

THE CROATIAN PEASANT PARTY'S VIEW OF HLINKA'S SLOVAK PEOPLE'S PARTY: A CASE OF SOLIDARITY BETWEEN STATELESS NATIONS

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This paper examines the Croatian Peasant Party's (HSS) view of Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSLS) during the 1930s, framing their cooperation as an example of solidarity between stateless nations. Despite significant ideological differences – HSS's agrarianism versus HSLS's political Catholicism – the two parties were united by their shared struggles against centralizing state powers in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. From the HSS perspective, the Slovak pursuit of autonomy, and eventually separation from Czechoslovakia, was seen as both a source of inspiration and a potential warning for their own negotiations with Belgrade, highlighting the possibility of a similar path toward separation. The HSS expressed solidarity through diplomatic gestures, such as Maček's condolences upon Hlinka's death, and public discourse emphasizing mutual struggles for self-determination. This study highlights how the Slovak declaration of independence in 1939 served as a potential model for Croatian aspirations, while the HSS pursued a more pragmatic path through the Cvetković-Maček Agreement.

Keywords: Croatian Nationalism; Slovak Nationalism; Vladko Maček; Andrej Hlinka; Jozef Tiso; Stateless Nationalism;

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Tento článok skúma pohľad Chorvátskej roľníckej strany (HSS) na Hlinkovu slovenskú ľudovú stranu (HSLS) počas 30. rokov 20. storočia, pričom ich spoluprácu predstavuje ako príklad solidarity medzi národmi bez štátu. Napriek významným ideologickým rozdielom – agrarizmus HSS v porovnaní s politickým katolicizmom HSLS – obidve strany spájala spoločná túžba po autonómii a boj proti centralizačnej moci v Juhoslávii a Česko-Slovensku. Z pohľadu HSS bolo úsilie Slovákov o autonómiu a nakoniec aj o oddelenie od Česko-Slovenska vnímané ako inšpirácia, ale aj ako varovanie pre ich vlastné rokovania s Belehradom, ktoré naznačovali možnosť podobnej cesty k separácii. HSS vyjadrovala solidaritu diplomatickými gestami, ako napríklad Mačekovými kondolenciami pri smrti Hlinku, a verejnými vyhláseniami zdôrazňujúcimi spoločný boj za sebaurčenie. Tento článok ukazuje, ako slovácke vyhlásenie nezávislosti v roku 1939 poslúžilo ako potenciálny model pre

chorvátske ambície, zatiaľ čo HSS zvolila pragmatickejší prístup prostredníctvom Cvetković-Mačekovej dohody.

Kľúčové slová: chorvátsky nacionalizmus; slovenský nacionalizmus; Vladko Maček; Andrej Hlinka; Jozef Tiso; nacionalizmus bez štátnej príslušnosti;

Stateless nationalism

When researchers discuss cooperation between certain political parties, they mostly study them in the context of ideological similarities. Thus, there are comparative studies on agrarianism in Central and Eastern Europe¹, political Catholicism², and collections on conservatives and right-wing radicals.³

However, beyond these ideological frameworks, some parties in the interwar period were connected by the shared circumstances of the nations they claimed to represent. These connections were shaped by what can be described as solidarity between “stateless nations.” This term refers to nations that lack their own state and seek some form of self-determination, whether autonomy or independence. It is important to clarify the terminology used in this study. When this analysis refers to political parties as “representing nations,” it does not imply that these parties spoke on behalf of entire populations in an uncontested manner. Rather, it reflects the way these parties positioned themselves as advocates for national self-determination and framed their political platforms around addressing the aspirations and grievances of their respective nations. This self-appointed role was central to their political identity and their engagement with other movements. While not all members of the Croatian or Slovak communities have supported the Croatian Peasant Party (HSS) or the Slovak People’s Party (HSLŠ), these parties explicitly sought to act as champions of the Croatian and Slovak national causes, respectively, in the context of interwar politics.

This study focuses on the relationship between the HSS and the HSLŠ as a case of solidarity between stateless nations. The HSS, led by Stjepan Radić and later by Vladko Maček, and the HSLŠ, led by Andrej Hlinka and later by Jozef Tiso, represented two nations seeking greater autonomy and recognition within the multinational states to which they belonged. Despite differences in political ideology, both parties shared a commitment to the self-determination of their respective nations. The analysis explores how the HSS perceived the Slovak struggle and identifies moments of interaction and mutual understanding between these two parties.

The research draws upon primary sources, including HSS newspapers, public statements by politicians, and published brochures authored by individuals associated with the HSS, primarily from the latter half of the 1930s. These sources offer insight into the political and ideological contexts of the HSS and HSLŠ, focusing on how the HSS perceived the HSLŠ and their cross-border interactions.

¹ TOSHKOV, Alex. *Agrarianism as Modernity in 20th-Century Europe: The Golden Age of the Peasantry*. 2019.

² CONWAY, Martin. *Catholic Politics in Europe, 1918-1945*. London/New York 1997.

³ BRESCIANI, Marko (ed.). *Conservatives and Right Radicals in Interwar Europe*. London/New York 2021.

