljuić explained that ‘such unevenness in relation to Russia was the result of a strong group struggle behind the scenes of the Yugoslav government’ (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, l. 12, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 22 September 1923).

Yurenev’s remark apparently became the reason for a discussion between Kljuić and Jakobson on the issue of mutual information in the press, during which the Yugoslav diplomat casually defined the priorities for each side, emphasizing that it was important to inform the Soviet press ‘properly about the relationship between Belgrade and Radić,’ i.e. to support the king and the government in the conflict with the leader of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party. In the

opinion of the Yugoslav diplomat, the press in the Kingdom of SCS should be informed about foreign trade and financial situation in the USSR, its cultural policy, condition of schools, etc. (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53955, l. 17, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 3 October 1923).

Kljuić informed the Yugoslav envoy to the Czechoslovak Republic Lazarević, who was in Belgrade at the time, temporary chargé d'affaires Berić, who stayed in Prague in his stead, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ninčić about his conversations with the Soviet diplomats. According to Kljuić, Ninčić and Lazarević approved of his steps. Moreover, the minister sent Berić a detailed telegram, in which he recommended to immediately come into 'direct contact with Yurenev and begin preliminary negotiations in Prague on establishing relations [between the Kingdom of] SCS and Russia and on a treaty' (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53955, l. 15, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 3 October 1923).

On 3 October, Berić had a meeting with Yurenev and had a lengthy conversation with him, which he asked to keep secret not only from the press but also from the friendly Czechoslovak government. At the beginning of the conversation, he 'very thoroughly proved' to Yurenev the inherent Russophilia of the Yugoslavs, assuring him that they loved all Russians, regardless of who they were, Bolsheviks or Wrangel followers. Berić asked to consider the meeting with the head of the Soviet mission as a 'private' one, but emphasized that it was approved by his government. He asked Yurenev how the Soviet side saw the relations between the Kingdom of SCS and the USSR. Yurenev 'privately' answered Berić that striving for peaceful coexistence and cooperation with all peoples, the Soviet side was ready to establish 'completely normal [bilateral] relations.' From the record of the conversation, it follows that Berić was interested in the question of the relations between the Communist International and the Soviet government. Yurenev assured him that 'the rumours spread by the enemies that the government of the USSR was an agent of the Communist International were absurd and provocative and that the future mission of the USSR in Yugoslavia would be certain to present no danger to the social and political regime of the latter' (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53955, ll. 2–3, K. K. Yurenev to G. V. Chicherin, 21 September 1923).

Yurenev was under the impression that, as the Kingdom of SCS began to pursue the establishment of relations with Moscow, a group of Yugoslav diplomats (Berić, Nešić, and Lazarević), motivated by personal gain and career ambitions, launched a campaign in Belgrade to have the negotiations between Yugoslavia and the USSR conducted in Prague. They were in a hurry to get ahead of envoy to Germany Balugdžić, who was planning Yugoslav–Soviet

negotiations in Berlin. 'Nešić and Lazarević are apparently in a hurry and want to strengthen their positions,' Yurenev wrote to Chicherin. 'For us it makes no difference at all; perhaps, Prague is even more preferable than Berlin. Since the negotiations will be held in Prague, no matter how they end, some cooling between Czechoslovakia–Yugoslavia on the one hand and Romania–Poland on the other is inevitable' (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53955, f. 3, K. K. Yurenev to G. V. Chicherin, 21 September 1923).

As Kljuić informed Jakobson on 9 October, Berić was favourably impressed by the conversation with Yurenev. Kljuić looked at the future Soviet–Yugoslav negotiations with great optimism. He assured Jakobson that 'things would go smoothly' and had no doubt that the clauses of the Soviet–Yugoslav treaty concerning economic relations would not cause any difficulties. The losses suffered by Yugoslav citizens in Russia were comparatively small. They did not exceed 5 million francs and, as Kljuić assumed, it would not be difficult to agree on them, especially since Yugoslavia did not cause Russia the same material damage as, for example, the Czech legionnaires did. He hoped that the clause on 'non-interference of the Soviet government and its eventual representation in Belgrade in the internal affairs of Yugoslavia' would not cause difficulties either. The Yugoslav diplomat attached great importance to the fact that Moscow had taken a decidedly hostile position towards the government of Aleksandar Tsankov who came to power in Bulgaria on 9 June 1923 as a result of a coup d'état (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, l. 46, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 9 October 1923).

