

DECISION-MAKING IN THE FOREIGN POLICY OF EARLY MODERN RAGUSA (DUBROVNIK)*

Based on a comprehensive reading of the minutes of the Ragusan Senate, this article analyses the decision-making in the foreign policy of the Ragusan Republic. It provides an overview of the key institutions and their interaction in articulating foreign policy. Moreover, the text outlines the fundamental political values and traditional techniques of consultation which affected the outcome of decision-making. After providing such a broad context, it reconstructs in detail the procedures behind the two key foreign policy decisions: the election of diplomats and the writing of diplomatic letters and instructions. Finally, it addresses the two main problems which stemmed from the rigidly collective nature of Ragusan decision-making – the slowness and the leaking of information.

Keywords: Dubrovnik (Ragusa), diplomacy, decision-making, early modern, political history

Introduction: an obvious question

Perhaps the best-known commonplace regarding the Ragusan Republic is that it had a highly effective diplomacy – and this diplomacy is probably the most studied aspect of Ragusa's history. However, while there are numerous works on specific diplomatic crises, relationships with major powers, and even individual diplomats, one important question remains largely unanswered. That, quite obvious, question is: who and how exactly planned and conducted that diplomacy?

This general question can be divided into more specific ones. To begin with, which institutions decided on diplomatic matters? What were their methods of decision-making? How were the diplomats elected? How and by whom were the diplomatic letters and instructions written? Which political values influenced the formulation of foreign policy? Finally, which specific problems did Ragusan institutions encounter in planning and managing diplomacy?

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This study attempts to address the aforementioned important questions, at least in a fragmentary and preliminary way – it is based on comprehensive but by no means systematic reading of the minutes of the Ragusan Senate.¹ It begins by providing a general overview of the key political institutions and their functions in the foreign policy of the Republic. The second subchapter deals with the fundamental values and *modus operandi* of Ragusan governing elite, revealing the ways in which they influenced foreign policy. The third part reconstructs in detail the procedures behind the two crucial diplomatic activities: electing diplomats and writing of diplomatic letters and instructions. Finally, the fourth part deals with the two main problems which troubled Ragusan foreign policy decision-making – slowness and leaks of information – as well as various solutions which the elite applied in trying to mitigate them.

The insight into all the aforementioned issues will hopefully help in dispelling an illusion characteristic of the traditional histories of Ragusan diplomacy. Namely, Ragusan government was all too often treated as a monolithic subject: usually labelled as the “Republic,” the “government,” or simply “Ragusa,” it was represented as unproblematically and smoothly guiding and managing the foreign policy. This article seeks to deconstruct that illusionary subject by stressing that Ragusan foreign policy was created through the interaction of several bodies and that it was a result of complex procedures which suffered from many specific problems. In other words, the point of this text is simple: when one takes a closer look at the Ragusan diplomacy, things are far more complicated than usually thought.²

Main governmental bodies and their functions in foreign policy

Generally speaking, Ragusan Republic was governed through a system of intertwined councils whose members were recruited from a closed and hered-

¹ The minutes of Ragusan Senate are preserved as two key series in the State Archives in Dubrovnik, both extensively used in this text: *Acta consilii Rogatorum* (henceforth ACR) and *Secreta Rogatorum*. For the sixteenth and seventeenth century, together they encompass more than one hundred extensive volumes. While they certainly provide a wealth of data, a truly in-depth insight into the topic would require systematic consultation of other archival series, as well as a comparative approach – both of which are currently beyond my capacities.

² Among the few studies which addressed, at least partially, the problems of decision-making in the Ragusan foreign policy, the most notable are: Bogdan KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1951; *idem*, *Diplomati i konzuli u starom Dubrovniku*, Zagreb: IBI, Poduzeće za izdavanje, prodaju i distribuciju knjiga, 1957, *passim*, especially 11-25, 35-45; Vesna MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istambulu*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU, 2003, *passim*, especially 21-32, 240-245. These important works are extensively used in the text which follows.

itary patriciate.³ Although each of these councils tended to focus on a certain group of issues, there was no clear division of competencies between them. All of them could deal with very diverse matters, ranging from individual appeals to diplomatic issues or legislative proposals, and each of these bodies had certain judiciary and electoral functions.⁴

The formal head of the Republic was the Rector who presided over the three main councils and represented the Republic on ceremonial occasions but enjoyed little real power. The Rector was assisted and supervised by the eleven magistrates who, together with him, constituted the Minor council. The Minor council dealt with the everyday governmental business, but also received all governmental correspondence and prepared the agenda for the other two councils. The most influential council was the Senate which consisted of some 30 to 60 individuals, depending on the period. It had a key role in foreign policy and state security, but effectively deliberated on all important issues and served as the highest appellate court. The third and broadest of the governmental bodies was the Major council which encompassed all the adult male patricians, including almost 400 individuals at the peak of the patriciate's demographic expansion in the late fifteenth century. Nominally the most important governmental institution and the bearer of "sovereignty", the Major council elected the majority of magistrates, granted pardons, and voted on the new legislation.⁵

When it came to foreign policy of the Republic, the crucial role was played by the Senate. It was *de facto* the most influential governmental institution, gathering all the key magistrates of the Republic. The Senate consisted of the current Minor council, the Minor council and the Rectors from the previous year, certain officials which entered *ex officio* (e.g. *provisores civitatis*, civil and criminal judges) and

³ For two recent English overviews of the Ragusan patrician elite see: Zdenka JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom: the Nobility of Dubrovnik between the Middle Ages and Humanism*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik, HAZU, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2015.; Nenad VEKARIĆ, *The Nobility of Dubrovnik: Roots, Structure and Development*, Zagreb - Dubrovnik: Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2019.

⁴ Nella LONZA, *Pod plaštem pravde. Kaznenopravni sustav Dubrovačke Republike u XVIII. stoljeću*, Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 1997., 64-74; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 163.

⁵ Good overviews of the three main councils are: Giacomo LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto degli Annali di Rausa*, Venice: Ad instantia di Antonio Leonardi, 1605., 154-160; Konstantin VOJNOVIĆ, O državnom ustrojstvu republike Dubrovačke, *Rad Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti*, 103, Zagreb, 1891., 24-67; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 163-173; David RHEUBOTTOM, *Age, Marriage, and Politics in Fifteenth-century Ragusa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000., 30-43, 132-138. For the interaction of these bodies in the decision-making process, see: Lovro KUNČEVIĆ, Political Decision-making in the Republic of Ragusa (Dubrovnik) in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, in: *The Cultures of Voting in Premodern Europe*, (ed. Serena Ferente, Lovro Kunčević i Miles Pattenden), New York: Routledge, 2018., 227-228.

a number of elected Senators.⁶ In the sixteenth and seventeenth century the Senate met three or four times a week and there were usually between 20 and 40 councillors.⁷ This gathering of the narrower patrician elite had the crucial say in all the important matters and especially those pertaining to foreign policy. It decided on diplomatic strategy, conducted espionage, elected ambassadors, and wrote or supervised the writing of diplomatic letters and instructions.⁸ Importantly, the Senate had a tendency to micromanage: despite of being swamped with work, when it came to foreign policy, it rarely delegated its work to other bodies. The majority of decisions regarding diplomacy – except for the drafting of documents and sending the most routine missions, both addressed below – were made by the Senate itself.

When it comes to the internal functioning of the Senate, it seems that its *modus operandi* was fairly egalitarian and that there was room for individual initiative. The Senators were able to put a certain topic at the agenda of the Senate by submitting it to the Rector and the Minor council, who then proposed it at one of the meetings.⁹ The vote of every member of Senate – regardless of his office, age or origin – had the same value, including that of the Rector himself.¹⁰ Moreover, it seems that there were no strict regulations limiting the freedom of speech, the only limitations being defamation, disturbance of order, and lobbying, as well as the obvious requirement that the Senators should keep to the topic which was debated.¹¹ There also seems to have been a time limit on the duration of the Senators' speeches. On several occasions in the seventeenth century, the minutes

⁶ On the composition of the Senate see: LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 156; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 168; RHEUBOTTOM, *Age, Marriage, and Politics*, 35.

⁷ *Liber croceus*, ed. Branislav M. Nedeljković, Beograd: SANU, 1997, cap. 86; LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 157; Jorjo TADIĆ, Dubrovački senat (<https://www.hkv.hr/izdvojeno/vai-prilozi/a-b/bai-ivo/5827-dubrovaki-senat.html> accessed on 11.12.2024); Branislav M. NEDELJKOVIĆ, Nekolike karakteristike i opaske o dubrovačkom pravu i državi 1358-1460., *Istorijski časopis* 18, Beograd, 1971., 95; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 171.