Before delving into the case study, it is important to highlight the ideological differences between the HSS and HSLS, extending beyond their nationalist perspectives. These differences encompass varying views on social policies, governance, and the role of religion in politics. While John A. Armstrong groups the HSLS with other integral nationalist movements, such as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Croatian Ustaše – both of which collaborated with the Third Reich – the HSS stands apart.⁴ Vladko Maček explicitly declined the Third Reich's offer to lead an independent Croatian state during the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia. The HSS was a conservative agrarian party and moderately nationalist, consistently opposing extremism in Croatian political life.⁵

European agrarian parties operated within the framework of the International Agrarian Bureau.⁶ However, under Vladko Maček, who succeeded Stjepan Radić as head of the party after his assassination in 1928, HSS did not maintain contacts with the European agrarian parties. This is most evident in the example of Czechoslovakia. HSS counterpart Czechoslovak Republican Party of the Smallholders and Farmers from October 1922 to September 1938 (Munich Crisis) almost always had the position prime minister.⁷ Because of that fact it was perceived as the bearer of the Czechoslovakism and proponent of a unitary state, while the HSS fought against Yugoslav unitarism and for the recognition of the Croatian nation. In contrast, the HSLS shared a similar approach to the national question as the HSS.⁸ As James Ramon Felak notes, the HSLS was “nationalist, autonomist, and Roman Catholic.”⁹

The ideological differences between the two parties are notable. The HSLS advocated political Catholicism, whereas the HSS, particularly under Radić, often engaged in anti-clerical rhetoric. While Maček changed the party's stance on the Catholic Church, the HSS remained distinct from the current of political Catholicism in Croatian political life.¹⁰

⁴ ARMSTRONG, John A. Collaborationism in World War II: The Integral Nationalist Variant in Eastern Europe. In *The Journal of Modern History*, 1968, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 396-410. During World War II, significant cooperation occurred between the Independent State of Croatia, governed by the Ustaše, and the Slovak State, driven by their shared ideological affinities. For a case study on the relationship between the Hlinka Youth and the Ustaška Youth, see: MILJAN, Goran. “The Brotherhood of Youth”: A Case Study of the Ustaša and Hlinka Youth Connections and Exchanges. In Arnd Bauerkämper and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe. *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation Between Movements and Regimes in Europe From 1918 to 1945*. New York/Oxford 2017, pp. 119-141.

⁵ BIONDICH, Mark. Vladko Maček and the Croat Political Right, 1928-1941. In *Contemporary European History*, 2007, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 203-213.; BIONDICH, Mark. The Crisis of Legitimacy and the Rise of the Radical Right in Interwar Yugoslavia (1918–1941). In BRESCIANI, Marko. *Conservatives and Right Radicals in Interwar Europe*, London/New York, 2021, pp. 98-101.

⁶ TOSHKOV, Alex. *Agrarianism as Modernity in 20th-Century Europe*, pp. 41-60.

⁷ HEIMANN, Mary. *Czechoslovakia: The State That Failed*. New Haven/London, 2005, p. 70.

⁸ Jan Rychlík summarizes the program of the two parties as follows: “The political programmes of both parties also had some identical features: although both of them spoke of autonomy; in fact, they were more concerned about the creation of a dualist state formation in the manner of the old Austria-Hungary”. RYCHLÍK, Jan. *Croatia and Slovakia during the Second World War*. In Željko Holjevac et al. *Croatia and Slovakia: Historical Parallels and Connections (from 1780 to the Present Day)*, vol. II. Zagreb/Bratislava 2017, p. 152.

⁹ FELAK, James Ramon. *At the Price of the Republic: Hlinka's Slovak People's Party, 1929–1938*. Pittsburgh/London, 1994, p. 39.

¹⁰ TOMAS, Domagoj. Croatian and Slovak Political Catholicism and Clericalism in the Period Between the First and the Second World War. In *Review of Croatian history*, 2023, vol. 19, no. 1, pp. 245-277.

Despite these differences, the HSS and HSLS were brought closer by the shared position of Croats and Slovaks as stateless nations in the interwar period. Political parties like the HSS and the HSLS exemplify what can be termed “stateless nationalist movements,” as they explicitly advocated for the self-determination of their respective nations. Harris Mylonas and Maya Tudor define nationalist movements as “political organizations in which the membership is formally defined, the leadership roles are institutionalized, the representation of the relevant national community as a whole is claimed, and the goal is to achieve either independence or autonomy.”¹¹

Political parties like HSS and the HSLS are representatives of such movements because they explicitly advocated for the self-determination of their respective nations, Croats and Slovaks. The definition of a nationalist movement aligns with the aspirations of both parties, which sought to achieve, depending on the periods,¹² autonomy or independence, while both Croats and Slovaks were “stateless nations” during this period.¹³

Stateless nations constitute “the overwhelming majority of nations.”¹⁴ Stéphanie Chouinard defines “stateless nations” as “nations that lack their own state”, distinguishing them from ethnic minorities by their pursuit of self-determination.¹⁵ Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham explains that self-determination movements aim to increase “power and autonomy their own group”. This struggle represents “an ongoing contest between states that want to retain territorial integrity and authority at the center on the one hand, and sub-state groups that desire greater control over their own affairs (which at the extreme can entail demands for their own independent state) on the other.”¹⁶ Both the HSS and the HSLS fit this definition, as they championed the self-determination of Croats and Slovaks, respectively.

This study contributes to the understanding of stateless nationalism by focusing on the relationship between the HSS and HSLS, particularly from the perspective of the HSS. Drawing upon primary sources and existing literature, it examines the ways in which the HSS perceived and engaged with the Slovak struggle, emphasizing their shared status as representatives of stateless nations and their pursuit of self-determination. By doing so, the study offers new insights into the connections between stateless nationalist movements in interwar Europe.

¹¹ MYLONAS, Harris, and Maya TUDOR. *Varieties of Nationalism: Communities, Narratives, Identities*. Cambridge 2023, p. 9.

¹² LORMAN, Thomas. *The Making of the Slovak People's Party: Religion, Nationalism and the Culture War in Early 20th-Century Europe*. London 2019, pp. 159, 214.

