

DEFEAT OF THE FIRST “PARTY LIBERALISM” AND THE ECHO OF “DJILASISM” IN SLOVENIA

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At the beginning of the 1950s, radical shifts occurred in Yugoslav communist ideology. The dispute with the Soviet Union and the awareness that blind imitation of the Soviet socialism was a mistake, forced Yugoslav political leaders to consider thorough reforms. At that time, Milovan Djilas, one of the most influential politicians and communist ideologists of the time, converted from a rigid party propagandist to a communist and later socialist with quite democratic views, and in both cases he played a role of a true believer.

The conflict with the Cominform was a dramatic experience for Yugoslav Communists. Immediately afterwards, the policy pursued by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (CPY) was anything but consistent. On one hand, Yugoslav leaders rejected Soviet accusations and ruthlessly persecuted the followers of the Cominform resolution, while on the other they proved their obedience to Moscow by enforcing numerous measures and correcting the mistakes with which Stalin charged them. Aggressive Stalinist methods, to which Yugoslav leaders were clinging after the split with Stalin even more tightly than before, only deepened the economic and political crisis, and they were soon forced to search for new solutions. At the same time, the Yugoslav authorities were under pressure from the West, which in exchange for economic, political and military aid expected concessions in terms of democratization of the Yugoslav political system.

Yugoslav political leaders refrained from public criticism of the Soviet Union and its leader for a long time, although an anonymous article entitled *O nepravdnosti i neistinitim optužbama*¹ (On unjust and untrue accusations) was published as early as October 1948 in *Borba*. The article was written by the Secretary of the Politburo and head of Agitprop, Milovan Djilas. He did actually acknowledge the Soviet Union's decisive role in the socialist movement, but also emphasized that socialism cannot develop in the same way everywhere. At the same time,

¹ *Borba* 4 October 1948: 3; Milovan Djilas, *Vlast* (London: Naša reč, 1983) 197.

he refused to acknowledge the charisma of infallibility to Stalin, writing that in the dispute between the Soviet and Yugoslav parties justice was on the side of Yugoslav Communists.

Pushed against the wall and determined to devise an alternative to the Soviet model of socialism, at the beginning of the 1950s, Yugoslav communists abandoned the rigid imitation of Soviet socialism and started to experiment with an adventurous ideological search. Critical thinking about the Soviet system was initially limited to the narrowest circle of party leaders. According to Djilas's accounts the most ardent ones, besides himself, were Edvard Kardelj and Boris Kidrič.² They took their inspiration from Marx, Engels, and Lenin, but secretly they had probably also reached for the works of less orthodox authors, particularly those by the French utopian socialists. They placed the blame for deformations in the Soviet system on bureaucracy and infatuation with a "strong state." In contrast to Soviet centralism, they began to propagate Marx's thesis on the withering away of the state, which led to the introduction of the self-management system.

Djilas expressed the new views of Yugoslav political leaders about the Soviet Union in a series of articles, which he published in *Borba* in November 1950 under the title of *Savremene teme*³ (Modern topics). In these articles he harshly attacked the Soviet system, which had degenerated into a new form of class society under the rule of bureaucracy or the so-called state capitalism. He was critical of the Soviet system in his subsequent articles as well, for example in the article *Početak kraja ili početka*⁴ (The beginning of the end or the beginning), and in some others. He defined bureaucracy as the privileged caste, saying that absolute power served as the source of its privileges and that in order to maintain this power bureaucracy needed ideology and a repressive apparatus to stifle the freedom of thought.

Djilas and some of his party comrades saw the essence of bureaucratism in the merging of party and state functions. The critical reflection on the Soviet Union and Stalinism therefore also incited ideas about the separation of the party's and state authorities. These ideas

² Milovan Djilas, *Pad nove klase: povest o samorazaranju komunizma* (Beograd: Službeni list SRJ, 1994) 110.

³ *Borba*, 19, 20, 26, and 29 November 1950.

