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Transformation of socialist political system in Eastern Europe

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Abstract

In the process of transformation of the inherited socialist socio-political system, a framework had to be set for the implementation of all those democratic mechanisms typical for societies with a long democratic tradition, such as pluralism of opinion, political activity, freedom of assembly, speech, writing, voting. This was supposed to be the foundation stone upon which the democratic process of electing government at local, parliamentary and presidential levels would rest.

Keywords: socialist political system, eastern Europe, electing government

Introduction

The democracy is not only represented by these characteristics. The fundamental meaning of democracy is that democratically elected officials serve for the benefit of all the citizens, promoting the public interest as a whole. Otherwise, these democratic mechanisms may serve political elites to gain power in order to protect exclusively the particular interests of individuals and groups. This opens the door to an undemocratic way of governing and a turn towards qualification, the notion of "bad government or simply government by the most unscrupulous or unsuitable people".

Consequently, when talking about democracy, one should distinguish between the fact that a democratic state implies the existence of a democratic government, but also that a democratically elected government does not need to guarantee the existence of a democratic state.

Distinguishing the understanding of democracy as a political system and democracy as a form of government is the factor that distinguishes countries with a long tradition of democracy from other states, which yet have to develop the said political system of government.

In a democratic political system, the responsible government acts in the interest of all citizens, enabling the application of democratic mechanisms to formulate their interests, by ensuring "alternatives to expression, right to vote, right to political leaders to compete for support, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, right political leaders to contest for votes, institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference" [1].

If we compare the above mentioned with the process of transition of the political system in Croatia, we can see a gap between the implemented mechanisms, through which the citizens could democratically elect the holders of power and ruling of political elites. The actions of political elites are not always in line with all democratic principles of good governance. The notion of good governance not only defines the way government works, but also applies to all other actors in society; political parties, parliament, the judiciary, the media, civil society, and their interactions with each other, all with the aim of improving citizens' standards. The tripartite formula for good governance encompasses the elements of "State capability—the extent to which leaders and government are able to get things done.

Responsiveness—whether public policies and institutions respond to the needs of citizens and uphold their rights;

Accountability—the ability of citizens, civil society and the private sector to scrutinize public institutions and governments and hold them to account" [2]. The type of party system, the type of political parties and the way they function are key to the functioning of the overall political system.

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If they operate in the conditions of unsettled legislative and non-institutional frameworks of society, they become the main source of corruption and political clientelism. According to Bandelj & Radu "political transformations in postcommunist Europe need to take into account the specific historical and socio-economic context of large-scale post-socialist transformations in this region".

As in the case of other countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, the Croatian political scene was marked in 1989 and 1990 by the beginnings of a change in the political system from a one-party system, dominated by the Communist Party for a decades, to a multi-party system.

The peculiarity of the first democratic elections, held in May 1990, is that they were held at a time when Croatia had not yet gained its independence, because it was part of the former Yugoslavia, and the elections themselves were held in the atmosphere of war threats in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Ekiert et al. emphasize that the bloody civil war in the former Yugoslavia and its legacies are a stark reminder of the potential difficulties faced by divided societies in their quest to build democracy" [3].

However, in the long run their results will influence the creation of the Croatian political space. Its basic feature is the existence of bipolar multipartism, in which two political parties of the left and right center have been alternating power for the past 25 years. As a rule, only two parties won the biggest number of votes in the parliamentary elections: HDZ and SDP, which formed governments with their coalition partners: from 1990 to 2000 - HDZ; from 2000 to 2003 - SDP; from 2003 to 2011 - HDZ; from 2011 to 2016 - SDP, and from 2016 to present - HDZ.

Also, by analyzing the results of the first multi-party elections for members of the Croatian Parliament, certain comparisons can be made with other countries of the former socialist political system, which indicate that the first free elections in those countries turned into certain "essentially plebiscites against Communist Party and protest against the existing political system: the elections were mainly protest votes against the former regimes" [4]. On the Croatian political scene, between the 33 political parties and 16 different associations registered for the elections, two main parties or two poles stood out, which exist to this day [5]. The largest number of seats in the first multi-party elections was won by the Croatian Democratic Union - HDZ (205 or 58%), and the Reformed Communists Party - the League of Communists of Croatia - Party for Democratic Change - SKH-SDP (107 seats or 30%). Compared to ideologically "sister" parties in Czechoslovakia (Communist Party won 14% of votes), Hungary (Socialist Party won 11%) in East Germany (Party of Democratic Socialism won 16.4%), only reformed communists in Croatia, and in Bulgaria (Socialist Party won 44%), they achieved good results.

The Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), as the strongest political party, emerged from the national independence movement, taking on the character of a mass party led by a charismatic leader.

Reformed Communist Party of Croatia – Social Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP) has profiled itself as the largest opposition political party since the early 2000s.