⁸ On the issues which were dealt by the Senate, see: Filip DE DIVERSIS, *Opis slavnoga grada Dubrovnika 1440*, (ed. Zdenka Janeković Römer), Zagreb: Dom i svijet, 2004., 66-67; LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 156-157; Bogdan KRIZMAN, 'Memoire' Bara Bettere austrijskom generalu T. Milutinoviću o Dubrovačkoj Republici iz 1815, *Anali Histojskog instituta Jugoslavenske akademije znanosti i umjetnosti u Dubrovniku* 1, Dubrovnik, 1952., 425; VOJNOVIĆ, O državnom ustrojstvu republike Dubrovačke, 56-59; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 168-169.

⁹ For this mechanism, which was applied also for the agenda of the Major council, see: *Liber viridis*, ed. Branislav M. Nedeljković, Beograd: SANU, 1984, cap. 14; Milan REŠETAR, Dubrovačko Veliko vijeće, *Dubrovnik* 1/2, Dubrovnik, 1929., 64; LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 159; KRIZMAN, 'Memoire' Bara Bettere, 426.

¹⁰ LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 159.

¹¹ The information about the rules of the Senatorial debate is scarce. For some insights see: *Liber croceus*, cap. 86, 5; State Archives in Dubrovnik, *Secreta Rogatorum* 4, f. 2v, a tergo (5.12.1626); JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 174.

stress that speeches should not be longer than 7.5 minutes (*unum octavum horae*), but in exceptional circumstances this was prolonged to 15 minutes.¹²

In conducting diplomacy, the Senate was assisted by the Minor council which had several functions related specifically to foreign affairs. Thus, it was the body which was the first to receive and read all the correspondence directed to the Republic, deciding on important questions regarding when and how to present it to the Senate. Moreover, the Minor council, headed by the Rector as the representative of the Republic, was the body which received foreign envoys and visitors. Equally so, the Minor council was often entrusted by the Senate to finalize the text of diplomatic letters and instructions after the debate among the Senators. Finally, the Minor council was sometimes entrusted by the Senate to prepare and send less important diplomatic missions.¹³

The third governmental institution with an important role in foreign policy were the so-called *provisores civitatis*. Established in the late fifteenth century, these five influential officials had broad and diverse competences, such as drafting new laws or supervising whether the functioning of governmental institutions was according to the norms and customs.¹⁴ However, the *provisores* also played an important role in foreign policy. Namely, at least three of them had to be present together with the Rector and the Minor council at every audience of the foreign diplomats. Equally so, the *provisores* alternated with the Minor council in composing diplomatic letters and instructions. As will be shown below, after discussing the content of the diplomatic document in general terms, the Senate entrusted either the Minor council or the *provisores* to compose its final draft and submit it for approval.¹⁵

¹² *Secreta Rogatorum* 4, f. 3r, a tergo (3.7.1629), f. 136r (28.11.1643); for the decree allowing the Senators to exceptionally speak for 15 minutes during the debates about the aggregation of the new families into the patriciate, see: *ibid.*, f. 137r (1.12.1643).

¹³ DE DIVERSIS, *Opis slavnoga grada Dubrovnika 1440*, 157-158; LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 158-159; Seraphinus Maria CERVA, *Prolegomena in Sacram metropolim Ragusinam. Editio princeps*, (ed. Relja Seferović), Zagreb – Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 2008., 309; KRIZMAN, 'Memoire' Bara Bettere, 426; VOJNOVIĆ, O državnom ustrojstvu republike Dubrovačke, 42-46; KRIZMAN, O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji, 35; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 166-167. For several examples of Minor council being entrusted by the Senate to organize and send less important diplomatic missions, see: State Archives in Dubrovnik, *Acta consilii rogatorum* 41 (1531-1534), ff. 29r, 131v, 203v; ACR 81 (1607-1608), ff. 39r, 66r, 66v, 189v. For more on the Minor council's role in composing diplomatic texts see the text below. Especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the youngest member of the Minor council was specialized in certain diplomatic tasks, primarily maintaining contact with foreign representatives in the city (KRIZMAN, O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji, 35-36).

¹⁴ LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 160-161; *Liber viridis*, cap. 86; LONZA, *Pod plaštem pravde*, 74-76; Nella LONZA, Dubrovački patriciji pred izazovom prava: druga polovica 14. i 15. stoljeće, *Acta Histriae* 16/1-2, Kopar, 2008., 125; KUNČEVIĆ, Political Decision-making in the Republic of Ragusa, 227-228.

¹⁵ For the role of *provisores* in foreign policy see: *Liber viridis*, cap. 86 and the following subchapter.

General context: Ragusan political values and traditional *modus operandi* of senatorial consultation

Although important, the formal description of institutions offers only a partial insight into the Ragusan decision-making. In order to understand it fully, one has to consider also the political culture of the Republic, in particular its fundamental values and operating routines, i.e. the traditional ways of conducting political debate and voting.¹⁶ The following subchapter takes this broader perspective, stressing fundamental values such as collectivism and conservatism and their impact on decisions. Equally so, it attempts to reconstruct the ways in which operating routines of politics – primarily ways of formulating proposals, the order of presenting and voting on them – affected the final decision.¹⁷

The first characteristic of Ragusan decision-making was that it was strongly collective. In other words, the political system of the Republic was made so that there was minimal room for individual power. Literally all the important political decisions were made in councils which consisted of at least a dozen individuals (Minor council), but usually more, from several dozen (the Senate) all the way to several hundred (the Major council). This was a consequence of a typical republican ethos which was deeply suspicious towards the concentration of power and sought to distribute it among the greater number of individuals.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, such strongly collective decision-making was characterized by a lot of debate and successive rounds of voting. Since Ragusan foreign policy was articulated through interaction of several governmental bodies, many issues were debated *repeatedly* in different, partially overlapping, gatherings of

¹⁶ For the broad but nonetheless useful concept of “political culture” see, for instance: Lane CROTHERS and Charles LOCKHART, eds. *Culture and Politics: A Reader*, New York: St. Martin’s, 2000.; Stephen WELCH, *The Concept of Political Culture*, New York: St. Martin’s, 1993.; Michael BRINT, *A Genealogy of Political Culture*, Boulder: Westview, 1991. For a useful concise overview, see: Lucian W. PYE, Political culture, (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences-and-law/sociology-and-social-reform/sociology-general-terms-and-concepts-35#1G23045000958> accessed 11.12.2024). For a different perspective, see also the following works: Yves SCHEMEIL, Les cultures politiques, in: *Traité de science politique. Tome 3: L’action politique* (eds. Madeleine Grawitz and Jean Leca), Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1985., 237-308; Serge BERSTEIN, L’historien et la culture politique, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire* 35, Paris 1992., 67-77 (available online at: https://www.persee.fr/doc/xxs_0294-1759_1992_num_35_1_2567 accessed 23.03. 2025).

¹⁷ For an articulation of such broader approach to decision-making, going beyond the rational actor model, and considering the psychological, cultural, and contextual factors, see: Alex MINTZ and Karl DEROUEN Jr., *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.: *passim*, especially, 9, 97-120, 144-145.

