

VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE EMERGENCE AND ACTIVITIES OF FRANCO-SERBIAN CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS IN SERBIA BEFORE 1914

ADPECTE VARIATE ALE EMERGENȚEI ȘI ACTIVITĂȚILOR ASOCIAȚIILOR CULTURALE FRANCO-SÂRBE ÎN SERBIA ÎNAINTE DE 1914

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Abstract

The expansion of French culture in Serbia resulted in the emergence of associations specializing in teaching and training of the French language and dissemination of French culture. Since the mid-19th century, the local bearers of this culture were Serbs educated in France. Between the end of the 19th century, when the first initiative for the establishment of a society of this kind was launched, and the Great War (1914–1918), there were several associations whose members were mostly prominent Serbs and representatives of France in Serbia. Based on historical sources and literature, the paper analyses various aspects of the establishment and operation of Franco-Serbian cultural associations and their influence on Serbian culture through the paradigms of the relationship between France and Serbia, international relations, the emergence and achievements of the French cultural diplomacy.

Rezumat

Expanziunea culturii franceze în Serbia a rezultat în emergența asociațiilor specializate în predare și instruire limbajului francez precum și diseminării culturii franceze. Încă de la mijlocul secolului al XIX-lea, purtătorii acestei culturi au fost sârbii educați în Franța. Pe la sfârșitul secolului al XIX-lea, când prima inițiativă pentru stabilirea societății de acest fel a fost lansată, și Marele Război (1914–1918), au fost câteva asociații ai căror membri au fost în predominantă sârbi și reprezentanți ai Franței în Serbia. În baza surselor istorice și a literaturii, lucrarea analizează aspecte variate ale stabilirii și operării asociațiilor culturale franco-sârbe și influența lor asupra culturii sârbești prin paradigme ale relației dintre Franța și Serbia, relațiile internaționale, emergența și realizările diplomației culturale franceze.

Keywords: *the French culture, Serbia, France, the Franco-Serbian cultural associations, cultural diplomacy.*

Cuvinte cheie: *cultura franceză, Serbia, Franța, asociațiile franco-sârbești, diplomație culturală*

1. Introduction

Late in the 19th century, France laid the foundations of modern cultural diplomacy by establishing cultural institutions (institutes, schools and grammar schools) in other countries through which it disseminated its culture. In 1893, the *Alliance française* (*French Alliance*), which had been founded in 1883 upon the initiative of a part of the French elite to employ culture in

achieving political goals of France, was particularly interested in the number of French-learning students in Serbia (ŠOBE, MARTEN, 2014, 129–130; VUJOVIĆ, 2014, 107).¹ After the reports, which French diplomats did not find satisfactory, the *Alliance française* expanded the scope of its activities in Serbia by the end of the century by sending books and newspapers and organizing language tuition courses (MALE, 1999, 259). It was from this period on that cultural cooperation had an important place in the Franco-Serbian relations.

Serbs educated in France introduced changes into Serbian society which enabled the adoption of the French cultural model already in the second half of the 19th century. The knowledge of French, as the language of diplomacy and a symbol of culture, promised a career in the state administration and a high social status. The learning of French was the most widespread in bourgeois circles and among youth. By establishing the Department of the French Language and Literature (1897) and launching *Srpski književni glasnik* (*Serbian Literary Gazette*, 1901), Bogdan Popović, who had studied in France, sought to transform Serbian culture and society according to the model of French culture (PAVLOVIĆ, 2008, 10). He was followed by his brother Pavle Popović, the author of *The Grammar of the French Language* for the fifth grade, which was used until World War II for the beginners' course of French (KOVIĆ, 2003, 226; VUJOVIĆ, 2014, 207). At the turn of the century, Popović's students Jovan Skerlić, a PhD student at the University of Lausanne, and Uroš Petrović, a PhD student in Paris, as well as the majority of Serbian intellectuals began to foster the so-called "Belgrade style" of writing – a variant of the Serbian literary language shaped on the model of an elegant, logical and flexible French idiom (VITANOVIĆ, 1965, 57–72; GORDIĆ, 1971, 18–27; SAMARDŽIĆ, 1990, 88–89; PAVLOVIĆ, 2008, 84–85; KOVIĆ, 2003, 229–230). In this way, the cultural life of Serbia became dominated by a generation who sought their models and inspiration in the French state, politics, ideas, art, architecture and literature.