¹³ Western authors often use the terms nation and state synonymously. However, As Ephraim Nimni explains: “A state is an apparatus of governance and a nation is a cultural community; these are two very different kinds of human groupings. The symbiotic relation between nation and state (a nation-state) is an historical creation of early modern Western Europe, and it became in more than one way, one of its most successful exports.” NIMNI, Ephraim. *Stateless Nations in a World of Nation-States*. In Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff. *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, London/New York, 2011, pp. 55. Julius W. Friend convincingly argues that “there is no such thing as sub-nationalism, only the nationalism of nations that do not possess states.” FRIEND, Julius W. *Stateless Nations: Western European Regional Nationalisms and the Old Nations*. Basingstoke 2012, p. 3.. See also CONNOR, Walker. *Nation-Building or Nation-Destroying?*. In *World Politics*, 1968, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 321, 334-336.

¹⁴ NIMNI, Ephraim. *Stateless Nations in a World of Nation-States*, p. 55

¹⁵ CHOUINARD, Stéphanie. *Stateless Nations*. In Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff. *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, 2nd Edition. London/New York, 2016, pp. 54-55

¹⁶ CUNNINGHAM, Kathleen Gallagher. *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination*. Oxford 2014, p. 4.

Brothers in the struggle against Czechoslovakism/Yugoslavism

The Croatian Peasant Party viewed the Czechs as equivalent to the Serbs who oppress a smaller nation under the guise of the state ideology (Czechoslovakism and Yugoslavianism). That is why HSS's partner is not a more ideologically aligned one (agrarian party)¹⁷, but a party whose electorate is in a similar position (stateless nation). HSS will compare the position of Croatia in Yugoslavia under Serbian domination with the position of Slovakia in Czechoslovakia and Ukrainians in Poland. All three cases pointed to the fallacy of pan-Slavic rhetoric because stronger Slavic nations exploit weaker ones. On October 12, 1935, HSS leader Maček was visited at his home in Kupinec near Zagreb by a prominent member of the HSLS, Alexander Mach. At that time, Mach, who would later become the Minister of Propaganda of the Slovak State, was the editor of the party newspaper *Slovak*. Maček explained to the Mach similarities between the Croatian and Slovak struggles:

“We Croats sympathize with the fight of Slovaks because we know that it is just. The tragedy of Slavdom is that the Slavic peoples, who were themselves oppressed for many years, when they achieved freedom, have nothing to do than to oppress other Slavic peoples, having brought them under their sphere. The Russians oppressed the Poles, today the Poles oppress the Ukrainians. The Austrian Germans oppressed the Czechs for three hundred years, and today the Czechs are oppressing the Slovaks. The Turks oppressed the Serbs for 500 years, today the Serbs are oppressing the Croats. It is a picture of Slavic reciprocity. Slavdom will have no future until every Slavic people will be completely free. I believe that at least our children will experience it.”¹⁸

In addition to contacts with the HSS, HSLS nurtured them with intellectuals around the Catholic daily *Hrvatska straža* (Croatian Sentinel), whose ideology is much closer to HSLS. Alexander Mach met with Maček and other prominent members of HSS, such as Ivan Pernar and Ilija Jakovljević, but also with Ivo Bogdan, editor-in-chief of *Hrvatska straža*.¹⁹

When Andrej Hlinka died in August 1938, *Hrvatski dnevnik*, the informal newspaper of the HSS, published an affirmative obituary, emphasizing that Hlinka's work “did not die with his death. It lives in his people, for whom he also lived with soul and body”. Croats, on the other hand, lost a “great, sincere friend” whose “thoughts were often focused on Zagreb and Croatia. He followed the struggle of the Croatian people with full sympathy and interest. Therefore, the Croatian people join the grief of the Slovak people over the loss of their leader.”²⁰ Maček sent a condolence message to the HSLS presidency on the occasion of his death.²¹ Ivan Pernar, one of the most important members of the party and symbolically more important as the victim of the assassination of former party leader Stjepan Radić in the National Assembly, was present at Hlinka's funeral. In his speech, he called Hlinka “the father of the Slovak nation”. The following message was written on the

¹⁷ It is important to point out that the agrarian parties are ideologically diverse, which is logical considering the different position of the peasantry in European countries. CABO, Miguel. *Farming The Nation: Agrarian Parties and the National Question in Interwar Europe*. In *Studies on National Movements (SNM)*, 2021, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 2-3.; HOLEC, Roman. *Ideology and the Practice of Agrarianism in the Mirror of the Slovak-Croatian Relationship*. In Željko Holjevac et al. *Croatia and Slovakia: Historical Parallels and Connections (from 1780 to the Present Day)*, vol. II. Zagreb/Bratislava 2017, p. 96.

¹⁸ MACH, Alexander. *Razgovor sa drom. Mačkom o hrvatskom problemu*. Zagreb 1935, p. 1.

¹⁹ HRUBOŇ, Anton. *Alexander Mach – Radikál z povolania*. Bratislava 2018, p. 162.

²⁰ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 18. 8. 1938, p. 5, *Hrvatski dnevnik*.

²¹ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 20. 8. 1938, p. 3, *Sažalnica predsjednika dra Mačka povodom Hlinkine smrti*.

wreath laid by Pernar and signed by Vladko Maček: “You are preparing the body of the great Andrej Hlinka for eternal rest. Because he is also dust, despite his greatness, he shall return to dust. Glory to the mortal Andrej Hlinka, and long live the unbreakable spirit of Andrej Hlinka. In Kupinec, August 19, 1938. Dr. Vladko Maček.”²²

Seljački dom (Peasant Home), the official newspaper of the HSS, wrote about national problems in Czechoslovakia in March 1938. At that time, it was pointed out that Slovaks, Germans, Poles, and Ruthenians were dissatisfied in Czechoslovakia, which had implications for national security. Again with the implication that dissatisfied Croats are weakening Yugoslavia, so they should be accommodated.