⁴ The article was summarized in *Naši razgledi*: "Začetak konca ali konec začetka," *Naši razgledi* 29 August 1953: 9.

mainly remained at the declarative level, which means that they were neither clearly defined nor realizable, because, with the exception of rare idealists, nobody seriously thought of the party's descent from power—least of all Tito.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the secretary of the Politburo and the leading party ideologist Edvard Kardelj, whom Djilas considered a party democrat, also frequently wrote about deformations in the Soviet system and further development of socialism in Yugoslavia. Kardelj viewed bureaucracy as a great threat to socialism. In his speech at the congress of the Slovene Liberation Front in April 1951, he advocated a gradual withering away of the state. In his opinion, the state was a product of class struggle therefore it will die off once social classes have disappeared. The one-party system would also break down gradually, but it would not be replaced by a multi-party system, but a party-less system, because, according to Kardelj, parties would wither away along with the state.⁵ In his public appearances, Kardelj was always cautious, but according to Djilas's accounts he was much more open in private conversations, in which he also expressed more radical ideas—for example, the possibility that communists could in time afford to allow a political opposition.⁶ Djilas later wrote about Kardelj:

Shrewd, capable, patient, civilized and cunning! With democratic tendencies and also democratic ideas, but without the strength to stick up for them consistently, to suffer for them. Kardelj knows how to cook up a democratic soup and then pass it on for others to swallow in the decisive moment, while he himself suddenly becomes a firefighter and an advocator of a firm hand policy.⁷

Ideas about internal democratization of the party attained the most concrete form at the fourth plenum of the Central Committee of the CPY in July 1951. At this plenary session, Djilas stated that for a long time the Soviet party had no longer been a Marxist party, since it repressed free speech and relinquished all of the power to one person. At the same time, he said that tendencies favoring an ideological monopoly

⁵ Edvard Kardelj, *Problemi naše socialistične graditve* II (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1955) 122.

⁶ Milovan Djilas, *Druženje s Titom* (Beograd: Zaslona, 1990) 112.

⁷ Djilas 1990, 163.

were also visible within the Yugoslav Communist Party.⁸ In his paper, criticism of the Soviet system came close to criticism of the Yugoslav party something that in his subsequent appearances was became increasingly more noticeable. The resolution on theoretical work within the party, adopted at the fourth plenum in July 1951, emphasized that communists were allowed freely to discuss publicly expressed views of their comrades, irrespective of their positions in the party.⁹ This meant that before the adoption of any final resolution everyone would have the right of democratic discussion, and even the opinions of the highest party leaders would in principle not be directive for as long as the discussion was ongoing.

The resolution of the fourth plenum fatally marked Djilas's political carrier. It was at this point that he proved to be a true believer. Considering his high political position, this may sound unbelievable, but in his enthusiasm Djilas believed or at least wanted to believe that the system, as it had been formally set up in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1950s, truly enabled what it promised on paper or at the declarative level. Later on, Djilas even said that right before his political fall he believed that although he would be discharged of all his political functions, he would be permitted to continue writing, which was extremely naive of him, if believable at all.

The efforts of the Yugoslav leaders to devise an alternative to the Soviet model of socialism and thus justify their power reached a climax at the sixth congress of the CPY in November 1952.¹⁰ The developments at this congress represented an important political breakthrough, while at the same time—as it turned out after less than a year—the sixth congress was one of the most controversial events in the history of the Yugoslav Communist Party. The party officially renounced direct control and renamed itself the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY). Its fundamental task was defined as providing the masses with the ideological guidance and education in the spirit of socialism, while the new name was supposed to emphasize the change and to outwardly promote the new role of the party. The resolutions of the congress

⁸ *Sednice Centralnog komiteta KPJ 1948-1952* (Beograd: Komunist 1985) 591.

⁹ *Sednice Centralnog komiteta KPJ 1948-1952*, 639.