The success of the Yugoslav–Soviet negotiations was also expected to be facilitated by the appointment of Lazarević head of the political section of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of SCS. Kljuić assumed that when Lazarević arrived in Prague to hand over affairs to new envoy Ljuba Nešić, he would meet Yurenev, and thus the Soviet plenipotentiary would come into direct official contact with the Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, l. 47, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 9 October 1923).

Kljuić did not exclude that the Soviet–Yugoslav treaty could soon be initialled. In the first half of November, Kljuić intended to go to Belgrade and organise a 'strong campaign' there in favour of rapprochement with the USSR. He considered it extremely important that complete unity be ensured in the consideration of the 'Russian issue' in the Skupština (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, ll. 47–48, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 9 October 1923).

After those encouraging assurances from the Yugoslav side, there was a standstill. On 30 October, Lazarević and Nešić arrived in Prague. Nevertheless,

they were in no hurry to meet Yurenev. Having handed over the affairs to the new envoy, Lazarević left Prague a few days later. The silence was broken on 27 November. Kljuić called Jakobson and asked for an urgent meeting to arrange Jakobson's visit to Nešić (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, l. 147, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 27 November 1923).

During the meeting, Kljuić informed Jakobson that 'the Russian issue in Belgrade had suddenly made great progress.' Since Soviet diplomats constantly emphasized that the Yugoslav government's support for Russian émigrés was a serious obstacle to the development of relations with the Kingdom of SCS, Kljuić repeatedly raised this issue during the conversation. He tried to convince Jakobson that, unlike Czechoslovakia, Belgrade was not courting the émigrés, did not maintain close ties with them, and did not provide them with significant support. He added that "Lazarević had begun a cunning and skilful campaign against the émigrés in the press and in political circles, accusing them of disloyalty to Yugoslavia and of interference in the country's internal affairs." Kljuić assured that the position of Vasily N. Shtrandtman (who stayed in Belgrade and was envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary of Russia, appointed to that post in 1919 by Admiral A. V. Kolchak) 'had been greatly shaken.' Ninčić needed some success in foreign policy to restore his position, which had been shaken by a series of recent failures, and he was interested in the majority of the Skupština party clubs passing a resolution in favour of rapprochement with the USSR. That would create the impression that the Skupština majority was thus exerting 'pressure' on Ninčić. Kljuić assured Jakobson that the Soviet–Yugoslav treaty was a matter of the near future and that he 'was counting on going to Moscow as an employee of the future mission.' According to Kljuić, in addition to the mission in Moscow, Yugoslavia would need repatriation facilities in Kyiv and Odessa (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, ll. 149–150, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 27 November 1923).

On 28 November, Jacobson visited Nešić. The envoy began the conversation with an extensive declaration that despite Yugoslavia and the USSR being ideologically far apart, Belgrade did not interfere in Russia's internal affairs and reckoned 'with the real Russian government.' According to him, lately, especially in recent days, there had been serious changes in the attitude of the Yugoslav government and the public toward the USSR. Sentiments had changed significantly in favour of establishing contacts with the USSR. It was not about trade relations (since Yugoslavia could not have much trade with the USSR), not about politics, but 'about the moral necessity for Serbia to be close to Russia.' Nešić declared that 'the prerequisite for the relations was mutual non-interference in internal affairs.' He emphasized that Yugoslavia did not and would not support

any émigré organizations that aimed at fighting the current regime in Russia, but material assistance to needy émigrés would continue. Ninčić authorized Nešić to establish contact with the Soviet representative before leaving for Prague, and he would be happy to do so in the near future (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, ll. 151–152, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 28 November 1923).

Negotiations between L. Nešić and K. Yurenev

On 3 December 1923, the Yugoslav envoy paid a long-awaited visit to the Soviet plenipotentiary. He immediately informed Yurenev that he had been authorized by Minister Ninčić to establish contact with him and ‘maintain friendship’ and that as an ‘old and great friend of Russia’ he had taken on this mission ‘with great pleasure.’ At the same time, Nešić was forced to report that he did not have the authority to conduct official negotiations. He claimed that the main obstacle to establishing ‘contractual relations’ between the Kingdom of SCS and the USSR was ‘the aged Pašić.’ Therefore, supporters of rapprochement with the USSR had to take that into account and ‘conduct their work systematically, without leaps and without a sharp break with Pašić if possible.’