“The most secure defense of the state is a free and satisfied people. Many responsible politicians notice this only when there is danger from the outside. Then they see that they cannot even count on their own people, and – often because of this, not even on others.”²³

A week after the Munich Agreement, the Slovak nationalists managed to win autonomy from the weakened Prague. Soon, one of the most prominent journalists associated with the HSS, Mirko Glojtnarić, who had previously edited a collection of Maček’s speeches and interviews entitled *Vođa govori* (“The Leader Speaks”)²⁴, arrived in the now autonomous Slovakia, which was governed by HSLS headed by Jozef Tiso. Upon return, Glojtnarić published the book with long title *Slovački narod i njegova sloboda: Oslobodjenje Slovačke, Andrej Hlinka, razgovori s prvim slovačkim ministrima, te senzacionalno otkriće u leglu nemorala, razvrata i mračnjaštva u masonskoj loži* (The Slovak people and their freedom: The liberation of Slovakia, Andrej Hlinka, conversations with the first Slovak ministers, and a sensational discovery in the den of immorality, debauchery and obscurantism in the Masonic lodge).²⁵ At the beginning, Glojtnarić immediately points out the aforementioned link between the position of Croats and Slovaks in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia:

“And it came to this because, in every such a community, one nation rode on the hump of another, using hollow slogans about national unity, state unity, brotherhood, and so on. Czechs and Slovaks found themselves in Czechoslovakia. All power was seized from the very beginning by the Czechs, who, as we later had the opportunity to see, did not spare any resources for twenty years to subjugate the captured and oppressed Slovaks.”²⁶

Glojtnarić also wrote that the Croats and Slovaks are “spiritually” the closest of all nations.²⁷ Glojtnarić compares Andrej Hlinka, a “champion” for the “liberation of Slovakia”, who died shortly before the publication of the book, with Maček: “It is not necessary to emphasize how much suffering Andrej Hlinka endured during the struggle, which he put himself at the head of on behalf of the Slovak people. The same way in which the leader of the Croats, President Dr. Vladko Mačko, who served three years in prison for fearlessly raising the Croatian flag and emphasizing the rights and demands of the Croatian people, was treated in this country. The same was done in Czechoslovakia with the Slovak leader who also did

²² Hrvatski dnevnik, 22. 8. 1938, p. 1, Hrvati nad grobom Andreja Hlinke.

²³ Seljački dom, 1938, vol. 3, no. 14, p. 7, Sudbina Čehoslovačke

²⁴ GLOJTNARIĆ, Mirko. Vođa govori: Ličnost, izjave, govori i politički rad vođe Hrvata. Zagreb 1936.

²⁵ GLOJTNARIĆ, Mirko. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda: Oslobodjenje Slovačke, Andrej Hlinka, razgovori s prvim slovačkim ministrima, te senzacionalno otkriće u leglu nemorala, razvrata i mračnjaštva u masonskoj loži. Zagreb 1938.

²⁶ GLOJTNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, p. 4.

²⁷ GLOJTNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, pp. 10-11.

not give up even an iota of what the people have a right to”.²⁸ While discussing the situation in Slovakia, Glojnaríć was actually talking about the situation in Croatia:

“Slovaks at that time rightfully demanded their freedom. When Prague lost what was not its own, but what the German people had a right to, it feared that this could go further, so overnight it agreed to satisfy the Slovaks, who presented the Prague rulers with an alternative: **either a free Slovakia within the borders of Czechoslovakia or an independent Slovakia outside the borders of Czechoslovakia.** (emphasized by the author) The Czechs say they chose the lesser of two evils. This is similar to how a debtor, who has never paid any interest to his creditor, finally returns only half of the debt...”²⁹

Free Croatia (Slobodna Hrvatska) was the fundamental political slogan of Maček’s HSS, modeled after the Irish Free State.³⁰ This concept was ambivalent, and supporters often did not know whether it meant an independent Croatia or a reformed Yugoslavia with autonomous Croatia. In place of Glojnaríć’s emphasized sentence, we can easily imagine the sentence: “Either a free Croatia within the borders of Yugoslavia or an independent Croatia outside the borders of Yugoslavia.”³¹ Glojnaríć also writes that the representative of the first Slovak government, Alexander Mach, soon flew to Zagreb and met with Maček.³² This is the same Alexander Mach who interviewed Maček in Zagreb in 1935. According to Glojnaríć, Mach “had the primary duty to thank President Dr. Vladko Maček, and thus the entire Croatian nation, on behalf of the Slovak people, for the sympathies nurtured among us Croats for the Slovaks, as well as for the moral support that Croatian national representatives expressed to their Slovak brothers through the press”.³³ Glojnaríć then flew with Mach to Bratislava, where he talked with the new president of the HSĽS and the first president of the government, then still autonomous, Slovakia, Jozef Tiso, at the Carlton Hotel. During the conversation with Glojnaríć, Tiso thanked the “Croatian brothers”. Tiso said to Glojnaríć:

“We always believed in God, because we knew that only with His help could we achieve our rightful goals. And now that we have achieved this, as you can see for yourself, it is my duty to thank our Croatian brothers, who have always helped us in our struggle as much as they could. We have always nurtured special sympathies towards the Croats, just as the Croats have towards their Slovaks, both before and now even more. Our wish is to always remain connected with the Croats not only through friendly but also in brotherly ties.”³⁴

Tiso also hinted at his visit to Croatia “as soon as we settle our affairs.” However, that never materialized.³⁵ During his stay in Bratislava, Glojnaríć also interviewed Karol Sidor, the editor-in-chief of *Slovak*, the organ of the ruling Slovak party, in his apartment. Sidor became the president of the Slovak National Council. Sidor completely identified with

²⁸ GLOJNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, p. 5.