¹⁰ For more on this see Mateja Režek, *Med resničnostjo in iluzijo: slovenska in jugoslovanska politika v desetletju po sporu z Informbirojem 1948-1958* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2005) 44–53.

reflected political self-confidence and visionary spirit of that time, although the thorough reconstruction of society that the communists prophesized lacked both determination and preparedness. As a result, the party's internal structure remained virtually intact. This structure was founded on the principle of the so-called democratic centralism, according to which the minority was unconditionally subordinated to the majority and the lower-ranking bodies to the Central Committee, although somewhat freer discussion than before was tolerated within the party itself. The resolutions via which the party renounced direct leadership and declared the separation between the party's and state authorities were soon put to the test, which later on they by and large failed to withstand.

Although resistance to further democratization appeared already before the sixth congress of the CPY, its resolutions resounded as a decisive break from Stalinism, and in many ways also as one of the final breaths of early “party liberalism.” The term “party liberalism” denotes the appearance of more democratic views inside the party, which however were named so only after Djilas's political fall. Djilas himself categorized his comrades to “democrats” and “bureaucrats,” and only later he called them “liberals” and “conservatives.” Among party democrats, along with himself, he especially counted Edvard Kardelj, Vladimir Bakarić, Koča Popović and some others, while in his opinion bureaucrats were present especially within the Serbian and Montenegrin party leadership. As for Aleksandar Ranković, Djilas considered him some kind of a soldier of the revolution, an obedient and flexible executor of the party's or Tito's directives. Djilas viewed Tito as more of a party conservative than democrat; this was probably mostly due to Tito's extremely sharp sense of danger and fear of losing power.

The enthusiasm of the reform era was relatively short lived. The opinions of those who advocated the policy of firm hand and saw democratization as the beginning of the end of the Communist party power prevailed in the Yugoslav leadership as early as in spring of 1953. This political spin was triggered not only by Stalin's death in March 1953 and hopes of warming up of the relationships with the Soviet Union, but also by the observations of the political leaders that the party had lost some of its former strength. The often inconsistent directives from above led to confusion and lack of discipline among party members, which resulted in apathy and public discussions of the current politics, as well as insertion of opinions that were not always in accord with those of the

political leaders. Resolutions of the second plenum of the Central Committee of the LCY in June 1953, which took place on the Brioni Islands, also pointed up this political standstill: “antisocialist deviations” were condemned, and communists were called to close their ranks again and take the initiative in public life.¹¹

Djilas understood the resolutions of the Brioni plenum as a standstill in the process of reforms, which indeed they were. Since he was not really a political pragmatist or an opportunist, as Kardelj was, it was probably the second plenum that brought about his articles in *Borba*. With these articles, Djilas was perhaps trying to stimulate public discussion on the further development of Yugoslav socialism and thus morally disqualify party conservatives, but he had no intention of organizing his own fraction within the Communist Party.

In his articles, Djilas initially criticized bureaucracy above all and emphasized the significance of free discussion, democracy, and equality before the law—“in brief, legality and the battle of opinions, and democracy again and again,”¹² as he himself wrote. Towards the end of 1953, his views became increasingly radical. On one hand he was encouraged by positive responses from readers and on the other by a belief that he was politically strong enough. At the end of December 1953, he was even elected president of the Federal Assembly, which created an impression in the public mind that the highest party leadership stood behind his writings. But the truth was far from this.

At the end of December 1953, Kardelj called Djilas in and declared his views to be excessive and hasty. Djilas did not agree with him and even replied that Tito was the bearer of bureaucratism, that a socialist left was already forming in the country, and that the emergence of another political party cannot be excluded.¹³ Soon after this he delighted his readers with the article entitled “Subjektivne snage”¹⁴ (Subjective forces), which was later described as one of the most controversial essays in the *Borba* series. At the core of this article was a conclusion that socialist forces existed even outside the party and that Communists are not the only “conscious force” in socialism. His series

¹¹ Arhiv Slovenije – The Archive of Slovenia (AS) 1589, box 3, The letter of the CC LCY.

¹² Milovan Djilas. “Konkretno,” *Ljudska pravica–Borba* 22 December 1953: 3.

¹³ Djilas. *Vlast* 265; Tretji (izredni) plenum CK ZKJ, *Komunist* 1/2 (1954): 29.