Yurenev responded that the agreement between the Kingdom of SCS and the USSR met the interests of both states, and that the Soviet side put no pressure on the Yugoslav government in any way, but the Yugoslavs themselves were obviously interested in accelerating the negotiations. Nešić essentially confirmed the words of his Soviet colleague. Having announced his upcoming trip to Belgrade in the first days of January at the end of the conversation, he assured that upon returning to Prague in the second half of January, he would bring in his pocket a mandate to conduct official negotiations. Nešić hoped that ‘with joint efforts, Beneš and Ninčić would overcome old courtier Pašić’ at the conference of foreign ministers of the Little Entente states in Belgrade (Zelenin, Cvetkovic 1992, 152–153. Doc. 112).

On the following day, 4 December, Kljuić met with Jakobson and reported that ‘Nešić had an extremely favourable impression of Yurenev and immediately wrote an official report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a personal letter to Pašić about the conversation with him.’ Kljuić assured that ‘both internal and external conditions in Yugoslavia’ were developing favourably for rapprochement with Soviet Russia (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, l. 161, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 4 December 1923). A week later, Kljuić informed Jakobson that ‘the opportunities for broad information about Russia in the Yugoslav press were now extremely great.’ He himself volunteered

to contribute articles and communications about the USSR to five newspapers: the Belgrade *Tribuna*, *Vreme* (Serbian: Time), and *Politika*, the Zagreb *Riječ* (Croatian: Word) and the Ljubljana *Jutro* (Slovene: Morning) (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 276, d. 53959, l. 171, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 11 December 1923).

The Belgrade Conference of Foreign Ministers of the Little Entente, about which Nešić spoke to Yurenev, took place on 11–12 January 1924, but there was no progress on the ‘Russian issue.’ Czechoslovak envoy to the Kingdom of SCS Jan Šeba considered the interview of the Yugoslav envoy to Paris Miroslav Spalajković, published in the government newspaper *Samouprava* (Self-Government) on the eve of the conference opening, to be one of the reasons for the allies’ delay in making the decision on the recognition of the USSR. Spalajković’s interview, in which he resolutely opposed rapprochement with Moscow, could not remain without consequences, taking into account his close ties with the royal court and the government (Šeba 2016, 191–192; Бажин 2021, 224–225). Moreover, according to Šeba, the content of the interview had been agreed upon by Spalajković and Prime Minister Pašić the day before (Šeba 2016, 191–192).

Visiting the Soviet mission on 27 February 1924, Nešić, did not hide the fact that Spalajković’s interview ‘caused great awkwardness,’ was discussed at a meeting of the government of the Kingdom of SCS, and three ministers even ‘solidarized with Spalajković.’ Despite everything, Yugoslav envoy assured Yurenev that the Belgrade Conference was a step forward, ‘The need to recognize Russia was stated, only the deadline was not set’ (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 278, d. 53971, l. 94, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 27 February 1924). Nešić convinced the plenipotentiary that the situation in Yugoslavia was extremely favourable for establishing relations with the USSR. According to Nešić, there were no issues dividing Yugoslavia and the USSR. ‘There are no complex economic problems, no mutual reparation claims, and it can be said categorically that within two – at the latest, three – months, the Russian issue will be resolved for [the Kingdom of] SCS and [the Kingdom of] SCS will have an ambassador in Moscow,’ the Yugoslav diplomat assured. ‘[The Kingdom of] SCS does not want any intermediate stages. No *de facto* recognition. Insofar as it enters into relations, these will be normal diplomatic relations, which presuppose *de jure* recognition.’ Nešić emphasized that it was the firm position of the Yugoslav government. At the same time, he did not hide the fact that ‘Pašić showed some hesitation, especially under the influence of two or three émigré figures who exerted pressure on him’ (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 278, d. 53971, l. 95, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 27 November 1923).

At the beginning of April 1924, Kljuić informed Jakobson that in about a month he would make an official trip to Moscow for the purpose of organizing a representation of the Kingdom of SCS there and handing over an official letter from Ninčić to Chicherin. The new Soviet plenipotentiary representative in Prague S. Aleksandrovsky was sceptical of that information. On 9 April he wrote in his diary: ‘This bears little resemblance to the truth. In general, the Yugoslav embassy is not taking any serious steps to get closer to us, and the situation inside Yugoslavia does not yet allow us to seriously count on any change in the attitude toward us. I have a fairly strong impression that the Yugoslav embassy maintains contact with us and sometimes tries to announce it almost exclusively for the purpose of blackmailing the Czechs, and now the Romanians, with “good relations” with us’ (Grishina 2000, 253. Doc. 146).