²⁹ GLOJNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, p. 8.

³⁰ GLOJNARIĆ. Vođa govori, pp. 201-202.

³¹ Lorman explains that the “unifying factor” within the party was an “ambiguous ideology embodied by the call for autonomy, which could appeal to both those loyal to the new Czechoslovak state and those who sought its destruction.” The same conclusion applies to the HSS. LORMAN, Thomas. *The Making of the Slovak People’s Party*, p. 179.

³² GLOJNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, p. 8.

³³ GLOJNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, p. 8.

³⁴ GLOJNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, p. 10.

³⁵ GLOJNARIĆ. Slovački narod i njegova sloboda, p. 10.

Maček's mentioned slogan (Free Croatia). "When your Croatian people's representatives³⁶ or President Dr. Vladko Maček, whom we all highly respect, say: Long live Free Croatia! – it means the same as when we shout: Long live Free Slovakia!", Sidor concluded.³⁷ Like Maček, Sidor remained ambivalent about the content of a "Free" Slovakia: "It can be called by any Greek or Latin name, the main thing is that the Slovak people get what they strive for and what they have the right to," said Sidor, wishing the "Croatian brothers" a "swift victory".³⁸

Czechoslovak example: Autonomy or separation

Soon, under German pressure, independent Slovakia was declared. One of the leaders of the HSS in Eastern Slavonia, Stjepan Hefer, traveled to witness Slovak independence. Just a few days after independence, Hefer traveled to Bratislava. He published two journalistic reports on the situation in the newly established Slovak State.³⁹ He described being received in state institutions "openly, fraternally". He has discussions with several Slovak ministers.⁴⁰

On March 14, 1939, *Hrvatski dnevnik* commented that "the friendly Slovak people once again found themselves in a fateful situation, a consequence of old sins and mistakes of Czech policy towards the Slovaks." It was noted that the Slovaks "had been loyal to the state union with the Czechs," only demanding autonomy, but the existing mistrust could not be overcome as autonomy was granted under external pressure. *Hrvatski dnevnik* explained how the Slovaks feared losing their autonomy. What is particularly important is that the Croatian newspaper explicitly denied the fascist character of the Hlinka Guard, associating it solely with the desire for Slovak freedom:

"Slovaks felt this fear, afraid that later, when circumstances in the world could change, what they had achieved would be taken away from them. Hence, the organization of the Hlinka Guard began. It was not because Slovaks overnight became 'fascists', as they were aware that a small nation cannot engage in ideological battles and waste its strength on them. The task of the Hlinka Guard was to protect and defend the achievements of the Slovak people. Therefore, Slovaks also sought to have Slovak soldiers serve in Slovakia under the command of Slovak generals. This army clearly had the task of defending the achievements of the Slovak people if anyone attempted to limit or even abolish them. Thus, the organization of the Hlinka Guard had a temporary character. Once the new situation was completely secured, it would become unnecessary. However, signs had recently emerged that the Czechs were considering a return to the past. This was the cause of agitation among Slovak ranks, and for this reason, certain Slovak politicians who had advocated a complete break with the Czechs had some success. Prime Minister Tiso was too weak to resist this agitation effectively because the psychosis that had begun to grip the Slovak people worked in favor of

³⁶ "Croatian people's representatives" (hrvatski narodni zastupnici) refers to Croatian deputies in the national parliament (Narodna skupština). However, because HSS abstained, they did not participate in the assembly's work. Under "Croatian national representatives," HSS also counted individuals who, due to the electoral system, did not receive a mandate despite receiving more votes than their opponents in their electoral district. JANČIKOVIĆ, Tomo. *Hrvati u izborima 11. Prosinca 1938*. Zagreb 1939, pp. 13, 64.

³⁷ GLOJNARIĆ. *Slovački narod i njegova sloboda*, p. 13.

³⁸ GLOJNARIĆ. *Slovački narod i njegova sloboda*, p. 13.

³⁹ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 30. 3. 1939, p. 3, Stjepan HEFER, U prvim danima mlade republike Slovačke; *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 16. 4. 1939, p. 18, Stjepan HEFER, U metropoli Slovačke.

⁴⁰ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 30. 3. 1939, p. 3, Stjepan HEFER, U prvim danima mlade republike Slovačke.

this agitation – that the Czechs wanted to restore the previous state of affairs. Obviously contributing to this was Czechoslovakia's dependence on Germany. At that time, some Slovak politicians began to consider whether it was beneficial for Slovaks to remain tied to the Czechs, if they could potentially preserve their territorial integrity even without them, and possibly even expand their territory. Slovaks, in fact, constantly thought about revising the Vienna Award in their favor. They could not forget that several hundred thousand Slovaks were outside the borders of Slovakia, which meant a lot to the small Slovak nation.”⁴¹

With such arguments, HSS is sending a message to Belgrade to promptly agree to Croatian demands. At that moment, new Prime Minister Dragiša Cvetković initiated an attempt to negotiate with the HSS about the creation of autonomous Croatia.⁴² The message from HSS is clear: trust can be gambled, and with the help of foreign powers, Croats might seek solutions beyond the borders of Yugoslavia.