¹⁸ For more on Ragusan collectivism, see: KUNČEVIĆ, Political Decision-making in the Republic of Ragusa, 229-232; *idem*, *Vrijeme harmonije. O razlozima društvene i političke stabilnosti Dubrovačke Republike*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 2020., 105-117.

officials (the Minor council, *provisores*, and the Senate). Typically, this was the case when the Senate entrusted the Minor council or *provisores* with elaborating on some issue or writing a document and then returning it to the Senate for confirmation or further discussion. This collective nature of decision making was the main reason why – as will be elaborated below – Ragusan politics suffered from two typical problems of republican governance: it was comparatively slow and suffered from constant leaks of information beyond the elite circle.¹⁹

Another characteristic of Ragusan decision-making was a propensity towards a peculiar type of (geo)political reasoning, which stressed caution, gradual change, and traditional solutions. In other words, typical of Ragusan decision-making was what would in modern jargon be called “incrementalism”, i.e. the tendency not to innovate but to opt for repetition and minor modifications of well-known policies.²⁰ This preference for graduality, even status quo, was a natural consequence of the weakness and fragility of small state, but also of the strong conservatism of its patrician elite.²¹ This conservatism is visible already in the fact that, until the very end of the Republic in 1808, the Senate insisted on using Italian as the language of its diplomatic correspondence, despite suggestions that at least a partial introduction of French would have been prudent.²² Another salient manifestation of this approach was the strict neutrality which Ragusa maintained throughout the Early modern period. An equally important example is that in this period it maintained the same system of international patronage, essentially relying on the protection of Ottomans, Spanish and the Pope, despite profound geopolitical shifts such as the rise of France or protestant states.²³ Such incrementalist approach was clearly articulated by N. V Gozze, a

¹⁹ On the other hand, such collective decision-making could sometimes lead to better decisions than those made by an individual. Speculating a bit, one could argue that, at least in its good moments, Ragusan decision-making benefited from the phenomenon known as “the wisdom of the crowds.” It has been argued that collective decisions are superior to individual ones if certain conditions are met – most importantly, if group members have diverse opinions, maintain an amount of independence, and are able to form opinions based on their specialized knowledge (James SUROWIECKI, *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*, New York: Anchor books, 2004.). At least to a certain extent, in Ragusan system such conditions were met: it consisted of patricians of different backgrounds and interests, belonging to different factions, whose relative independence was guaranteed by the insistence on free debate and anonymity in voting.

²⁰ On incrementalism see: MINTZ and DEROUEN, *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making*, 73-74, with references to further literature.

²¹ For the profound conservatism shaping Ragusan politics, see: KUNČEVIĆ, *Vrijeme harmonije*, 118-124; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 195-196.

²² KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, 161.

²³ The only truly noticeable shift was the stronger reliance on the Austrian Habsburgs which can be first detected during the Ottoman Christian conflict of 1683-1699 and which, to a certain degree, also

Ragusan political philosopher but also successful politician who served as the head of the Republic (*rector*) no less than seven times.²⁴ In his major work of political philosophy, published in 1591, Gozze lauded the opinion of those who warn that in politics one “should in no way do something unpredictable and with uncertain outcome”; insisted that the greatest danger for rulers is “to recklessly gamble with what is theirs”; and stressed that “rash and reckless advice, even if sometimes useful, should not be hurriedly put to practice, because afterwards always follows pointless regret.”²⁵ This tendency towards caution and small steps in Ragusan politics was also noticed by the historian A. Tenenti, who somewhat harshly concluded – “a life with no risks and no history.”²⁶

Besides collectivism and incrementalism, Ragusan decision-making was also shaped by one important *operating* norm – the traditional method of formulating proposals and voting on them. Namely, all the proposals put in front of the Senate were formulated as a choice between the two options, presented as *prima* and *secunda pars*. These two options were sometimes direct opposites – one being the negation of the other – but sometimes were simply different propositions or even slight variations of the same choice.²⁷ Importantly, the proposals were usually formulated as simple propositions regarding only one specific issue and rarely several of them simultaneously. That is, the decision-making process was split into many smaller steps each dedicated to one concrete topic. For instance, the senators were debating and then voting on whether the envoy was to be noble or not, whether his instruction was to be written by *provisores* or the Minor council, whether he was allowed to refuse the mission or not, etc. Besides

continued throughout the eighteenth century. This reflected the growing importance of Austrian Habsburgs in the Balkans – however, it was far from a truly novel arrangement due to the ancient constitutional ties of Ragusa with the Hungarian Kingdom. For the shift towards Austria in Ragusan foreign policy during the last quarter of the seventeenth century, see: Ragusan reliance on Austria see: Zdenko ZLATAR, *Between the Double Eagle and the Crescent: The Republic of Dubrovnik and the Origins of the Eastern Question*, Boulder: East European Monographs, 1992.

²⁴ Nenad VEKARIĆ, *Vlastela grada Dubrovnika*, sv. 5. *Odabrane biografije (E-Pe)*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU, 2014., 323-333.

²⁵ For three quotes, see: Nikola Vitov GUČETIĆ, *O ustroju država*, (ed. Marinko Šišak), Zagreb: Golden marketing, 2000., 502, 508, 494.

²⁶ Alberto TENENTI, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice*, (trans. J. Pullan and B. Pullan), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967., xvii-xviii.

²⁷ Nella LONZA, *The Council Deliberations (Reformationes) as Sources for the Study of the Late Fourteenth-Century Dubrovnik*, in: *Odluke dubrovačkih vijeća 1390-1392*, (ed. Nella Lonza i Zdravko Šundrica), Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2005., 22; Nella LONZA, Introduction, in: *Odluke dubrovačkih vijeća 1395-1397*, (ed. Nella Lonza), Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 2011., 20. For the similar practice in Major council, see also: REŠETAR, *Dubrovačko Veliko vijeće*, 64-65.

reflecting the incrementalist mentality typical of the Ragusan government, such an approach also facilitated reaching decisions (albeit making the entire process slower). Namely, breaking the problem into many smaller proposals made it easier for each of them to be discussed, modified, and thereby more readily accepted than it would have been if the senators were asked to decide on many issues by discussing and having a single vote on one complex proposal.²⁸

The voting procedure itself, conducted through a secret ballot, reflected the binary choice between the *prima* and *secunda pars*. After a certain proposal was put forth by the Rector and debated, the chancellor(s) walked around the hall carrying a specifically designed urn which had two connected compartments – one of them colored green, the other red. The Senators voted by inserting their hand into the urn and dropping a small ball into one of these compartments. The secrecy of their vote was ensured by the fact that the balls were fabricated of linen and thus made no sound, so that it was impossible to discern in which compartment the Senator had cast his ballot.²⁹ The minutes of the Senate reflected such a series of binary choices made through the secret ballot. The accepted proposal was followed by a short note about the number of votes for and against it (sometimes also the number of those excluded from voting), while the rejected proposal was crossed out.³⁰

This peculiar form of proposing motions had a significant impact on the final decision. Namely, the proposals were formulated in such a way that there *always was an alternative*, but one of the alternatives *had to be accepted*. Moreover, the fact that there was always an alternative proposal – if nothing else, simply negating the first or stating “to do otherwise” (*de aliter faciendo*) or to delay (*de differendo*) – probably helped avoid or at least reduce the phenomenon known as “group-think.” This phenomenon designates a tendency of groups to reach suboptimal decisions because their members seek consensus at the expense of exploring a variety of alternatives, i.e. they disregard opinions and information which do

²⁸ Moreover, the fact that every major and complex decision was divided into numerous smaller ones made it easier for the Rector and Minor council to “push” a certain issue. Namely, it was simpler to put a specific rejected proposal to vote again, perhaps reformulating it slightly, than it would have been had the senators rejected a complex decision with many, potentially problematic, elements. For this valuable insight I am grateful to Nella Lonza.

²⁹ Although little is known about the procedure of voting in the Senate itself, this much can be deduced from the record of the Senate’s decisions and by analogy with better known procedure of elections in the Major council (actually, a special case of voting): Nella LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, *Dubrovnik Annals* 8, Dubrovnik, 2004., 24-25; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 179.

³⁰ On the form of the record of the council’s minutes, see also: LONZA, *The Council Deliberations (Reformationes)*, 22; *eadem*, Introduction, 20-21.

not conform to the majority position and therefore make bad decisions.³¹ Since one of the key methods of avoiding “groupthink” is to invite criticism and alternative solutions, the mandatory alternative proposal certainly removed some of the cognitive bias.³² Other factors which could have prevented “groupthink” were the carefully maintained anonymity of voting and the heterogeneity of the patriciate, i.e., the fact that it was divided into at least two main factions.³³

Another important characteristic of Ragusan decision-making was the traditional order in which the proposals were put to vote. Namely, for every typical situation – such as deciding to write a diplomatic letter or to send an envoy – there was a customary order in which proposals were put on the agenda of the Senate by the Rector and the Minor council. This specific sequence in which issues were debated and balloted certainly affected the final outcome. Such traditional sequences – which usually had a deductive quality, moving from more general to the particular³⁴ – were by no means applied to the letter, but are nonetheless discernible.³⁵ For instance, in many cases, when sending a mission to a distant court, the Senate would first vote on whether to send an embassy or not; if it was decided to send it, it would vote on whether to send a nobleman or a person of non-noble status; then it would decide on issues such as the title, salary, and daily allowance of the diplomat; then it would decide on the possibility to refuse mission and the penalty for refusal; and only then the diplomat would be selected, which would be followed by decisions regarding his instruc-

³¹ MINTZ and DEROUEN, *Understanding Foreign Policy Decision Making*, 44-45; A good summary of the phenomenon is: Will KENTON, What Is Groupthink? Definition, Characteristics, and Causes, *Investopedia* (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/g/groupthink.asp#:~:text=Groupthink%20is%20a%20phenomenon%20that,of%20a%20group%20of%20people>, accessed 12.12.2024).