It is not known what direction Belgrade’s diplomatic game would have taken if the international activity of the leader of the Croatian Republican Peasant Party Radić had not spoiled the game. After unsuccessful negotiations in London, where he failed to gain support in resolving the Croatian issue, Radić arrived in Moscow and announced the entry of his party into the Peasant International on June 27, 1924 (Grishina 2003, 32–33. Doc. 17; Lampe 2000, 143–144).

The Dilemma of Soviet Diplomacy

The People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the USSR faced a dilemma whether to continue negotiations with representatives of the Kingdom of SCS or to bet on Radić. In a conversation with the new plenipotentiary representative of the USSR in the Czechoslovak Republic V.A. Antonov-Ovseenko, Deputy People’s Commissar Maxim M. Litvinov noted that in his opinion, ‘the fuss with Radić’ had incurred damage by complicating an agreement with Yugoslavia. People’s Commissar Chicherin held the opposite point of view, believing that Pašić’s government got frightened of their connections with Radić and become more accommodating (Grishina 2003, 90. Doc. 41). On 23 July, Chicherin wrote to Antonov-Ovseenko in Prague about the ‘colossal historical importance’ of Radić’s party joining the Peasant International. According to Chicherin, in the person of Radić ‘we had acquired a colossal plus not only for the revolutionary movement but also for our diplomacy in the Balkans’ (Grishina 2003, 104. Doc. 48). The People’s Commissar developed that idea in another letter to Antonov-Ovseenko dated 3 August. The reason for that was the resignation of the Pašić government and the coalition cabinet of Ljubomir Davidović (in which four portfolios were given to Radić’s party) coming to power on 27 July 1924. ‘The turn that has taken place in Yugoslav politics is of the greatest importance

for the development of Balkan affairs. The consequences of Radić's arrival in Moscow have exceeded all our expectations,' wrote Chicherin to Prague. '[...] Radić openly puts forward the Balkan federation and workers' and peasants' government as his slogan. His connections with other elements of Balkan politics are such that all this will have the greatest resonance in the entire development of political events in the Balkans' (Grishina 2003, 120. Doc. 62). In September 1924, Moscow considered the question of appointing a resident in Zagreb. The lack of a suitable candidate hampered the matter (Grishina 2003, 181. Doc. 101).

At the same time, the Soviet mission in Prague maintained constant contacts with the Yugoslav embassy. On 4 October, Jakobson met with Kljuić, who reported that 'total chaos reigned' in the government circles of Yugoslavia. Kljuić described the state of public life in the Kingdom of SCS as 'the struggle between Radić and the king.' In his opinion, it would not be possible to reach an agreement with Radić, and 'the government would collapse' (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, ll. 2–3, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 4 October 1924). On 6 November 1924, the Davidović cabinet fell. The new government was headed by Pašić, and the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs was again occupied by Ninčić, who, according to Kljuić, 'fixed his eyes on Russia.' 'Ninčić will now definitely pursue a policy of recognition,' the Yugoslav diplomat declared to Jakobson on 14 November, adding that the new minister had already given the corresponding instructions to Nešić, and in the very near future he would visit Antonov-Ovseenko (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, l. 67, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 14 November 1924).

Indeed, that same day Nešić telephoned the Soviet plenipotentiary and arranged a meeting for the following day to make 'responsible statements.' Nešić began his conversation with Antonov-Ovseenko by assuring that no Yugoslav government 'would ever take a single hostile step towards Russia.' He expressed hope that his 'private and personal' relations with the Soviet mission, which he had received permission from Ninčić to resume, 'would soon become legally formalized.' His government hoped that the USSR 'would meet them (the Yugoslav government. – N.S.) halfway, recognise the integrity of Yugoslavia, and would not create any internal difficulties for them.' The Yugoslav envoy emphasized that 'the Croats were not a special nation,' and 'Radić himself did not know what he wanted; he was not a serious person.' In order to obtain 'truly objective information,' Nešić proposed sending Jakobson to Yugoslavia (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, ll. 70–72, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 14 November 1924).