However, ideologically, the HSS did not align itself with Nazi Germany. On the contrary, at that time, the HSS explicitly declared itself a democratic party and separated national issues from the state's structure. *Hrvatski dnevnik* wrote that “the issue of the Sudeten Germans would equally exist in democratic and dictatorial Czechoslovakia”. “The national and democratic principles are not contradictory. A nationalist can be both a democrat and opposed to democracy. Likewise, a democrat can be a supporter or opponent of nationalism”, it is concluded in the same article.⁴³

It is explained elsewhere that foreign policy is completely separate from ideology. Namely, HSS considered the national question crucial: “Its (Czechoslovakia) national minorities had a relatively good position. Germans even had their own university, which was highly esteemed. They also had their theater, which did not suffer. Nevertheless, they were not satisfied with their fate because they wanted to live in community with their other German brethren. In the Sudeten German Party, there were even democratically oriented Germans, as union with Germany was much more important than all ideological differences. And they ultimately achieved the realization of this goal”. Finally, the conflict in Europe was not “a struggle between two ideological fronts; it really isn't about ideological conflicts but about state and national interests. They are the sole factors that govern foreign policy”.⁴⁴ Despite sympathies, it was warned that “Slovakia suffered, having lost its most fertile regions and several major cities” in favor of Hungary after the Munich Agreement.⁴⁵

⁴¹ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 14. 3. 1939, p. 3, *Hrvatski dnevnik*.

⁴² BOBAN, Ljubo. *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček*. Belgrade 1965, pp. 127-140. The term autonomy has been used throughout the paper in accordance with Ruth Lapidoth's definition of autonomy as a “means for diffusion of powers in order to preserve the unity of a state while respecting the diversity of its population”. LAPIDOTH, Ruth. *Autonomy: Flexible Solutions to Ethnic Conflicts*. Washington 1997, p. 3.

⁴³ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 24. 9. 1938, p. 5, *Hrvatski dnevnik*.

⁴⁴ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 4. 10. 1938, p. 5, *Hrvatski dnevnik*.

⁴⁵ *Hrvatski dnevnik*, 6. 11. 1938, p. 5, *Hrvatski dnevnik*. Just as Slovakia was endangered by the threat to its territory from revisionist Hungary, the HSS feared that Italy might occupy at least part of the Dalmatian coast. The Secretary General of the HSS, Juraj Krnjević, then still in exile in Geneva, sent a letter to Maček through an intermediary at the end of February 1939, enclosing an excerpt from Italian newspapers that claimed Dalmatia for Italy. Krnjević instructed the courier, his friend Gjuro Maršić, to show it “to all those who admire Ciano”, referring to Italian foreign minister Galeazzo Ciano. Croatian State Archives (hereinafter referred to as HDA), fund (f.) Maršić Family [Obitelj Maršić], box 18. Juraj Krnjević to Gjuro Maršić, 25. February 1939.

The Czechs were blamed in the HSS press for the breakup of the state. “The fact is that the Czechs forcibly and unconstitutionally changed the government in Slovakia. The Slovaks responded. We know how”, wrote *Hrvatski dnevnik*.⁴⁶ The publication of the *Hrvatski radnički savez* (Croatian Workers’ Union), a union associated with the HSS, also reported on the establishment of independent Slovakia on an entire page under the title “Slovak Republic”.⁴⁷

On the front page of the official journal of the HSS, on March 16, 1939, a text was published under the title “There is no Czechoslovakia anymore”. In that text, the “senseless policy of all governments and statesmen of Czechoslovakia” is blamed for the breakup, and the fact that the nations in the state “did not feel freedom in such a state, but were forced to seek it even outside the framework of the state”.⁴⁸

The author, through the story of the Czechs’ relationship with Slovaks and Ukrainians in Czechoslovakia, is actually talking about the relationship of Serbs with Croats and the potential consequences if a policy of suppressing Croatian national aspirations continues. It was emphasized that France and Great Britain, the country’s allies, did not save Czechoslovakia. That was a message to the Serbian political elites that they would not save Yugoslavia either. Janko Banovac stated that a group of Slovak politicians advocating for independence “could not have come to the fore more strongly if the Czechs had provided evidence that they no longer wanted to exploit Slovaks and restrict their freedom, but that it was in the interest of the Slovak people and the necessity of a united joint action against any external enemy”.⁴⁹ The conclusion was as follows: “Czechoslovakia has disappeared from the map of Europe. It was brought down by its dissatisfied peoples, or rather by its incapable statesmen”.⁵⁰ Thus, during negotiations with Belgrade about autonomy, the HSS conveyed that Croats could pursue another path if the demand for the establishment of a strong Croatian autonomous unit was not accepted. Local authorities did not miss the point of the article. The entire issue of *Seljački dom* was banned because of the mentioned article and brief news on the sixth page starting with “Slovak State”.⁵¹

The Vice President of the HSS, August Košutić, published an article at the beginning of April 1939 titled “Mirni i svjestni svoje snage idemo k’ uzkrснуću” (“Calm and Conscious of Our Strength, We Go Towards Resurrection”) in which he stated that the “sinful politics had duly ended last month”. According to him, the Czechs invented the Czechoslovak nation and were Slovak masters:

”Although the current state organization in which the Czech people have been since March 16 is only temporary, it is nevertheless an instructive example for us and for others. Twenty years ago, the Czechs, in agreement with the Slovaks and with the help of Western Europe and America, founded their independent republic, which they named Czechoslovakia. Not only did they name their state that way, but in that state, the Czechs ruled and governed as if they were the sole masters. They did not recognize the Slovak people as a separate nation but said that they were part of one nation called the Czechoslovak nation. However, this

⁴⁶ Hrvatski dnevnik, 26. 3. 1939, p. 5, Hrvatski dnevnik.

⁴⁷ Hrvatski radnik, 1939, vol. 4, no. 12, pp. 1-2, Slovačka Republika.

⁴⁸ Seljački dom, 1939, vol. 4, no. 12, p. 1, Janko BANOVAČ, Čeho-Slovačke više nema.

