

# THE SERBO-CROAT AGREEMENT: DIFFICULTIES AND DELAY

BY

EMIL PROKOPY

The *Tsvetkovitch* Government, which was formed after the unexpected fall of the *Stoyadinovitch* Cabinet, took office, as is well known, with the express purpose of solving at long last the Croat problem, which has existed for twenty years and has been growing steadily more acute.

After the formation of the new Government, the Croat question was naturally much discussed both in the *Skupsh-tina* and during the debate on the Budget in the Senate. Its speedy solution was considered an imperative necessity by all the Parliamentary Parties without exception, and the basis of the agreement was to have been an acknowledgement of the historical past of the Croats and recognition of their separate national individuality, principles hitherto considered inadmissible by the Yugoslav Parliament.

This very important change of front was undoubtedly due to *certain events in international politics*. This is strikingly evident from the fact that the War Budget was approved without debate in the *Skupshtina*, and from the attitude of the Senate, which on 23rd March, after a debate lasting barely two whole days, approved the 1939/1940 Budget with all the supplementary Government Bills, and did so, according to the preamble to a motion submitted by the Government Party, on the one hand because of the dangerous state of international affairs, and, on the other, to hasten a reasonable solution of Yugoslavia's grave domestic problems.

The extreme gravity of the international situation exerted a decisive influence also on the negotiations that took place between Premier *Tsvetkovitch* and M. *Maček* between April 2 and 27, when the former visited Zagreb no

fewer than four times. According to a curtly worded communiqué issued on 27th April, an agreement "to be made public within the shortest time possible" had been arrived at. The *pourparlers* had been conducted in a spirit of reciprocal understanding and amenableness, which on M. Maček's part was particularly surprising, for hitherto he had always declared that federation and the solution of the Croat question in terms of the agreement concluded with the Serb Opposition were the minimum demands of the Croat folk. That Maček made great and important concessions during these conversations and that the willingness to do so had matured in him long before it came to the point of negotiations, may be established from articles in the Croat Press supporting him. The "Obzor" of 25th February, for instance, wrote: — "Although Maček has not rejected the methods of procedure stipulated in the agreement concluded between the Democratic Farmers Coalition and the United Serb Opposition on 8th October 1937, he has come to understand that the solution of the Croat problem might be achieved by other ways and means. The new relations between the Croats and the Serbs and Slovenes would have to be arranged with due respect for the individuality of the three nations and on the basis of a proportionate share for each of them in the central administration of the State." Here there is no word of the realization at any price of the political and constitutional demands of the Croats which had praisably been the pivotal question; it is in fact an open admission of readiness to make new, less hard terms. Writing of the upshot of the negotiations, Maček's newspaper, the "Hrvatski Dnevnik" of 28th April gives the following evasive explanation: — "It is certain that the agreement now concluded applies only to the methods of solving the Croat question. It is true that Maček resolutely stood up for the interests of the Croat people, but as the rights of the Croats do not preclude the rights of the Serbs, all who really desire an agreement must recognize the rights of both. Today the international situation is such as to make it imperative that

further shilly-shallying over the Croat question shall cease."

All kinds of rumours concerning the agreement were spread in the international Press. All, however, that could definitely be established from reports appearing in the "Hrvatski Dnevnik" of Zagreb and the "Vreme" of Belgrade between 16th and 19th April was that Tsvetkovitch's and Maček's conversations and their proposals were all *in conformity with the present Constitution*, that is to say with the dictatorship forced on the country on 3rd September 1931. This then means that Maček no longer insists on one of the cardinal points of his programme as the basis of a Serbo-Croat agreement, on his chief demand: the immediate repeal of the present Constitution, the promulgation of a temporary fundamental law and its enforcement by decree, and the convocation in terms thereof of a national assembly to draft a new Constitution. Maček's failure to insist on this means an open breach with the United Opposition and a denial of his agreement with them. It also means the renunciation, for the present at least, of the greater part of the Croat constitutional demands.

It cannot be questioned that it was with no light heart, but only *in view of the international situation and especially under the influence of the events in Albania in April last* that Maček decided to take this step, the consequences of which cannot be predicted yet. How this step is regarded, — not by the Serb Parties, which one and all are surely congratulating themselves on the cheap bargain they made in the political market, — but by certain Croat circles, may be gathered from a few quotation from the April 29th issue of the "Nezavisna Hrvatski Drzava" (The Independent Croat State), the newspaper of the one million Croats in America. "It would seem that Maček has given in to his rotten environment and is ready to betray the Croat people... He (Maček) has broken his promise and betrayed the Croats. The Croats are firmly united and knowing the Serbs, do not believe that an agreement will be concluded... The report of Maček's disgraceful capitulation has given rise to a ter-

rible reaction all over Croatia..." It is quite certain that these passionate outbursts mirror the opinions and sentiments, not only of the Croats in America, but also of a large majority of those at home.

Something, however, went wrong with the agreement concluded at the price of surrendered principles, for the Council of Regency — because, it is said, of the objections and the strong opposition of the General Staff and the leaders of the Orthodox Greek Church — refused to approve and ratify it, whereupon Maček sent a member of his Party, Dr. Subasić, to Belgrade to clear up the situation and remove the obstacles. When Dr. Subasić failed in this mission, Maček, on 8th May, called a meeting of the Croat "Representative Body" consisting of the 47 members of Parliament and a few senators elected on his general list at the Parliamentary elections on 11th December, and a resolution was passed stating that they were fully satisfied with their president, Maček's work and methods, and empowering him to act on their behalf as he judged best in view of the attitude displayed by the Serbs and the general European situation and to take such steps in the fields of internal and foreign politics as were necessary in the present situation. They assured M. Maček that the "Representative Body" and the whole Croat nation — true to their principles — would be ready to follow him.

The "Hrvatski Dnevnik" of 11th May, writing of this resolution, says: — Maček never yet received from his fellow members of Parliament such extensive powers as these. He may well be said to have been given a free hand with everything left to his discretion... It has been established that the whole Croat nation desires to come to terms with the Serbs... The resolution of the Croat Representative Body thus does not exclude the possibility of an agreement, but *the initial steps must be taken by the Serbs and their representatives...* We have done everything possible and cannot do more... After all we are not demanding anything new, nor fighting for any concessions, only for our rights..."

The resolution itself and the comments on it in Maček's newspaper are proof that — as was stated by the Speaker of the Senate, M. Koroshetz, in his speech at Ljubljana on 7th May — negotiations have not yet been completely broken off and an agreement is still possible. Since, however, the Croat Representative Body has expressly stated that the initiative, on ratter the opening of new negotiations, must come from the Serb Government, with this they lay the full responsibility of failure to reach an agreement on Belgrade. From this point of view the pessimistic opinion voiced in the "Obzor" of 21st May is particularly characteristic. The circumstance — says the "Obzor" — that Maček has gone to Rogashka Slatina for a three weeks' cure means that the political situation has reached a dead-lock.

Very interesting is the sentence in the resolution which speaks of *steps in foreign politics*. This in all probability is a disguised threat to Belgrade and an unmistakable allusion to the radical changes lately effected in the relation between Bohemia and Slovakia. But even should the agreement be concluded in spite of all obstacles, it will merely be of a temporary nature, for sincerity, the only thing that would make it permanent and stable, is lacking.