Franco-Serbian cultural associations were established at the time when France was increasingly interested in expanding the scope of cultural influences through the *Alliance française* and the development of the idea that French culture should serve as the basis for strengthening Serbian culture. Through the analysis of various aspects of their establishment and activities, we will try to explore the relationship between France and Serbia during the international crisis that led to the first worldwide war.

2. The Establishment of Franco-Serbian Cultural Associations

The desire to improve the knowledge of a foreign language as a primary means of communication and transmission of knowledge was one of the motives that urged primarily the lovers of the French language and culture to establish associations that would offer education at an informal level. Already in 1891, i.e. before the establishment of the Department of the French Language at the Great School, there was an initiative to launch an association that would popularize the French language and culture. A letter of the French Embassy, as of July 5, 1891, sent to Paris, mentions the founding of another society in Niš that would follow the model of Belgrade's association, whereas the director of the Serbian Post Offices, Grozdić, suggested the establishment of the *French Club* (PAVLOVIĆ, 2005, 13–14). At the moment, the body of information about this association is rather limited, but sources mention other societies. In May 1904, the Franco-Serbian Literary Society was founded, whereas in 1905, Louis Gabriel Antoine Joseph, Vicomte de Fontenay mentioned the *Réunion française de Belgrade* (*Belgrade French Association*) in his reports to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The aforementioned association assembled members of the then small French colony in Belgrade, who maintained relations with about forty Serbs. According to de Fontenay, the association was involved in spreading the French language and culture in resistance to the "growing wave of Germanism" (Ibidem). Thanks to private

¹ Archives des Ministère des Affaires étrangères – La Courneuve, Paris [AMAE], v. 35, Légation de la Serbie à l'Alliance française, 1883.

donations, in only one year the association managed to expand its activities significantly and increase the number of members, so that in February 1907, it had 138 members.²

The body of literature on this topic has so far highlighted the fact that the establishment of associations for popularizing the French language and culture had a special role in the dissemination of French cultural influences in Serbia. However, these studies fail to substantially stress that the establishment of such associations began at the time when Serbia was striving to establish a closer relationship with France, both politically and economically. At the time when the Franco-Russian alliance was concluded (1894), the Serbian elite believed that it was possible to maintain independence and achieve national goals by relying on the new alliance between the traditional protector of Orthodox Christians – Russia, and the model country in terms of freedoms and culture – France (VOJVODIĆ, 1988; KOLAKOVIĆ, 2015, 66, 113, 251, 296–297, 367, 401, 437). On its part, France showed an increased interest in the presence in the Balkans and Serbia. At the proposal of Ernest Lavisse, the “national teacher”, the historian Albert Malet visited Belgrade in 1892 on “a special mission at the Serbian court” and “as a teacher of diplomatic history to the future Serbian king Aleksandar Obrenović”.³ The mission was agreed upon by French and Serbian radical parties, i.e. by the two countries. Aware of the importance of his mission, Malet noted down: “The Serbian government has entrusted to me an educational mission, while the French government has entrusted me with a political one” (MALE, 1999, 17–18; BATAKOVIĆ, 2013, 298–311). The rise of Franco-Serbian associations coincided with a political rapprochement, while the dynastic overturn in Serbia had a significant role in their further development.