⁴⁹ Seljački dom, 1939, vol. 4, no. 12, p. 1, Janko BANOVAČ, Čeho-Slovačke više nema.

⁵⁰ Seljački dom, 1939, vol. 4, no. 12, p. 3, Janko BANOVAČ, Čeho-Slovačke više nema.

⁵¹ HDA, f. Censorship and prohibition of printing [Cenzura i zabrana tiska], doc. 2723. Zagreb Police directorate to the Interior Ministry, 16. March 1939.

invented nation was never created by God. The gentlemen⁵² in Prague did not care much about the rights and justice of the distinct Slovak people because they believed they had enough strength to dominate. They organized all their intellectual and physical forces to defend lies and injustice. Besides that, they forgot about their own Czech nation, which they equated with the state. Anyone who criticized them was declared anti-state and a traitor”.⁵³

Taking all of the above into consideration, it is understandable that Yugoslavia's attitude towards Slovakia, as Milan Sovilj states, “was reserved”.⁵⁴

After several months of hiatus, negotiations with Cvetković seemed to be nearing completion in July 1939. However, at that point, there was a deadlock due to a disagreement about the authority over the gendarmerie.⁵⁵ Maček then threatened that if Belgrade did not agree to the demands, he would have to take a path similar to Slovakia's and secede from Yugoslavia. “All right – Germany then – let her come and make order. Some one must make order in Yugoslavia. If Belgrade cannot make order in Yugoslavia, Germany can”, Maček said to an American journalist on August 2nd.⁵⁶ Amid the looming threat of war on the European continent, Maček eventually agreed to a compromise solution – the Cvetković-Maček Agreement and the autonomous Banovina of Croatia.⁵⁷

Although the HSS ultimately opted for autonomy within Yugoslavia through the Cvetković-Maček Agreement, and its leader Vladko Maček, unlike Tiso, did not accept the German offer to declare independence under German patronage in April 1941, Slovakia continued to be presented as a sort of model for Croats even during the Banovina of Croatia. With the signing of the Agreement between Vladko Maček and Prime Minister Cvetković on August 26, 1939, the autonomous Banovina of Croatia was created.

Some prominent HSS politicians now explicitly rejected the Slovak scenario, either in public statements or in discussions with Slovak diplomatic representatives.⁵⁸ However, in the *Hrvatski dnevnik*, independent Slovakia was described as a “small but cultured, advanced, and beautiful” country. Slovakia was compared to Switzerland, Denmark, and Finland. It was described as a “country physically small, but enormous and exemplary in its spiritual value.” Croats, the author stated, should see in the Slovaks “calm, robust peasants who are so close to us in every way.” The Slovak school system was particularly praised, and the fact that only six percent of the population was illiterate, significantly less than in the Banovina of Croatia.⁵⁹ On March 1, 1941, the Croatian Singing Society

⁵² Košutić uses the term “gospoda” which, in the ideology of HSS was used to refer to the educated (urban) elite from the perspective of an agrarian populist party. BIONDICH, Mark. Stjepan Radic, the Croat Peasant Party, and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904-1928. Toronto 2000, p. 30.

⁵³ Seljački dom, 1939, vol. 4, no. 15, p. 2, August KOŠUTIĆ, Mirni i svjestni svoje snage idemo k' uzkrskuću.

⁵⁴ SOVILJ, Milan. Yugoslav-Slovak Relations 1939-1941, with Particular Emphasis on Croatia. In Željko Holjevac et al. Croatia and Slovakia: Historical Parallels and Connections (from 1780 to the Present Day), vol. II. Zagreb/Bratislava 2017, p. 137.

⁵⁵ BOBAN, Ljubo. Sporazum Cvetković-Maček, p. 188-190.

⁵⁶ New York Times, 2.8.1939, p. 10. According to Mylonas and Shelef “stateless nationalist movements often depend on the intercession of external powers on their behalf”. MYLONAS, Harris and Nadav G. SHELEF. Which Land is Our Land? Domestic Politics and Change in the Territorial Claims of Stateless Nationalist Movements. In Security Studies, 2014, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 754-786.

⁵⁷ MAČEK, Vladko. Memoari. Zagreb 2003, pp. 190-191.

⁵⁸ SOVILJ, Milan. Ide Yugoslav-Slovak Relations 1939-1941, with Particular Emphasis on Croatia, p. 139.

⁵⁹ Hrvatski dnevnik, 29. 9. 1940, p. 28, Zlatko DUJMOVIĆ, Prosvjeta u Slovačkoj, koja je čuvala i hrabrila narod.

Zvonimir was supposed to travel to Slovakia to visit the “brotherly nation”. This society was widely promoted in the HSS press. *Hrvatski dnevnik* described Zvonimir’s tour with a clear political tendency, once again celebrating the Slovak example.