A few days later, the Yugoslav embassy repeated its proposal to send Jakobson to Yugoslavia, emphasizing that the invitation came from the Minister of Foreign

Affairs and that Jakobson would be received by Pašić, Ninčić, and other prominent politicians. If Jakobson's trip was impossible, it was proposed to send another person with a similar purpose (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, ll. 76–77, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 19 November 1924).

Antonov-Ovseenko informed Moscow about the proposals of the Yugoslav side, emphasizing that the question of relations with the USSR played a significant role in the internal struggle in Yugoslavia: 'We are promised "recognition" as payment for renouncing Radić. But the peasantry of Croatia (and not only Croatia) is behind Radić' (Grishina 2003, 260. Doc. 130. Note 1).

In his reply letter, Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Litvinov noted: 'We are interested in the recognition of Yugoslavia no less, if not more, than Czechoslovakia and other countries. We would very much like to establish a firm foothold in the Balkans and establish legal relations. [...] everything that can speed up and facilitate the restoration of diplomatic relations must be done by us.' Nevertheless, at the same time, he emphasized: 'If Pašić thinks that he can buy our break with Radić at the price of recognition, he is probably mistaken because we will not agree to any conditions for recognition, and therefore we will not take on obligations regarding our future relations with Radić and his party.' Litvinov considered preliminary negotiations with Yugoslavia at that time to be unnecessary and was against sending to the country a Soviet informant, who could be used either for the purpose of initiating unofficial negotiations or for 'misleading public opinion and instilling in it the idea of relaxed relations with the USSR' (Grishina 2003, 260. Doc. 130).

Litvinov was obviously right: Belgrade was not ready to recognize the USSR at that time. Talking to German Envoy to Yugoslavia, Franz Olshausen on 10 November 1924, Ninčić openly stated that 'the question of recognition in practice should be postponed, since due to Radić's chatter and coquetry with Moscow, the elements that oppose recognition are significantly strengthened.' (Avramovski 2020, 236)

Indeed, at the end of 1924 there were anti-Soviet attacks in the Yugoslav press and a far from friendly statement of the Pašić government, which Kljuić initially tried to explain 'exclusively by the considerations of domestic politics and election campaigning' in connection with the upcoming elections to the Skupština: 'Pašić needs to weaken Radić's chances as much as possible, and the decision of his cabinet is intended to compromise Radić rather than the USSR in the eyes of voters' (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, l. 99, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 28 November 1924). But during the conversation with Jakobson on 17 December, Kljuić no longer concealed

the fact that the attitude towards the Soviet Union in Yugoslavia had become 'considerably worse' and 'Ninčić had recently taken a sharply aggressive position on the question of the USSR' (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, l. 127, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 17 December 1924). Belgrade accused Moscow of hostile activity against the Kingdom of SCS and of active support for the Kosovo Committee in Albania and for Macedonian and Thracian organizations conducting subversive work against Yugoslavia (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, ll. 127–128, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 17 December 1924).

Kljuić blamed Czechoslovakia for the deterioration of relations between the Kingdom of SCS and the USSR, presenting Czechoslovakia as the culprit. In 'strict secrecy,' Kljuić informed Jakobson about the 'ambiguous policy' of the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš, who spoke of his desire to improve relations with the USSR, while his department and the head of secret police Jan Hajšman constantly supplied Nešić 'without any request from him' with secret information about the aggressiveness of Moscow, the danger of the Comintern, etc. (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, ll. 127–128, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 17 December 1924).

Antonov-Ovseenko was very sceptical about Kljuić's information. He considered the talks of a worsening attitude towards the USSR an election gimmick by Pašić and justification for repression; the plenipotentiary considered the repeated emphases on the fact that anti-Soviet information was coming exclusively from Czechoslovak sources to be a 'clumsy' attempt to complicate an agreement between the USSR and the Czechoslovak Republic (AVPRF, f. 0138, op. 5, p. 103a, d. 12, l. 129, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 17 December 1924).