¹⁴ *Ljudska pravica–Borba* 27 December 1953: 3.

of articles published in *Borba* concluded on 4 January 1954 with the article *Savez ili partija*¹⁵ (The alliance or the party), in which he wrote that the Socialist Alliance of Working People (SAWP), which was created from the People's Front, should be transformed into a political party, while the Communist Party would be a kind of an association of like-minded people, which would gradually lose the character of a standard political party. He ended the article with the thought that at the current level of development only reforms and evolution could be creative. A day after the publication of this article, agents of the secret police brought Djilas in for a discussion with Kardelj and Ranković, who reproached him with revisionism. He was also called in by Tito, who told him that the party could not afford ideological disputes,¹⁶ and this sealed Djilas's political career.

Early on, Slovene party leaders were informed of the fact that Tito disagreed with Djilas's writings, so they rushed to organize an intra-party campaign against his articles. These were discussed for the first time on 5 January 1954, at a consultation with regional party secretaries.¹⁷ Without the customary introduction that normally steered the flow of party sessions, the Slovene party leader Miha Marinko invited regional party secretaries to discuss Djilas's articles, and some of them did not hide their sympathies for Djilas's ideas. Slovene political leaders did not yet know how Tito was planning to settle accounts with Djilas, so they probably tried to track his followers in advance. At the end of this session, the topmost Slovene party leaders such as Miha Marinko, Boris Zihelr, Boris Kraigher and Vida Tomšič spoke. They emphasized that Djilas's ideas are not the official views of the party and also warned the members of the controversial and rash nature of Djilas's thinking. At the same time, however, they recommended to all those attending the session not to go overboard with the criticism of his articles either. Vida Tomšič even said that some of Djilas's views were similar to those of Kardelj, but that Djilas simply went too far.¹⁸ At the session of the Presidency of the SAWP of Slovenia, which took place a few days later, when discussing Djilas's opinion that the socialist alliance should replace the Communist Party,

¹⁵ Ljudska pravica—*Borba* 4 January 1954: 2–3.

¹⁶ Djilas 1990, 157–58, 163; Darko Bekić, *Jugoslavija u hladnom ratu: odnosi s velikim silama 1949-1955* (Zagreb: Globus, 1988) 568.

¹⁷ AS 1589, box 4, The consultation with regional secretaries of the LCS, 5 January 1954.

¹⁸ The consultation with regional secretaries of the LCS, 17–18.

Miha Marinko stressed that this would not happen anytime soon, as communists would still be organized at a higher level.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Djilas crowned the series of articles in *Borba* with another one entitled “Anatomija jednog morala”²⁰ (The anatomy of a moral), which was published on 6 January in the journal *Nova misao*. In it he presented the morality of the new political elite. Since at least in Slovenia the political campaign against Djilas’s ideas began even before the publication of this paper, the thesis that “The Anatomy of a Moral” was the reason for political elimination of Djilas is not true, but it certainly did have a profound effect on the emotional tone of discussions at the third plenum of the Central Committee of the LCY, as many party leaders could recognize themselves in this article.

The third plenum took place 16–17 January 1953 and it only had one item on the agenda—the case of Milovan Djilas. Djilas was accused of revisionism, breach of party discipline, and attempts at liquidating the Communist Party and restoring capitalism; some even reproached him for “fractionism,” but Tito rejected these accusations. Initially, Djilas was not willing to repent. He only admitted to the breach of party discipline and added that the majority of his “controversial” ideas were not even his own, but that he had taken them from many authors—even from Kardelj and Tito.²¹ At the end of the plenum, Djilas did nevertheless repent, as self-criticism was an inevitable party ritual. He was excommunicated from the Central Committee by a vote, including his own. It is interesting that critics reproached Djilas for ideas discordant to the resolutions of the sixth congress of the CPY, although Djilas’s articles merely expanded on the party congress and its policies from the beginning of the 1950s, and were in no way contrary to them.