³² It could be argued that the mandatory alternative proposal in Ragusan system performed a similar function to *contradictor*, an official tasked with speaking against the official or only proposal in some late medieval Italian communes. The *contradictor* at least created an illusion of the debate or, in better cases, truly offered an alternative solution (Lorenzo TANZINI, From discussion to vote: practices of political deliberation and written records in communal Italy, in: *Cultures of Voting*, 177-178).

³³ On Ragusan patrician factions see: Stjepan ĆOSIĆ and Nenad VEKARIĆ, *Dubrovačka vlastela između roda i države: Salamankezi i Sorbonezi*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik: HAZU, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2005.; Nenad VEKARIĆ, *Nevidljive pukotine: dubrovački vlasteoski klanovi*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik: HAZU, Zavod za povijesne znanosti u Dubrovniku, 2009.).

³⁴ The general tendency to propose from more general to the particular is also mentioned in: LONZA, *The Council Deliberations (Reformationes)*, 22.

³⁵ In some cases, such standard order in which proposals were put to vote was determined by laws. For instance, the important law from 1405, regulating the election of ambassadors and other officials sent abroad, decreed that the first thing to be decided was the salary of such officials and afterwards the penalty for refusing such a mission – which was natural, since the exact amount of the fee depended on the salary (*Liber viridis*, cap. 111).

tion, retinue, and the date of his departure.³⁶ As has been mentioned, the crucial role in this sequence – i.e. proposing motions in the Senate – was played by the Rector and his Minor council. However, in this delicate task they were supervised by the *provisores* who not only ensured that the proposals were put forth in customary order, but also that they were formulated as clear alternatives, the aforementioned *prima* and *secunda pars*.³⁷

The procedures and mechanisms of foreign policy decision-making

In order to ensure an effective decision-making process in a strongly collective form of government, Ragusans developed a number of formalized and complex procedures. This subchapter reconstructs in detail such procedures regarding two crucial types of foreign policy decisions: the election of diplomats and writing of diplomatic letters and instructions.

When it came to writing diplomatic letters – both to foreign powers and the Republic's diplomats themselves – the usual procedure was as follows. First, the Minor council decided that the Republic should write a letter or, alternatively, decided to answer the letter which was received. Presumably, after a rudimentary debate, the Minor council decided when to put the proposal in front of the Senate and how to formulate it.³⁸ Once it was presented to the Senate, the Senators debated how to formulate the letter in general terms and then voted on whether its text should be composed by the Minor council or by the *provisores*.³⁹ That the text of the letter was supposed to reflect the conclusions of the

³⁶ It has to be stressed that this was a typical sequence but by no means the only one and that variations were numerous. Briefly on the same topic, see: KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, 30-32; *idem*, *Diplomati i konzuli u starom Dubrovniku*, 18-19.

³⁷ For more see: KUNČEVIĆ, *Political Decision-making in the Republic of Ragusa*, 227. For an example of the intervention of *provisores* who insisted that a general issue should be proposed before the more particular one, see: ACR 82 (1609-1611), ff. 33r-33v.

³⁸ Unfortunately, this process is invisible in the laconic minutes of the Minor council and can be reconstructed only on the basis of various descriptions of its functions by premodern authors listed in the footnote 9.

³⁹ The minutes of the Senate contain countless examples of such decisions which were usually formulated in the traditional form of two proposals (*prima* and *secunda pars*), one of which was that the letter should be composed by the Minor council and the other that it should be composed by the *provisores*. For some of the literally thousands of examples from different periods, see: ACR 57 (1563-1566), ff. 22r, 43v, 52r, 62v, 66v, 75v, 78v-79r, 83v, 103v, 106v, 153r, 160r, 179v, 189r 199v, 201 202v; 215r, 216v; ACR 82 (1609-1611), ff. 2r, 2v, 6r, 8r, 10v, 21v, 23r, 26v, 30v, 31v, 49r, 60v, 61v, 63v, 64r, 77v, 82, 85v; ACR 98 (1643-1645), ff. 2v, 5r, 61r, 75v, 80r, 88r, 99r-v, 101v, 114v, 115r, 139r; ACR 122 (1675-1677), ff. 10r, 15v, 26r, 35r, 41v, 70r. It should be stressed that in the first decades of the sixteenth century the choice between Minor council and *provisores* was not yet standard and there were instances when the Senators voted whether a certain letter or instruction should be composed by the Senate itself or the *provisores* (for several such examples, see: ACR 41 (1531-1534), ff. 78v, 111r, 119v, 134r, 142r, 150r,

senatorial debate is confirmed by the fact that occasionally the Minor council or the *provisores* were explicitly entrusted to compose it "as it was deliberated in this council."⁴⁰ Usually, after a few days, the draft of the letter was presented by one of these two bodies back to the Senate. The Senate then voted whether to accept the text or change it. If it was accepted, the letter was sent. On the other hand, if the Senate decided that the text should be changed, sometimes it corrected the letter itself, but more frequently, it entrusted such modifications to the Minor council or *provisores* who had to resubmit the text to the Senate for final approval.⁴¹

Similar procedure was followed when it came to instructions issued to the Republic's diplomats. After the Senate decided to send envoys to a certain court and voted on the details of their forthcoming embassy, it debated on the general content of their instruction. The debate was followed by a vote whether

153r, 173r). On the other hand, there were also instances when the writing of certain, usually less important, diplomatic documents was entrusted to Minor council without alternative *pars* being the *provisores*, but most often *de aliter faciendo* or simply to delay the task. For some examples see: ACR 41 (1531-1534), ff. 9r, 26v, 35v, 61v, 122r, 244r. This custom was again applied more frequently towards the end of the seventeenth century (for instance: ACR 122 (1675-1677), ff. 64v, 68v, 70v, 74r-74v; ACR 133 (1693-1694), f. 21r).

⁴⁰ The usual formulation in the decision was that the letter should be composed *prout consultum est in praesenti consilio, uti consultum est* or *prout consultum est in eo* (i.e. the Senate). For several examples, see: ACR 81 (1607-1608), f. 172v; ACR 82 (1609-1611), f. 61v; ACR 94 (1634-1636), f. 145v; ACR 133 (1693-1694), ff. 41, 61v. One should also keep in mind that the content of both the diplomatic letters and instructions was influenced by the chancellors of the Republic, who were present at all the meetings of the aforementioned bodies and wrote down the text (KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, 37; on the analogous role of chancellors in stylization of legal texts, see: LONZA, *Dubrovački patriciji pred izazovom prava*, 124).

⁴¹ There are numerous examples of such decisions literally in every book of the Senate's minutes. For a random selection of examples from the sixteenth and seventeenth century, see: ACR 41 (1531-1534), ff. 62v, 281r-v; ACR 57 (1563-1566), f. 200r; ACR 82 (1609-1611), f. 6r, 10r, 27v, 49r, 63r; ACR 86 (1617-1619), f. 89v; ACR 93 (1629-1630), f. 112v; *Secreta Rogatorum* 4 (1624-1658), f. 201v. On this procedure see also: KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, 29. While the procedure was usually simple - with the Senate approving the draft submitted in to it - sometimes the deliberations could get quite complex. A good example is the instruction issued to the envoy to Alvise Gritti in the summer of 1531. Trying to find a way to wiggle out of Gritti's insistent demands that Ragusa should pay tribute to his patron, John Zápolya, thereby acknowledging him as the Hungarian King, the Senators intensely debated for more than a week. Originally the *provisores* were tasked with writing the instruction for the envoy (*Secreta Rogatorum* 1 (1497-1537), f. 52r, 3.8.1531). However, after they submitted it on the next session, the Senate voted to modify the text (*ibid.*, f. 52r, 4.8.1531). After a couple of days, there was a proposal regarding the further modifications and the Senate voted between the two versions of addition to the instruction (*ibid.*, f. 52v, 8.7.1531). The next day, the *provisores* submitted the new version, but the Senate again refused to accept it and voted to modify it once more (*ibid.*, f. 53r, 9.8.1531). After several days, the Senate again voted on the proposal how to modify the instruction and then finally confirmed it by yet another round of voting (*ibid.*, f. 53r-v: 12.8.1531). All in all, the composing of this text took some nine days, involved two governmental bodies (the Senate and the *Provisores*), and required 7 rounds of voting in the Senate itself (starting with the decision to entrust the composing of instruction to the *provisores* until the final approval).