Meanwhile, important changes had taken place in the political arena in Yugoslavia. On 23 December 1924, the Law on the Protection of the State was applied against the HRSS, which had joined the Peasant International; the party was dissolved, and Radić and his associates were arrested. The hopes that the Soviet government placed on the leader of the HRSS did not come true. In prison, Radić agreed that a statement be made on his behalf recognizing the Vidovdan Constitution of 1921 and the royal dynasty of Karađorđević, and promised to leave the Peasant International (see Petranović–Zečević 1988, 221–224). His party was no longer called republican and soon entered a coalition with the Radical Party. On 18 July 1925, Pašić headed a new coalition government consisting of Radicals and representatives of the Croatian Peasant Party. Radić entered the government of Pašić as the minister of education in November 1925 (Calic 2019, 83; Lampe 2000, 139; Nikiforov, ed. 2011, 252).

Resumption and Breakdown of Soviet–Yugoslav Negotiations

Negotiations on establishing diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of SCS and the USSR resumed in Prague in the autumn of 1925, this time encouraged by Beneš. The reason for this was the 1925 Locarno Treaties, which strengthened Germany's position in Europe while weakening that of France and its Eastern European allies. In a conversation with Jakobson on 6 November 1925, Kljuić noted Beneš's 'intensive activity' in favour of recognizing the USSR and the pressure he was exerting on Ninčić. In contrast, in 1923 Beneš had significantly slowed down the movement for recognizing the USSR that had begun in the Kingdom of SCS. (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 279, d. 53986, ll. 32–33, Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 6 November 1925). According to Kljuić, Ninčić was keenly interested in the situation in the USSR and demanded that he be provided with detailed materials on Czech–Soviet political and trade relations, the sentiments of individual Czech groups on the 'Russian issue,' their attitude toward Russian emigrants, etc. Clearly, Ninčić would hardly want to 'lag behind' Czechoslovakia in the matter of recognising the USSR (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 279, dos. 53986, l. 33. Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 6 November 1925).

On 23 December 1925, Kljuić informed Jakobson that Nešić had arrived in Prague from Belgrade with the 'categorical news' that Yugoslavia would recognize the USSR in January or February 1926. Beneš allegedly told Nešić that Czechoslovakia would recognize the USSR in January and that on the part of the Czechoslovak Republic and the Kingdom of SCS, this issue should be resolved before the upcoming conference of the Little Entente in March. This would present Romania with a *fait accompli* and, accordingly, simplify matters (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 279, dos. 53986, ll. 114–115. Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 23 December 1925). On the same day, 23 December, Nešić visited Antonov-Ovseenko and effectively confirmed Kljuić's information, referring to a conversation he had had with Beneš on 22 December. The Czechoslovak minister officially stated that 'normal diplomatic relations with the USSR would be established as early as January.' 'We shall not be far behind the Czechoslovak Republic,' Nešić added. In his view, the Yugoslav envoy to Berlin had apparently already begun negotiations with the Soviet plenipotentiary. It was planned that Balugdžić would go to Moscow as the representative, although it was also possible that Nešić himself would be sent. (AVPRF, f. 04, op. 43, p. 279, d. 53986, ll. 121–122. Diary of the USSR Plenipotentiary in Czechoslovakia. Prague, 23 December 1925). In early January of 1926, Yugoslavia asked Turkey to mediate in the settlement of relations with

the USSR (*Жубомућ* A. 2018 316–317). However, the matter never reached the point of Soviet–Yugoslav negotiations at that time.

On 30 January 1926, Chicherin wrote to Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Comintern Grigory Ye. Zinoviev: ‘We came extremely close to restoring diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia. It was at this moment that a conspiracy or imaginary conspiracy of communists in Belgrade was exposed.’ According to various sources, the purpose of the conspiracy was to form communist cells based on a directive from Moscow and to assassinate the royal family and prominent members of the government. In connection with the exposure of the conspiracy, the Belgrade newspaper *Politički glasnik* (Serbian: Political Herald) wrote that the issue of resuming diplomatic relations with the USSR was removed from the agenda for a long time (Grishina 2003, 576–577, Doc. 283).

Conclusion

Despite the outcome of the negotiations, contacts between the Soviet mission and the Yugoslav embassy in Prague during 1923–1925 were of great importance for the USSR. Through regular meetings, Soviet diplomats obtained information about domestic political developments in the Kingdom of SCS, its relations with other countries (primarily with its allies in the Little Entente, its neighbours on the Balkan Peninsula, and the great powers), and also had the opportunity to provide materials about the USSR for publication in the Yugoslav press in a light favourable to the Soviet side. By establishing permanent contacts with Yugoslav diplomats, Soviet representatives sought to influence the recognition of the USSR by the Kingdom of SCS and the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two states. The success of these negotiations was hindered by the inconsistency of both Soviet and Yugoslav diplomacy, the activities of the Comintern, and Moscow’s support for separatist movements on the one hand, and by the influence of anti-Soviet forces within the Kingdom on official Belgrade on the other. As a result, diplomatic relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia were not established until a decade and a half later.