The political elimination of Milovan Djilas was not followed by any major purge. The party leaders all agreed that Djilas did not organize a circle of followers and in fact merely expressed his opinions publicly, causing confusion among party members, who read his articles as directives due to his high position in the party. In Slovenia, it was found that Djilas enjoyed the greatest sympathies among intellectuals, but party leaders warned against a campaign against them, as in Boris Kraigher’s

¹⁹ AS 537, box 26, The session of the Presidency of the SAWPS, 13 January 1954, 29.

²⁰ *Momčilo Đorgović, Dilas—vernik i jeretik* (Beograd: Akvarijus, 1989) 325–39.

²¹ Tretni (izredni) plenum CK ZKJ, *Komunist* 1/2 (1954): 16.

words this would artificially create a Djilas's fraction.²² Djilas's articles were received with much enthusiasm primarily by the group of intellectuals connected with the magazine *Naši razgledi*. Along with the summaries of articles from *Borba*, they also published some of their own thoughts that were similar to Djilas's; for example, Ljubo Bavcon's *Razmišljanje o nekaterih vprašanjih socializma*²³ (Reflection on some questions of socialism) and an article by Vlado Vodopivec, *Za socialistične oblike javne razprave*²⁴ (For socialist forms of public discussion). After Djilas's political elimination, the contributors to *Naši razgledi* were accused of “djilasism,” and some of them were even expelled from the party. Slovene party leaders also perceived the influence of Djilas's ideas in the cultural circle around the magazine *Beseda*,²⁵ as well as at in *Revija 57* the end of the 1950s and in *Perspektive* at the beginning of the 1960s.²⁶

A case similar to that of *Naši razgledi* occurred at the editorial board of the Croatian party paper *Naprijed*, but in Croatia the ideological purge was harsher and more in the public eye; it also included some members of the Croatian Central Committee. A considerable disquiet was caused among people especially by the suicide of the director of the Croatian party school Augustin Šprljan, who was accused of being Djilas's adherent. The Croatian party leader Vladimir Bakarić, whom Djilas actually considered a great “liberal,” found himself in the role of the main prosecutor against those who advocated Djilas's ideas in Croatia. He was assigned this role probably for this very reason, the same way Edvard Kardelj was the main prosecutor against Djilas in January 1954 at the third plenum of the Central Committee of the LCY, thus also reckoning with himself.

The party could not afford harsh treatment of Djilas and those who shared his views, because this would have constituted public denial of its own policies from the beginning of the 1950s. The party's criticism

²² AS 1589, box 4, The consultation with regional secretaries of the LCS, 20 January 1954, 6.

²³ *Naši razgledi* 5 December 1953: 6-8.

²⁴ *Naši razgledi* 26 December 1953: 1-2.

²⁵ AS 1589, box 7, Session of the executive committee of the CC LCS, 12 October 1954.

²⁶ For more on this see Božo Repe, “Vpliv »dilasovščine« na Revijo 57 in Perspektive,” *Borec* 535–37 (1994): 928–35.

of Djilas therefore did not revolve around the erroneous nature of Djilas's views, but focused on their rashness. The political leaders were cautious also because of possible negative responses from the West: Western diplomats and the press were very interested in the "Djilas case" and had been observing Yugoslav flirting with the Soviet Union with much suspicion. Some Western observers believed that the very reason for Djilas's fall lay in the fact that Yugoslavia was approaching to the Soviet Union and Djilas was its loudest critic after the split with the Cominform. They also noticed that in Yugoslav politics the protagonists of strict party discipline, who were opposed to any liberalization of the political system, had started to prevail.

Djilas was frequently credited with ideas about a two-party system in which there would be a social-democratic party along with the Communist Party. Judging from a diary entry of Edvard Kocbek, Djilas told his comrades about the idea of two political parties as early as 1950, and he envisaged the new party as legal opposition to the Communist Party that would constitute a means for maintaining political balance.²⁷ This is probably where, later, the SAWP originated, but like the People's Front before it, this was no more than a party transmission. Rumors about the development of a social-democratic party also spread immediately after Djilas's fall,²⁸ but they soon died down.