to entrust the Minor council or the *provisores* with composing the text of the instruction.⁴² After a short time, usually just a few days, the text was submitted to the Senate which voted whether to accept it or to change it. Again, the procedure involved several consultations in two or three governmental bodies (Minor council, Senate, and often also the *provisores*) and lasted for days, even weeks.⁴³

All in all, the typical procedure of composing a diplomatic letter or writing an instruction involved the interaction of two (Minor council and Senate) or three bodies (Minor council, Senate, and *provisores*). In a typical version of the procedure, the Minor council debated the issue twice: first when it decided to put this topic on the agenda of the Senate and, second, when formulating the text of the letter or instruction (if the Senate entrusted it with that task). Equally so, the Senate debated the diplomatic letter or instruction on at least two occasions: first, when deciding generally about its content and entrusting its final composition to one of the two smaller bodies; second, when listening to the version of the letter prepared by one of these bodies and deciding whether to accept it or modify it. However, in many cases the process was more complex, involving also the third body, *provisores*, or involving additional consultations in those governmental bodies (when the Senate decided to modify the draft presented to it). In such cases, the procedure involved six or more debates, sometimes in three different bodies, and could stretch to several weeks.⁴⁴

⁴² As with the letters, the instructions composed by smaller bodies were supposed to follow the conclusions of the senatorial debate. This is nicely illustrated by one decision of the Senate from 1530 in which it entrusted the Minor council to write an instruction *secundum opiniones arengatorum quomodo eius* [Minor council] *melius videbitur* (*Secreta Rogatorum* 1 (1497-1537), f. 38r; for similar examples but with *provisores* writing or modifying the text of diplomatic instructions after the senatorial debate, see: *ibidem*, f. 108v; ACR 57 (1563-1566), f. 30v).

⁴³ Some of the numerous examples of this procedure in the minutes of the Senate are: ACR 41 (1531-1534), ff. 25r, 27r, 47v, 70r, 80v, 135v, 150v, 176r, 225r, 282r; ACR 57 (1563-1566), ff. 13r, 39r, 159v; ACR 73 (1593-1594), ff. 113v; ACR 82 (1609-1611), ff. 53v; ACR 84 (1613-1615), f. 88v; ACR 85 (1615-1617), f. 214v; ACR 122 (1675-1677), ff. 61r-61v, 72r-72v, 101v-102r, 109v-110v.

⁴⁴ The series of steps through which the Republic answered to the letter of its ambassador in Rome in January 1609 can serve as a good illustration of one, more complex but by no means exceptional, procedure of answering a diplomatic letter. As usual, the first to discuss the ambassador's letter was the Minor council, since it was the body which received all diplomatic correspondence and put it on the agenda of the Senate. After the Minor council brought it to the Senate's agenda on 9th January, the Senators voted whether to respond to that letter or not. After deciding to respond, the Senators voted on whether the response should be drafted by the Minor council or the *provisores*, deciding that the latter should do it (ACR 82 (1609-1611), f. 2r). Then on the 15th of January the Senators listened to the *provisores'* version of the letter and approved it, but immediately voted on whether an addition should be made. After deciding it should be made, there was another round of voting regarding whether this addition should be made by the Minor council or the *provisores*, and it was decided that the *provisores* should do it (*ibid.*, f. 6r). Then, on 22nd January, the Senate again listened to the letter with the new addition by the *provisores* and decided that the addition should be further corrected. In other words, the Senate was not happy

Another crucial foreign policy decision was electing the envoys of the Republic. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the exact procedure of electing ambassadors which was done in the Senate.⁴⁵ What can be inferred from scarce references is that ambassadors were elected through direct nomination, in Ragusan documents called *scrutinium*.⁴⁶ Most likely, the procedure was that the chancellor approached each Senator and asked him in confidence to nominate one candidate, noting the names of the nominees. After all the Senators were thus consulted, the chancellor singled the names of those who were nominated by three or more Senators since they were eligible for election.⁴⁷ In the second

with the addition and decided to do it itself. After the Senate changed the text, there was a new vote on the correction, but the majority of Senators was still not content and decided that it should be corrected yet again. Finally, after this second round of corrections, the letter was approved by the Senate (*ibid.*, f. 8r). All in all, the decision to respond to the ambassador in Rome – and, more importantly, what to respond – was reached through a succession of debates in three bodies: first the Minor council, then the Senate, then the *provisores*, then again the Senate, then again the *provisores*, then again the Senate formulating the final version. In sum, leaving the work of *provisores* and Minor council aside, only when it comes to Senate, it took some 13 days and eight rounds of voting to answer this one letter.

⁴⁵ Originally, the election of ambassadors was a prerogative of the Major council, but during the fifteenth century it gradually transferred to the Senate. The details of this process are still unresearched and one can only cautiously suggest its vague outlines through the changing legal norms. Thus, in the early fifteenth century the Senate first gained the right to initiate such elections, since the law from 1405 stated that the Major council can elect ambassadors and other officials sent abroad only after the Senate had voted to start that process (*Liber Viridis*, cap. 111). The next step came in 1424, when another law decreed that hitherto such officials were to be *elected* by the Senate, with a 2/3 majority, and only afterwards confirmed by the Major council with a simple majority (*Liber Viridis*, cap. 199). At an uncertain point, this confirmation by the Major council disappeared, so that by the early sixteenth century the diplomats were elected exclusively by the Senate (and by the simple majority). However, it seems that in this period there still were vestiges of the earlier practice: in exceptional situations, when it came to very important missions, the Senate delegated the elections of diplomats to the Major council, as it did with the ambassadors to Charles V in 1535/6 (*Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/2, (ed. Jovan Radonić), Beograd: SKA, 1938., 382).

⁴⁶ This was different from the standard system of nomination through election chambers selected by lot which was applied in the Major council. The fact that direct nomination (*scrutinium*) was applied to electing ambassadors is confirmed by its mention in different laws such as: *Liber viridis*, cap. 65 (1388), cap. 414 (1450); *Liber croceus*, cap. 117 (1487). That this was the practice also in the seventeenth century is confirmed by a short reference to the election of tribute ambassadors *per scrutinium* in one senatorial decision from 1614 (ACR 84 (1613-1615), ff. 201v-202r. On *scrutinium* in general, see: LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 22-24).

⁴⁷ This procedure is based on the ancient law from 1388, regulating the election by direct nomination, traditionally applied for the offices outside of the city, including the diplomats: *Liber viridis*, cap. 65; LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 22-23. By the sixteenth century, in the Major council this procedure was replaced by a different one in which individuals were nominated by three Senators elected by lot, who whispered the names of candidates to the chancellor (LUCCARI, *Copioso Ristretto*, 155; LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 24). However, since direct nomination (*scrutinium*) is mentioned in documents about elections of ambassadors also in the later periods (see the previous footnote), it is more likely that elections of ambassadors in the Senate continued with the older form of direct nomination.

half of the fifteenth century, but probably also in the later period, the names of nominees were noted on small strips of paper which were then put in a cap or sack so they could be drawn in random order and put to vote. Before the voting itself began, the names of all nominees had to be read so that the Senators could make an informed choice.⁴⁸

The election itself was probably conducted in the same way as all the other voting procedures in the Senate and Major council. After the name of a candidate was proclaimed, the chancellor(s) moved from one senator to the other carrying the aforementioned voting urn with the two compartments – one of them, colored red, was for affirmative vote, and the other, colored green, for negative. The senators made their choice by dropping a small linen ball into one of the urn's compartments. After all the votes were collected, they were counted, and the winning candidate was the one who received the biggest number of positive votes, providing that this number superseded half of the valid votes.⁴⁹

Clearly, this peculiar system is quite different from the modern elections. The first important difference is that the senators could vote not only for but also *against* candidates. Another peculiarity in comparison to modern elections was that the Senators voted regarding *each of the candidates*, instead of choosing only one among the nominated. These specific features sometimes led to situations when candidate(s) received more negative votes than positive ones.⁵⁰ Equally so, such a voting system could lead to peculiar cases of failed elections in general, situations when *none* of the candidates received more positive than negative votes and the entire process had no winner.⁵¹

Importantly, these features of Ragusan elections enabled electoral strategies

⁴⁸ This procedure with paper straps and reading of the candidates' names before the voting is mentioned in: *Liber croceus*, cap. 117; see also: LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 23.