The rise to the throne of Petar Karadjordjević (1903), a former student of the prestigious Saint-Cyr Military Academy and a participant in the Franco-Prussian War, enabled the further expansion of French influences in Serbia (VOJVODIĆ, 1999, 225; ŽIVOJINOVIĆ, 1, 2009, 36–43; ŽIVOJINOVIĆ, 2, 2009, 440).⁴ However, the second period of the intensive cultural action of France in Serbia falls into the period after the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1908). At the initiative of the Serbian diplomatic corps, the French minister Stephen Pichon tried to mitigate Serbia’s dissent due to the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In accordance with Serbian interests, Pichon expressed his commitment to ensuring some compensation for Serbia (ALEKSIĆ-PEJKOVIĆ, 1965, 411–413; RADUSINOVIĆ, 1991, 7–8; VOJVODIĆ, 1999, 227). The compensation included loans allocated to Serbia, a greater influence of the French capital in Serbia and grants for cultural propaganda. Based on an agreement of French and Serbian diplomats in 1909, Gaston Gravier was appointed as a lecturer of French at the University of Belgrade, while the purpose of his visit was to strengthen the spiritual connection between Serbian and French cultural contexts (DEMANGEON, 1915, 455; PAVLOVIĆ, 2008, 41).⁵

The establishment of Franco-Serbian societies on the eve of World War I was supported by both countries. Between 1911 and 1914, the *Société littéraire de Belgrade* (*Belgrade Literary Society*) was active and it was supported by donations from the Municipal Council of Paris, Léon Decaux, the French ambassador in Serbia, and Prince Roland Bonaparte (ŽUJOVIĆ, 1918, 32–33; PAVLOVIĆ, 2015, 14). Decaux was an honorary member of the Society, just like the French military attaché, Colonel Fournier, and several French bankers. In 1914, the list of members included King Petar Karadjordjević, as well as a significant number of prominent Serbs (ŽUJOVIĆ, 1986, 60–112; DJURIĆ, 2014, 93–94, 112, 122).⁶ The need for French culture that emerged following the return of an increasing number of people educated in French schools was also reflected in the establishment of Franco-Serbian associations in provincial towns in Serbia. In 1910,

² AMAE, Serbie, Nouvelle Série, vol. 38, Raport présenté à l’Assemblée annuelle le 4/17 février 1907.

³ AMAE, Correspondance politique Serbie, 1892, 13, 285, 291, Paris, 25. août 1892; Beograd 28. august 1892; Archives nationales de France, Paris [ANF], AJ/16/6074, Dossier Mallet; F/17/2987a, A. Mallet - Mission en Macédoine études ethnographiques (1902)

⁴ AMAE, Serbie, Nouvelle Série, vol. 12, télégramme de roi Petar à classe Pubella, Belgrade 21 novembre 1903

⁵ "Gaston Gravije – Junačka smrt jednog prijatelja Srbije". *Politika*, 18. juni 1915, p. 2.

⁶ Arhiv Srbije, Lični fond Jovan Žužović, br. 32, l. 1.

a group of intellectuals led by General Dimitrije Paić, Čeda Mihailović, Dušan Pavlović, Milan Kostic and Moris Avramovic established the *Réunion française* in Šabac with the help of Gaston Gravier, a lecturer in at the University of Belgrade, Lacour Gaiyet, a member of the French Academy, and Jeanne Migeon (POPOVIĆ-DRENOVAC, 2005, 425). Two hundred people enrolled as members of the association. These associations brought together francophone Serbs in Serbia, due to which French cultural influences became even stronger.