Abbreviations

AVPRF – Arhiv vneshnej politiki Rossijskoj Federacii [Archives of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation], Moscow

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Nikolay N. STANKOV

IZLAZAK IZ ISOLACIJE: SOVJETSKO-JUGOSLOVENSKI SUSRETI U PRAGU, 1923–1925

Na osnovu dokumenata iz Arhiva spoljnih poslova Ruske Federacije i objavljenih izvora, autor studije ispituje neformalne pregovore predstavnika Sovjetskog Saveza sa ambasadorom u Čehoslovačkoj Republici Ljubom Nešićem i članovima Ambasade Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca (SHS) u Pragu između 1923. i 1925. godine. Sovjetski i jugoslovenski diplomati razmenjivali su informacije i razgovarali o pitanjima priznavanja Sovjetskog Saveza i uspostavljanja zvaničnih međudržavnih odnosa. Sovjetska strana je insistirala na *de jure* priznanju Sovjetskog Saveza, što Beograd nije mogao prihvatiti. Kralj Aleksandar I i niz istaknutih jugoslovenskih političara odbili su da priznaju boljševičku vlast. Situaciju su dodatno pogoršavale aktivnosti Komunističke internacionale i otvorena podrška Moskve separatističkim pokretima unutar Jugoslavije, posebno u slučaju Stjepana Radića, prvaka Hrvatske republikanske seljačke stranke (HRSS). Jugoslovenski diplomati u Pragu su stoga prvenstveno nastojali da Moskva prizna „integritet“ Kraljevine Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca i da ih podrži u njihovom protivljenju Italiji, izbegavajući pritom prihvatanje bilo kakvih obaveza. *Gljučne reči:* sovjetsko-jugoslovenski odnosi, Georgij V. Čičerin, Konstantin K. Jurenjev, Vladimir A. Antonov-Ovsejenko, Roman O. Jakobson, Momčilo Ninčić, Ljuba Nešić, Stevo Kljuić

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KILÉPÉS AZ ELSZIGETELTSÉGBŐL: SZOVJET-JUGOSZLÁV TALÁLKOZÓK PRÁGÁBAN, 1923–1925

Az Orosz Föderáció Külügyi Levéltárának dokumentumai és a megjelent források alapján a tanulmány szerzője a Szovjetunió képviselőinek informális tárgyalásait vizsgálja, amelyeket a Csehszlovák Köztársaságban Ljuba Nešić nagykövettel és a Szerb–Horvát–Szlovén Királyság (SZHSZ) prágai nagykövetségének tagjaival folytattak 1923 és 1925 között. A szovjet és a jugoszláv diplomaták információt cseréltek, valamint megvitatták a Szovjetunió elismerésének és a hivatalos államközi kapcsolatok kialakításának kérdéseit. A szovjet fél a Szovjetunió *de jure* elismeréséhez ragaszkodott, amit Belgrád nem tudott elfogadni. I. Sándor király és számos kiemelkedő jugoszláv politikus nem volt hajlandó elismerni a bolsevik hatalmat. A helyzetet tovább súlyosbította a Kommunista Internacionálé tevékenysége és Moszkva nyílt támogatása a Jugoszlávián belüli szeparatista mozgalmak iránt, különösen Stjepan Radić, a Horvát Republikánus Parasztpárt (HRSS) vezetője esetében. A jugoszláv diplomaták ezért Prágában elsősorban arra törekedtek, hogy Moszkva ismerje el a Szerb–Horvát–Szlovén Királyság „integritását”, és támogassa őket az Olaszországgal való szembenállásban, ugyanakkor elkerültek bármilyen konkrét kötelezettségvállalást.

Kulcsszavak: szovjet–jugoszláv kapcsolatok, Georgij V. Csicserin, Konsztantyin K. Jurenjev, Vlagyimir A. Antonov-Ovszejenko, Roman O. Jakobson, Momčilo Ninčić, Ljuba Nešić, Stevo Kljuić