⁴⁹ LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 24-25, 27. In the case when two candidates had the same number of votes, the voting was repeated (*Liber viridis* cap. 65; LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 27).

⁵⁰ Traditionally, in Major council elections, such delicate situations were marked with three zeroes after the candidate's name: that is, the number of negative votes was not noted, just the fact that they superseded that of positive ones (LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 27). When it came to the elections of diplomats in the Senate, the approach was even more discreet. Only the name of the elected candidate was noted, while the names of the defeated ones were simply omitted (even those who received more positive votes than negative ones, but fewer than the winner).

⁵¹ For several illustrative examples of failed elections of diplomats from different periods, see: ACR 41 (1531-1534), ff. 61r, 175v-176r; ACR 73 (1593-1594), ff. 19r, 64v, 104v, 107v, 110r; ACR 81 (1607-1608), f. 246r; ACR 82 (1609-1611), ff. 13v, 25v, 54r; ACR 85 (1615-1617), f. 213v; ACR 90 (1626-1628), f. 190r; ACR 122 (1675-1677), f. 4r.

which are not possible today. Thus, for instance, it was completely acceptable to have several favorites for a post and to vote for more than one candidate. Equally so, one could vote against all candidates, hoping that his favorite (or even himself) will be nominated after the current ones fail.⁵² Intriguingly, it seems that numerous votes against a certain candidate did not necessarily mean that he lacked support - quite to the contrary. Namely, three zeroes were sometimes good news: it is likely that, when it came to dangerous and long diplomatic missions, the relatives and friends of the candidate voted *against* him, trying to spare him from trouble.

As can be seen from all the aforementioned, Ragusan decision-making involved dozens of individuals and consisted of complex formal procedures. While such a collective and formalized system ensured broad consultation and legitimacy, it also resulted in two problems typical of republican governance. Namely, it was relatively slow and had problems maintaining secrecy. The next section addresses these two issues and the various solutions which the Ragusan elite applied in trying to solve or at least mitigate them.

Typical problems: secrecy and slowness

Usually, organizing a diplomatic mission took weeks, sometimes even months, and required dozens of rounds of voting on issues such as the envoys' instruction, salary, retinue, date of departure or gifts to be distributed. While *ad hoc* embassies to foreign courts could typically be arranged in one to roughly three weeks, it was not uncommon for the deliberations to take much longer.⁵³ Thus, for instance, the decision-making process regarding the preparation of an embassy to Rome in 1532 took roughly two months and thirty-four rounds of voting on different topics.⁵⁴ Discussions and voting regarding the annual mission of the tribute ambassadors often started in November and - of course, intermittently - lasted until spring, sometimes even May.⁵⁵ Importantly, the decision-making

⁵² LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 26.

⁵³ For several examples of missions to foreign courts organized within the usual time of one to three weeks: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/1, (ed. Jovan Radonić), Beograd: SKA, 1935., 190-196; ACR 41 (1531-1534), *passim* between ff. 76r-84r (13.5.1532-29.5.1532); ACR 73 (1593-1594), *passim* between ff. 18r-27r (2.9.-11.9.1593); ACR 93 (1631-1633), *passim* between ff. 214r-219r (25.6.-11.7.1633).

⁵⁴ The consultations began in early April and lasted quite intensively until late May (ACR 41 (1531-1534), *passim* between ff. 59v-83v). For similar examples, see: *Secreta Rogatorum* 1 (1497-1537), ff. 85r-90v; *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* II/1, 382-386; *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* III/1, (ed. Jovan Radonić), Beograd: SKA, 1939., 326-329.

⁵⁵ On the election of tribute ambassadors see: MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, 21-25, for chronology especially 23. It should also be stressed that the departure date of diplomats was often

process did not end with the departure of the diplomats but continued during the mission with additional instructions, as well as after their return with the final report, review of expenses, additional awards, and the formal discharge.⁵⁶

Besides the general complexity of the procedure and the tendency of Senate to micromanage, another serious reason for delays were the problems with electing envoys. Namely, the most important consequence of the aforementioned possibility to vote negatively for all candidates was that the elections of diplomats did not necessarily end with a positive result. There were numerous examples of failed elections when nobody was elected since all the candidates received more negative than positive votes. This constantly forced the Senate to repeat the elections, but without the guarantee of a positive result. What further prolonged the process was the traditional right of those elected to consider for three days and to refuse office without any penalty due to reasons such as illness, familial problems, or because they had recently served as envoys. Lacking those reasons, they could also refuse by simply paying the fine or, in the worst case, by agreeing to suffer the customary punishment of several months' internment in the city's district.⁵⁷ Together with the failed elections, this right to refuse embassy often caused serious delays in organizing diplomatic missions. Thus, for instance, there were six failed attempts to elect the tribute ambassadors in only one session of the Senate in 1676; in 1609 the elections of two envoys to Istanbul involved fifty-six rounds of balloting, lasting for ten days; finally, the elections of tribute ambassadors in 1661-1662 dragged on for four months.⁵⁸

The Senate tried to speed up the decision-making process in several ways. One strategy were its constant attempts to impose deadlines on itself. That is, the Senate occasionally obliged the Rector to propose a given topic on a certain date or even decreed that, until decided otherwise, a certain issue must be debated on a specific day every week.⁵⁹ However, most of Senate's efforts were

prolonged several times, and, in the meantime, additional decisions were made, usually about their instruction, retinue, provision or the gifts to be made to different dignitaries.

⁵⁶ For a good overview of the consultations after the mission see: KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, 73-75, 143-156.

⁵⁷ For various regulations about refusing diplomatic missions see: *Liber Viridis*, cap. 111 (1405), 79-80; cap. 199 (1424); ACR 59 (1568-1570), f. 90r; KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, 66-68, 75; MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, 24.

⁵⁸ For these examples see: ACR 122 (1675-1677), ff. 20v-21r; MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, 22-23. For additional examples of prolonged elections of diplomats, see: Toma POPOVIĆ, *Turska i Dubrovnik u XVI veku*, Beograd: Srpska književna zadruga, 1973., 77; *Secreta Rogatorum* 1 (1497-1537), ff. 54r-v; ACR 81 (1607-1608), ff. 27r, 28r, 29r, 30v, 32r, 38r-38v.

⁵⁹ For several examples of such decisions regarding different topics, not only diplomacy, see: ACR 84 (1613-1615): f. 187r; ACR 85 (1615-1617): ff. 16v, 87r-87v, 102 r; ACR 98 (1643-1645): ff. 52r, 124r; ACR 114 (1666-1667): ff. 80v-81r; ACR 116 (1668-1669), f. 171r.

focused specifically on trying to prevent the prolonged elections of diplomats. Thus, on several occasions the senators literally imposed fines on themselves, if the elections of tribute ambassadors were not started or continued within a given deadline.⁶⁰ At one point in 1569, the Senators even contemplated solving the problem in another, quite a radical way - by electing the senior of the two tribute ambassadors four years in advance.⁶¹ Yet another strategy, aimed specifically at avoiding refusals of missions, was to motivate those elected to accept by raising their salary, daily expenses, granting them certain lucrative privileges or decreeing that afterwards they would be liberated from diplomatic duties for a longer period than usual.⁶² However, even more frequently, the Senate resorted to intimidating the candidates into accepting. Thus, for instance, the senators simply decreed that the candidate did not have the customary right to refuse the post without penalties, increased the fine for refusing, sometimes to impressive amounts such as 2000 ducats, or increased the duration of internment in the district, sometimes up to two years.⁶³ In cases when it was absolutely crucial for

⁶⁰ MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, 23.

⁶¹ ACR 59 (1568-1570), ff. 187r, 193r-193v; however, relatively soon the Senate dropped this idea (*ibid.*, 205r). Such method of electing ambassadors was contemplated once more, in 1576, but the Senate rejected the suggestion to apply it (ACR 63 (1575-1576), f. 128r); POPOVIĆ, *Turska i Dubrovnik u XVI veku*, 258-259; MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, 23). Most likely, the problem which the Senate tried to solve with this unusual decree was that those elected repeatedly refused to accept the position, thus prolonging the organization of missions. Popović speculates that the reason behind such refusals was that the nobles were reluctant to renounce the enormous trade profits during the ongoing Ottoman-Christian tensions in the Mediterranean (POPOVIĆ, *Turska i Dubrovnik u XVI veku*, 258-259). While this might have been one reason, it also seems likely that the nobles were unwilling undertake potentially dangerous missions to the Porte in a situation when Ragusans were assisting the anti-Ottoman coalition.