3. The activities of Franco-Serbian associations in Serbia

The activities of Franco-Serbian associations were mostly related to language training and nurturing and adoption of the fruits of French civilization. According to the Rules of Procedure of the *Franco-Serbian Literary Society*, its main aim was to popularize the French language. Daily communication in French and the availability of French newspapers, magazines and books were the means by which the Society carried out its mission. However, the political aspects of these activities were apparent already at that time. The 1903 Rules of Procedure of the club inform us that the owner of the club was Slavka H. M. Antonović, while the Honorary President was the Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Milutin D. Nešić, which shows the Society's importance in Serbian political and intellectual circles.⁷ At this time, after lengthy preparations and corrections, the second revised edition of the general dictionary of the French language by Nastas Petrović, a law professor at the Great School, writer, translator and a member of the Paris Geographical Society, was published by the State Printing House (STOJANOVIĆ-KNEŽEVIĆ, 2005, 220, 224). At the same time, the *Alliance française* increased the number of free summer language courses in Serbia and France. These courses were meant as preparation for those who wished to continue their studies at one of the French universities.⁸ The French Alliance also developed cooperation with associations of pupils and students, such as *Pobratimstvo* (*Brotherhood*), *Nada* (*Hope*), *Trgovačka omaldina* (*Merchants' Youth*), *Podmladak* (*Offspring*) from Kragujevac, as well as with *Slobodna škola za mlade devojke* (*Free School for Young Girls*).⁹

Réunion française de Belgrade was spreading its influence in the Serbian society rather quickly owing to significant financial support from France distributed through French diplomats in Serbia. Due to this, Serbian Francophiles, and, what was even more important for France, future Francophiles were able to regularly read prestigious French newspapers and magazines: *Le Temps*, *Le Matin*, *Le Journal*, *Le Journal des Débats*, *L'Illustration*, *La Revue des Deux Mondes*, *La Revue Hebdomadaire*, etc (ŽUJOVIĆ, 1918, 49). Lectures, the establishment of libraries and reading rooms, free French language courses, art exhibitions, scholarships for summer courses organized by the *Alliance française*, awards for the best translations from French, the cooperation of artistic and scholarly institutions were the activities in which the society was involved. As a consequence, the Serbian elite began to look at international events through a *Parisian magnifying glass*, which slowly and indirectly shaped a political framework for a joint action of France and Serbia.

As it has been already mentioned, the *Société littéraire de Belgrade* was supported by donations from the Municipal Council of Paris and the French ambassador Decaux, who was also an honorary member, together with the French military attaché and several French bankers (ŽUJOVIĆ, 1918, 32–33, PAVLOVIĆ, 2005, 14). In 1910 and 1911, Gaston Gravier and Léon Decaux helped the establishment of literary societies in Šabac, Niš and Valjevo which followed the model of the French Literary Society in Belgrade.¹⁰ French members of these societies sought to expand cultural influences throughout the country. Another specific aspect of the situation was the fact that the Serbian king Petar Karadjordjević was a member of the *Société littéraire de Belgrade*.

⁷ AMAE, Serbie, Nouvelle Série, vol. 24, Serbie, 1897–1914.

⁸ Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes [CADN], Légation de Belgrade, 168, Alliance Français à le Ministre de France à Belgrade, Paris 9. mars 1905, Paris 8. mars 1907.

⁹ CADN, Légation de Belgrade, 168, Alliance Français 1888, 1895, 1905–1907.

¹⁰ CADN, Légation de Belgrade, 168, Alliance Français à le Ministre de France à Belgrade, Paris 5. juillet 1901.

Along with Serbia's full political shift towards Russia and France, this fact might have given an additional impetus to the official state support to Franco-Serbian cultural cooperation.

Active members of the *Société littéraire de Belgrade* included Metropolitan Dimitrije, Serbian intellectuals and French students: Ivan Djaja, Miodrag Ibrovac and Milan Grol, famous industrialists Ignjat Bajloni and Milan Vapa. Some of them (Djaja and Grol), accompanied by Bogdan Popović, Jovan Skerlić, Uroš Petrović and the Serbian minister and Prime Minister Milovan Milovanović (who acquired his PhD degree in law in Paris) were members of the Society's Management Board. The Honorary President of the Society was the politician, lawyer, professor and Minister Djourje Pavlović. Jovan Žujović, a pioneer in geological and paleontological science in Serbia, professor, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister (1905) of Education and Religious Affairs (1905, 1909–1910) was the President, while the Gaston Gravier and Mileta Novaković (son of Stojan Novaković, prominent Serbian historian, scholar, politician and diplomat, the Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Minister of Interior) were the secretaries. The prominent Serbian intellectuals and the majority of former French students gathered there, and together with their French colleagues, they sought to create the basis for conveying the spirit of French culture into Serbian culture. The active members of the association included members of Masonic lodges (Bajloni, the Popović brothers, Decaux, etc.), and primarily the lodge *Jedinstvo (Unity)*, which was under the patronage of the Grand Orient of France (ALEKSIĆ-PEJKOVIĆ, 1965, 522; MICHAÏLOVICH, 1912, 576–587; STOJKOVIĆ, 1925, 173–176, NENENZIĆ, 2010, 342; STAMENKOVIĆ, MARKOVIĆ, 2009, 65; KOLAKOVIĆ, 2015, 228–240).¹¹ This suggests that various aspects of the society's activities were associated with personal cooperation of its members with other organizations and associations.