The period of political changes had been drawing to a close since the spring of 1953, and Djilas's thoughts on the prospects of socialism and public criticism of the party and the political elite only accelerated the tightening of the political reins. This also is proven by Tito's own words at the session of the newly elected Federal Assembly on 28 January 1954. The president concluded his speech with the following words:

There is a certain essential difference between the era we have just experienced during the past four years and the emerging new era. We no longer have to change the organizational and constitutional forms. Before us lies the task of solidifying and perfecting the new social and political system.²⁹

²⁷ Edvard Kocbek, *Dnevnik 1950* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2000) 318–19.

²⁸ *Slovenian Report on Yugoslavia* 4 (1954): 20–21.

²⁹ *Ljudska pravica—Borba* 30 January 1954: 2.

In that same speech, Tito evaluated the international political position of Yugoslavia and made many critical remarks about the Soviet Union, but spoke highly of collaboration with the West. This was because in the West doubts had appeared regarding further support for Yugoslavia because the West viewed the “Djilas case” as the end of the democratization process and beginning of a repressive policy. Tito was well aware of this. By criticizing the Soviet Union, he tried to dispel second thoughts on the part of the Western powers concerning further, urgently needed help, for, among other things, a satisfactory resolution of the Trieste question. Tito tried to present the “Djilas case” to the Western public as an internal party problem unrelated to Yugoslavia’s internal or external politics. Even in his interview with American journalists in March 1954, Tito claimed that the reason for Djilas’s political elimination was not that he had advocated Western democracy, but that he had committed a breach of party discipline.³⁰

The epilogue to the “Djilas case” did not come until January 1955, when he received a year and a half suspended sentence due to his interview in *The New York Times*, in which he described the Yugoslav system as totalitarian and similar to Stalinism. In December 1956, he was sentenced to three years in prison for his article in *The New Leader* and his statement to *France Press* criticizing the actions of the Yugoslav authorities during the Hungarian uprising. In October 1957, the court added a further seven years imprisonment for publication of his book *Nova klasa* (The new class), and he earned another five in 1962 for *Razgovori sa Staljinom* (Conversations with Stalin). In December 1966, he was released from prison after nine years, but was sentenced to political anathema.

Although Yugoslav political leaders tried to limit the dimensions of the “Djilas case,” it resounded powerfully in the international community because Yugoslav communists clearly demonstrated through the political elimination of Djilas that they belonged to the East and not West. Djilas’s political fall thus symbolically marked the end of a politically very exciting period of Yugoslav communism, when ideas were far ahead of reality.

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³⁰ AS 1277, box 33, file 9/4262, p. 5.

POVZETEK**PORAZ PRVEGA »PARTIJSKEGA LIBERALIZMA« IN ODMEV
DJILASOVIH IDEJ V SLOVENIJI**

Avtorica opisuje obdobje političnih sprememb v Jugoslaviji po sporu z Informbirojem skozi ideološko preobrazbo člana najožjega jugoslovanskega partijskega vodstva Milovana Djilasa. Na pragu petdesetih let, ki jih je zaznamovalo iskanje alternativnega modela socializma, se je Djilasova kritika sovjetskega sistema začela zgodaj spogledovati s kritiko jugoslovanske partije, ki ji je Djilas v svojih znamenitih člankih v Borbi jeseni 1953 odrekel nič manj kot pravico do političnega monopola. Reformnemu poletu jugoslovanskih komunistov je tedaj že pohajala sapa, v jugoslovanskem partijskem vrhu pa so znova prevladala stališča zagovornikov politike trde roke, ki so v reformah videli začetek konca partijske oblasti. Djilasov politični padec januarja 1954 je tako simbolično zaznamoval konec politično zelo razburljivega obdobja jugoslovanskega komunizma, ko so bile ideje daleč pred resničnostjo. Članek obravnava tudi odmev Djilasovih zamisli v Sloveniji, kjer so jim bili naklonjeni zlasti levo usmerjeni kritični izobraženci iz kroga sodelavcev Naših razgledov.