⁶² A good example are the elections of the ambassador to Rome in 1532. After one candidate refused, which was followed by a round of failed elections, the Senators decided to raise the salary of the ambassador. However, this was clearly not a sufficient motivation because soon another candidate refused, which prompted the Senators to raise the daily allowance as well (ACR 41 (1531-1534), ff. 61r, 62v; for a similar example: *Secreta Rogatorum* 2 (1555-1569), f. 175r). Another strategy of encouraging candidates to accept was by offering them the privilege of selling a certain amount of salt in the suburb of Ploče – clearly a lucrative opportunity (for example, see: ACR 96 (1643-1645), f. 117v; ACR 122 (1675-1677), f. 5v). Moreover, in 1568 the Senate tried to motivate the future ambassadors to Istanbul by promising that they would be spared of diplomatic duties for five years after the mission (*Secreta Rogatorum* 2 (1555-1569), f. 175r). For similar eighteenth-century examples of Senate trying to motivate the nobles to accept their election as envoys by increasing their salary or the vacancy after the mission, see: Vesna MIOVIĆ, Beylerbey of Bosnia and Sancakbey of Herzegovina in the Diplomacy of the Dubrovnik Republic, *Dubrovnik annals* 9, Dubrovnik, 2005., 53.

⁶³ MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, 24-25, 144, 151, 153. For more examples of such strategies, see: *Secreta Rogatorum* 2 (1555-1569), f. 175v; *Secreta Rogatorum* 4 (1624-1658), ff. 76v, 186v-187v. For an example when all the other ways of refusing except the high fee were denied (including the interment in the district), see the decision regarding the election of an envoy to Charles V in 1532 (*Secreta Rogatorum* 1 (1497-1537), f. 62r).

ambassadors to be elected quickly, the Senate flatly decreed that those elected could not refuse in any way or left them the dubious possibility of refusing with the penalty being exile or death.⁶⁴

Another serious problem, inherent in Ragusa's system of collective governance, was maintaining secrecy. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Senate usually included around thirty or forty people and thus it is not surprising that there were constant leaks of information. It seems that not only the spies of foreign powers, but even the city's population in general, were often aware of what had happened behind the closed doors of the council rooms.⁶⁵ The government tried to control the flow of politically delicate information with several strategies which ranged from protecting the physical record of deliberations to threatening the Senators with harsh punishment for revealing the governmental *arcana*. The motives behind such attempts were not only to prevent leaks to foreign governments. In an equal measure, it was about hiding from the commoners the less popular decisions and the conflicts within the ruling circle, in the constant attempt to project an image of a wise and unified elite.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Thus, for instance, when electing the two envoys to the sandzakkbey of Herzegovina in 1565, the Senate simply decreed *quod illi duo nobiles qui eligentur pro eundo ad D. Sangiaccum Chercegovinae nullo modo possint refutare sed statim teneantur acceptare et quod quilibet possit habere huiusmodi electionem non obstantibus quibuscumque ordinibus in contrarium* (ACR 57 (1563-1566), f. 200v). Similarly, when electing two envoys to negotiate a highly delicate matter with the sandzakkbey of Herzegovina in 1560 the Senate decreed that those elected *nullo modo recusare possint legationis officium* (*Secreta Rogatorum* 2 (1555-1569), f. 54r). For similarly laconic statements regarding the envoys to the Venetian Captain of the Gulf in 1603 or to the sandzakkbey of Herzegovina in 1607, see: *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* III/1, 66; ACR 81 (1607-1608), f. 58r. For threats of exile or death to those who refused the post, see: MIOVIĆ, *Dubrovačka diplomacija u Istanbulu*, 153.

⁶⁵ Most obviously, when such a big number of people was involved, it was quite likely that some of them will turn into informants for foreign governments. Thus, there are examples when Venice had spies among the narrowest circles of the city's elite and was so well informed as to literally receive copies of letters sent to the Ragusan government (Paolo PRETO, *Tajna diplomacija Mletaka i Dubrovnika*, in: *Tajna diplomacija Dubrovniku u XVI. stoljeću*, (ed. Mirjana Polić Bobić), Zagreb: Sveučilište u Zagrebu, 2011., 67-68; State Archive in Venice, *Senato, Dispacci, Provveditori da terra e da mar e altre cariche* (henceforth: PTM) busta 292, no. 23; PTM, busta 289, no. 116). In general, Venice was well informed regarding the intentions of Ragusan government and the happenings in the councils (for some examples of such information, obviously gained from someone in governmental circles, see: PTM busta 291, no. 258; PTM busta 292, no. 24, no. 142). The Venetian informants also offer glimpses of the fact that the non-noble population of the city was aware of the diplomatic strategy of its government and commented on it, even appealed for it to be changed (PTM busta 292, no. 142).

⁶⁶ For the self-representation of Ragusan elite, especially its insistence on the (illusion) of social harmony, see: JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 38-40; Zrinka PEŠORDA VARDIĆ, *U predvorju vlasti. Dubrovački antunini u kasnom srednjem vijeku*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku i Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2012., 176-181; Lovro Kunčević, *Mit o Dubrovniku: diskursi o identitetu renesansnoga Grada*, Zagreb-Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 2015., 13, 148-150.

One strategy for preventing the leaking of sensitive information was safeguarding the physical record of the Senate's decisions. According to the law from 1428, two reliable secretaries were to keep the books of council minutes, and also of diplomatic letters and instructions, under strict lock and key.⁶⁷ However, soon it was decided that this was not enough and in 1443 a specific kind of minutes was introduced, the so-called *Secreta rogatorum*. The prologue to the law establishing *Secreta* explicates the reasons behind it: in the ordinary minutes there were "many secret things", which when found out, led to serious "scandals" and damage to the "honor" of the Republic.⁶⁸ These "secret" minutes were where the secretaries noted the most delicate decisions of the Minor council and the Senate, which were thus excluded from their ordinary minutes. Unsurprisingly, the *Secreta* were even more closely guarded than the ordinary minutes. The secretaries who kept them locked were allowed to show them exclusively to the Minor council or the Senate – and then only if they had the quorum – and these volumes were occasionally destroyed.⁶⁹

Another measure ensuring secrecy was self-censorship, often noticeable in the record of the Senate's deliberations. In the already quite laconic minutes of the Senate, there are many instances when it was deliberately avoided to be specific regarding sensitive issues. To the historian's frustration, the Senate often decided to consult "on the matter known to this council", to act regarding the "persons known to this council" or decided something "due to reasons known to this council".⁷⁰ Sometimes this way of recording resulted with truly cryptic formulations such as one decision in 1617 which states that it was decided "that the person known to this council should be interrogated regarding the matter which was discussed today."⁷¹ This practice is reminiscent of *lettera ostensibile*, a custom applied also in Ragusa, of writing a diplomatic letter in such a way as not to reveal anything if it fell into the wrong hands.⁷² Analogously, the text of the Senate's minutes was sometimes written so as not to reveal much to the

⁶⁷ *Liber viridis*, cap. 223.

⁶⁸ *Liber viridis*, cap. 342.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, cap. 342; JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 170.

⁷⁰ Some of the typical formulations are: *super negotio noto presenti consilio, persone note presenti consilio* or *ob causas notas presenti consilio*. For these and other similar examples see: *Secreta Rogatorum* 2 (1555-1569), f. 137r; ACR 81 (1607-1608), ff. 19r-19v, 25r, 52v; ACR 82 (1609-1611), f. 1v; ACR 84 (1613-1615), ff. 14r, 25v; ACR 85 (1615-1617), ff. 65v, 97v, 98r, 179r, 180r, 214r, 222v, 252v; ACR 116 (1668-1669), ff. 17, 189r; ACR 122 (1675-1677), ff. 4v, 86r, 87r, 102r; *Dubrovačka akta i povelje* III/1, 68.

⁷¹ *Prima pars est de commitendo ut persona nota presenti consilio interrogatur super materia de qua consultum est hodie in eo* (ACR 85 (1615-1617), f. 222v). Another equally unrevealing example is the decision from July 1607 *de deliberando in presenti consilio super materia de qua in eo consultum est* (ACR 81 (1608-1609), f. 71r).