“Since the Slovak people achieved their independence, it has been observed that cultural life is developing in a positive direction and that the Slovak brothers are striving to strengthen and better acquaint themselves with the Croatian people, with whom they have traditional brotherly ties. There are frequent mutual visits by our cultural workers, literary works are being translated from Slovak to Croatian and from Croatian to Slovak, extensive articles are being written about the cultural and political activities of the Slovak and Croatian people. Work is being done in every field, and more intensively. The ties are getting stronger and stronger, and the exchange of thoughts and views is increasing”.⁶⁰

According to the *Hrvatski dnevnik*, Zvonimir’s visit to Slovakia was “a sign of special respect that the Slovaks show towards the Croats and Croatian songs.” The first concert was scheduled to take place in Bratislava, followed by performances in Ružomberok, Hlinka’s birthplace, Turčiansky Sv. Martin, Žilina, Trnava, etc.⁶¹

Although the HSS chose a different path compared to the ruling Slovak party, it seems that the Slovak authorities did not view the HSS’s policies or its agreement with Belgrade as unreasonable or contrary to Croatian interests. The chargé d’affaires of the Slovak legation in Belgrade spoke with Maček in mid-February 1941. The Slovak diplomat asked Maček if he was afraid that the Serbs might attempt to limit Croatian rights after the war, to which Maček responded that “the strength of the Croatian people is so great today that no Serbian force could overcome it.” He also stated, according to the Slovak diplomat’s report, that “the military might come into consideration, but such a military force would play no role in peacetime as there would be complete demobilization.” The Slovak diplomat concluded: “The policy of the Croatian Peasant Party has not abandoned its program, but it also had to find ways to fulfill that program under the given and difficult circumstances, if not immediately at 100%, then at least to a large extent”.⁶² In another report, the same Slovak diplomat noted that Maček “has the support of the majority of the Croatian people, and he defends integrity only to the extent that it does not conflict with the fundamental demands of Croatian national and political individuality. The Banovina of Croatia is developing its independent economic and social life, establishing appropriate institutions to address pressing issues of population supply, tourism, export, and import, etc.”.⁶³

Uncompromised by collaboration with the Nazis, the HSS in exile will participate in the work of the International Agrarian Union under the patronage of the USA after World War II. International Peasant Union included representatives not from Slovakia, but from Czechoslovakia.⁶⁴ However, Maček as a founding member was against this. In a letter to his successor, as a party leader, Juraj Krnjević written on July 19, 1948, he explained that at the meeting of the International Peasant Union ten days earlier “the Slovak question” arose. Maček on that meeting, as he stated in the letter, “proposed rejecting (Fedor) Hodža’s acceptance, arguing that the Czechoslovak Agrarian Party was not Slovak, and the present

⁶⁰ Hrvatski dnevnik, 23. 2. 1941, p. 7, Manifestacija hrvatske pjesme u Slovačkoj.

⁶¹ Hrvatski dnevnik, 23. 2. 1941, p. 7, Manifestacija hrvatske pjesme u Slovačkoj.

⁶² BOBAN, Ljubo. Maček i politika Hrvatske seljačke stranke 1928-1941, vol. 2. Zagreb 1974, p. 384.

⁶³ BOBAN, Ljubo. Maček i politika Hrvatske seljačke stranke, p. 428.

⁶⁴ TOSHKOV, Alex. Agrarianism as Modernity in 20th-Century Europe, pp. 160-161.

Slovak Democratic Party is not agrarian”⁶⁵ Eventually, Czechoslovak agrarians were admitted to the International Peasant Union. On December 13, 1948, Maček informed Krnjević that Hodža “has a bit of a grudge against me. Primarily because I openly told him that I believe the Hlinka followers still have the majority of the people behind them in Slovakia today, and they could have won the majority in the last elections because the Hlinka followers couldn’t stand as candidates, and then because I opposed their admission at the meeting here. But everything will smooth out”⁶⁶

Conclusion

The cooperation between the HSS and HSLS during the interwar period highlights the complex dynamics of nationalist movements representing stateless nations in Central Europe. Despite notable differences in their ideological foundations – HSS’s focus on agrarian reform and HSLS’s emphasis on political catholicism – the two parties were united in their struggle for self-determination. Their mutual support was not grounded in ideological alignment, but rather in a pragmatic solidarity stemming from their shared experiences as marginalized nations striving for self-determination.

Despite ideological differences, the two parties recognized in each other a shared commitment to national self-determination, fostering mutual support through symbolic gestures, intellectual exchanges, and public affirmations of solidarity. This relationship is exemplified by the HSS’s public condolences upon Hlinka’s death, shared critiques of pan-Slavism, and the recognition of the parallels between Croatian and Slovak struggles. While the two movements diverged in their ultimate approaches – HSLS declaring independence of Slovakia under German patronage and the HSS attaining Croatian autonomy in Yugoslavia through the Cvetković-Maček Agreement – their cooperation reflects the broader theme of how stateless nations navigated the complex political landscapes of interwar Europe. Their shared experiences of marginalization by dominant ethnic groups – Serbs in Yugoslavia and Czechs in Czechoslovakia – served as the foundation for their cooperation, illustrating the potential for collaboration across ideological divides when united by common challenges. The interactions between the HSS and HSLS serve as a case study in how cooperation, grounded in shared existential concerns, can transcend ideological differences, providing insights into the adaptability and agency of stateless nations in their pursuit of recognition and self-determination. The mentioned divergence in strategy underscored the distinct political and geopolitical contexts of the two nations, yet the HSS continued to view the Slovak example as a potential model for the achievement of its goals. The HSS-HSLS relationship underscores the adaptability and agency of stateless nationalist movements in addressing the challenges of interwar geopolitics.

Ultimately, the cooperation between the Croatian and Slovak nationalist movements demonstrates that nationalism is not solely about ideological uniformity but can be a pragmatic and adaptive force. By examining their cooperation, we gain a nuanced understanding of the interplay between ideology, strategy, and national identity in the context of stateless nations, as well as broader lessons about the enduring quest for autonomy and sovereignty in the face of political and geopolitical constraints. In conclusion, the

⁶⁵ PRPIĆ, Neda. Dr. Juraj Krnjević – Tri emigracije I – razgovori, pisma, prilozi. Zagreb 2004, p. 96.

⁶⁶ PRPIĆ, Neda. Dr. Juraj Krnjević, p. 103.

HSS-HSLS relationship underscores how the shared experience of statelessness can foster cross-border solidarity among nationalist movements.

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