4. Conclusion

In the history of Franco-Serbian cultural associations in Serbia and their activities at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, it is possible to identify several aspects of their influence. The need for such associations in the late 19th century was not only the result of the social influence of generations educated in France but also of political and economic relations between the two countries. New people educated at the most prestigious French universities, sought to take the spiritual culture of the Serbs at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries to the “main stages of modern European civilization and spirituality” (PALAVESTRA, 1986, 25–26). The adoption of the French cultural model that was largely carried out through Franco-Serbian cultural associations erased the traces of “Oriental fatalism, seamlessly encapsulated in the spirit and mentality of the Serbian people” (*Ibidem*). The bearers of major changes in Serbia's political and cultural life were the above-mentioned members of Franco-Serbian cultural associations.

The international relations in the late 19th and the early 20th century, Serbia's rapprochement with its new allies, Russia and France, as well as the Great Britain, and the estrangement from and the conflict with Austria-Hungary created the basis for a change not only in Serbian culture but also in Serbia's foreign policy and economic plans. The belief that France could play the role of a major factor in providing economic and diplomatic support to Serbia had an important place in Serbia's foreign policy programme (JAKŠIĆ, 1953, 132; MILIĆ, 1995, 103–112; MALE, 1999, 79, 88.119).¹² In January 1906, the cancellation of the loan in Vienna and the purchase of guns in France – the so-called Cannon Issue, caused discontent on the part of Austria-Hungary due to the weakening of their political and economic positions in Serbia and soon led to the closure of borders for Serbian products and the Customs War between Serbia and Austria-Hungary (DJORDJEVIĆ, 1962, 210–248). The activities of Franco-Serbian associations from the mid-1900s were directly influenced by the French state, according to which cultural influences were an antecedent or support

¹¹ Arhiv Jugoslavije, Fond Masonske lože, F-100, Arhitektonské table lože Pobratim za 1908. godinu, Arhitektonské table o radu lože Pobratim za 1909. godinu, Izveštaj o radu lože Pobratim za 1910. godinu,

¹² "La question d'Orient populaire, par Charles Sancerme Paris 1897". *Delo*, book 15 (1897), pp. 511–512; "Jedan srpski ministarski program (1895)". *Nedeljni pregled*, br. 6 (43), 8. februar 1909, pp. 84–87.

for economic and political influences in Serbia. The further influx of French capital in Serbia (loans, involvement of French companies in public works, concessions for mining, the establishment of the Franco-Serbian Bank in 1910) went parallelly with the activities of Franco-Serbian associations, which were supported by a French ambassador, a lecturer of the French language at Belgrade University and members of the French business colony (POIDEVIN, 1964, 49–67; ALEKSIĆ-PEJKOVIĆ, 1965 90–114, 340. 206–223, 285–301; MILIĆ, 1992, 180; MITROVIĆ, 1994, 52; MIRČIĆ, 2005, 60; SRETENOVIC, 2008, 51, 54, 63–66; MITROVIĆ, 2010, 370). Already in an early period, cultural diplomacy demonstrated its power through the establishment and operation of Franco-Serbian cultural associations and enabled the expansion of French culture in line with the economic and political interests of France in the Balkans in the wake of the Great War (1914–1918).

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