⁷² For *lettera ostensibile* in Ragusan diplomacy see briefly in: KRIZMAN, *O dubrovačkoj diplomaciji*, 33.

readers who did not know the context - and, unfortunately, historians are often among them.

However, the most frequent method of trying to keep secrets was by attempting to intimidate the senators into silence. In other words, the authorities made a serious effort to prevent senators from speaking about sensitive political issues outside of the council's sessions. In general, as all the other members of the Major council, the Senators were bound by solemn oaths, taken at the beginning of the annual elections in December, to maintain secrecy regarding those issues they were ordered to.⁷³ In addition, on numerous occasions the Senate imposed an additional oath and strict penalties on its members, forbidding them to speak about what had happened during the sessions. After the sensitive issue was debated, the Senate decided on the penalties to be imposed on those who revealed it. The text of this decision was usually followed by a list of all the members of the Senate who were present with the note that they swore secrecy, sometimes also followed by the list of absentees. The penalty for revealing the content of the debate was often quite harsh, revealing the anxiety of the government regarding the matter. For instance, in the seventeenth century, the typical punishment included some or all of the following: the trial for perjury, the loss of right to offices and benefices for a certain period (usually ten years), imprisonment in one of the city's dungeons (usually for the period between 6 months up to 3 years) and occasionally also the significant fine (for instance, of 500 or even 1000 ducats).⁷⁴ As is confirmed by the investigations regarding the leaks of information, the Senate did not merely threaten the councilors but made concrete efforts to look into such breaches of secrecy and punish the offenders.⁷⁵

⁷³ *The Statute of Dubrovnik of 1272 = Liber statutorum Civitatis Ragusii compositus anno MCCLXXII*, (ed. Nella Lonza), *Dubrovnik: Državni arhiv u Dubrovniku*, 2012., 2, V. For the context of this oath: LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, 16. For the oaths of other officials also specifically obliged to preserve secrecy: *The Statute of Dubrovnik of 1272*, 2, II; 2, IV; 8, II.

⁷⁴ For some of the numerous examples see: *Secreta Rogatorum* 4 (1624-1658), ff. 9r 12r, 14r, 19v, 37v, 44r, 50r, 59r, 64r-v, 69v, 82v, 96v, 103r, 114v-115r, 122v, 136r, 143r, 164r-165v, 194r, 198v, 229r, 232v. Sometimes such decrees imposing severe penalties on Senators are to be found also in the regular minutes, for instance: ACR 122 (1675-1677), f. 62v; ACR 133 (1693-1694), ff. 29r-29v. For several, albeit less frequent and usually less strict, similar decisions from the sixteenth century, see: *Secreta Rogatorum* 2 (1555-1569), ff. 37v-38r, f. 51v-52r, 52v, 93v, 96v, 98r, 101v-102v, 133r-v, 143r-v, 145v-146r, 150r-151v, 176v. For similar decrees in the fifteenth century, see: JANEKOVIĆ RÖMER, *The Frame of Freedom*, 170.

⁷⁵ Several of such investigations have been preserved in: State archive of Dubrovnik, ASMM 17, Sv. 64, br. 2051, br. 162; ASMM 17, Sv. 65, br. 2025, 41, 64 and 85. Occasionally the Senate made the councilors swear that they will report those whom they hear speaking about its decisions to the Minor council which was then obliged to notify the Senate or start an investigation on its own, eventually submitting it to the Senate (see, for instance: *Secreta Rogatorum* 4 (1624-1658), ff. 190r-v, 279r).

Conclusion: on mechanized *virtù* and its reasons

At the end, it seems useful to borrow a famous metaphor. Ragusan system of decision-making can be described as the “mechanization of *virtù*,” similar to how John Pocock described the early modern conceptualizations of elections in the Venetian Great council.⁷⁶ In other words, Ragusans tried to regulate the complex and unpredictable process of political consultation by breaking it into small, formalized, and predictable steps which were supposed to lead to an optimal outcome. Of course, as can be seen from the text above, in reality the Senate’s deliberations were often far from this ideal. However, at least on the normative level, Ragusans tried to turn decision-making into a highly routinized, mechanical affair – almost a political computation.

The last question of this text is: why? The most obvious reason for such an approach to political deliberation was desire to reach optimal decisions: the aforementioned formalized *modus operandi* sought to ensure the consultation of broad number of individuals and ensure that each of them could act rationally in what he deemed a common interest. However, an equally important, if not even more important, reason behind such formalization was the desire to avoid conflicts within the Ragusan elite itself. The clear procedure and rigidly upheld rules – in which, moreover, secrecy of vote was crucial – minimized the potential conflicts between different patrician factions or at least contained them within the institutional framework.⁷⁷ Moreover, there was yet another, third reason for such formalized approach to decision-making. Namely, when deciding on foreign policy, Ragusan Senators usually decided about themselves or, at least, about their relatives, friends, and enemies – in any case, it was often *personal*. One should keep in mind that most Ragusan diplomats were patricians, members of the elite circle. That is, the people who were elected to prolonged and sometimes dangerous missions abroad belonged to the relatively small group of patrician males, which, for instance, in 1594 included 309 individuals, while in the seventeenth century it was significantly smaller.⁷⁸ The fact that the senators

⁷⁶ John G. A. POCOCK, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975., 284-285. The physical devices, which besides the formalization also play an important role in Pocock’s assessment, were present in Ragusa as well, including the rows of benches, balloting boxes, and physical dislocation of councilors depending on their current role in election (see, for instance: LONZA, Election Procedure in the Republic of Dubrovnik, *passim*).

⁷⁷ KUNČEVIĆ, Political Decision-making in the Republic of Ragusa, 232-235.

⁷⁸ The number from 1594 is known because of an important list of members of Great council which has been preserved, while we do not have such precise data for other years (for the estimates see: Nenad VEKARIĆ, *Vlastela grada Dubrovnika*, sv. 1: *Korijeni, struktura i razvoj dubrovačkog plemstva*, Zagreb – Dubrovnik: Zavod za povijesne znanosti HAZU u Dubrovniku, 2011., 141-142).

decided about their own fate and fate of those close to them required impersonal rules and clear procedures which were meant to reduce the influence of personal interests and emotions on foreign policy decisions. Such a quintessentially republican aspiration was clearly stressed in the well-known inscription which stands at the entrance of the Hall of Ragusan Major council. There, in stone, are the following words: *Obliti privatorum publica curate*.⁷⁹

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⁷⁹ On this maxim, see: Nella LONZA, *OBLITI PRIVATORUM PUBLICA CURATE: A Ragusan Political Epigraph and its Historical Background*, *Dubrovnik annals* 11, Dubrovnik, 2007., 25-47.

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Sažetak

Donošenje odluka o vanjskoj politici u Dubrovačkoj Republici tijekom novog vijeka

Na temelju zapisnika dubrovačkog Senata (*Acta Consilii Rogatorum*) članak nudi analizu načina na koje su se u novovjekovnoj Dubrovačkoj Republici donosile odluke o vanjskoj politici. Njegov prvi dio donosi pregled najvažnijih političkih institucija koje su kreirale vanjsku politiku (Senat, Malo vijeće, providnici grada) i njihovih interakcija. Drugi dio posvećen je temeljnim političkim vrijednostima koje su utjecale na odluke o vanjskoj politici – dubrovačkom kolektivizmu i konzervativizmu (inkrementalizmu). Taj dio predstavlja i niz specifičnih tehnika, odnosno operativnih normi koje su se primjenjivale u radu dubrovačkog Senata: prepoznatljiv način formuliranja prijedloga kroz dihotomiju *prima* i *secunda pars*, redosljed predlaganja od općeg prema pojedinačnom te tajno glasanje uz pomoć glasačke žare. Treći dio članka donosi detaljnu rekonstrukciju procedura kojima je Senat birao diplomate te „proizvodio“ diplomatske upute i pisma u suradnji s Malim vijećem i providnicima grada. Konačno, posljednje potpoglavlje posvećeno je analizi dvaju temeljnih problema koji su proizlazili iz izrazito kolektivističkog načina donošenja odluka, tipičnog za Dubrovnik, a to su sporost i curenje informacija.

Ključne riječi: Dubrovnik (Ragusa); diplomacija; donošenje odluka; novi vijek; politička povijest.