Through the activities of these two main political parties, one can see the overall process of democratization of the Croatian political system. This process can be provisionally divided into two time periods - from 1990 to 2000, and from 2000 to the present.

To draw parallels between the presentation of the transformation of the political system over the specified time period, it is necessary to analyze the structure of the members and the leadership of the newly formed political parties.

From the aspect of influencing the creation of party and national politics, there are two basic categories of members of political parties: former members of the Union of Communists of Yugoslavia, and members of the Croatian diaspora.

By joining the newly formed political parties, former members of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia took prominent positions in the new pluralist party system [6].

After the breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the establishment of new states within the territorial borders of the former republics in Croatia, the League of Communists of Croatia changes its name to the Party of Democratic Change (SKH-SDP), and then to the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

Simultaneously with the process of transformation of the SDP, as the sole successor to the former Communist Party, a large number of political parties was formed, with a large number of former Communists joining, for example, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ); The Croatian People's Party - HNS, and the Serb ethnic minority party - the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), which ceased to exist after the end of the Homeland War. Some of its members are now politically active in the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (SDSS).

So, regardless of the political program of the new political parties, they had one thing in common - the former communists became members of the mentioned parties, and their influence, after the first multi-party elections, was not weakened. The described pattern of rapid transformation of politicians with many years of experience in the one-party system is found in other post-communist transitions. According to Stoica "Romania is a country marred by former communist politicians' survival", in which the positioning of former communist elites in the new authorities has led to the establishment of the so-called "mock democracy," controlled by an incompetent, highly politicized, and excessive bureaucracy, as well as an "economic system that rewards politically-connected individuals or firms and punishes honest, hard-working entrepreneurs" [7].

The second category of party members was represented by members of the Croatian diaspora, especially part of the political emigration, who returned to Croatia in the early 1990s.

The very term "diaspora" does not refer exclusively to "the objective group of people but always the result of social or political mobilization, with foundation myths, rituals and representative organizations".

In order to understand their role in the construction of the new political and economic system of Croatia, it is necessary to explain the genesis of their emergence.

During the 20th century, the Croatian diaspora, as part of the total Yugoslav emigration, had three major emigrant waves, whose actors can be divided into three categories - "old emigrants", "political emigrants" and "quest workers" [8, 9].

The "Old Emigrants" were emigrants, mostly members of the peasantry and the working class, who left the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy from 1880 to 1914, which at that time comprised areas of present-day Croatia.

The next group (with two groups provisionally speaking) was represented by "political emigrants" - Croatian emigrants who left Yugoslavia after 1945 and the collapse of the Quisling state formation of the Independent State of Croatia. The aforementioned group of emigrants was marked by the Calvary of the "Cross Road" and the mass liquidations at Bleiburg ^[10]. This group was represented by members of the middle and upper classes, who were treated by enemy emigration by the Yugoslav Communist leadership.

Another subset of political emigrants emerged after the collapse of the so-called MASPOK (mass national movement) in Croatia, that is, the "Croatian Spring" in late 1971 and during 1972 ^[11]. This movement was led by Communist leaders of the younger generation and liberal orientation, who "made genuine efforts to broaden the regime's social base to increase Croatia's autonomy within the Yugoslav Federation". The consequences of its collapse were reflected in the entire Croatian society in terms of the imposition of the "ideological dictatorship" by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in all areas of social life, from social, cultural, to educational. This was followed by persecution, intimidation, imprisonment for prominent members of the movement, and the elimination from political life of its major leaders, from Dr. Savka Dabčević-Kučar, Mike Tripal to Dr. Franjo Tuđman and other high-ranking members of the communist elite.

The third group of emigrants consisted of "guest workers" or temporary workers abroad. They were one of the "consequences" of the Communist leadership's attempt to carry out economic reforms during the 60 years of the last century, by introducing certain elements of a market economy. The reform failed because the Yugoslav economy, with the exception of the Croatian and Slovenian economies, was not ready to function on a market basis. The result of this experiment was a large increase in unemployment, which the Communist leadership "regulated" in such a way that it liberalized going abroad and thus solved two problems: it reduced unemployment and the number of political opponents of the regime, allowing them to go temporarily abroad.

After winning the first elections in 1990, the HDZ held power until 2000, winning two consecutive election cycles for the Croatian Parliament. The aforementioned decade of HDZ rule was marked by the Homeland War (1991-1995) and the transition process, during which the rule of the leading political party was based solely on the issue of national identity, as a mobilizing factor, instead of the priority task of implementing structural political and economic reforms. According to Bandelj and Radu "Democratic consolidation will be faster when the elites in power have a pro-democratic reform orientation, defined quite minimally as a government, where the ruling party is not a nationalist nor communist in orientation". The ten year rule of HDZ has adversely affected the transition process of the Croatian society, and opened up the space "toward greater authoritarianism and greater corruption".

It was the absence of political will for consistent and thorough transformation processes during the 1990s that favored the spread of corruption and clientelism, and, in that period, classified Croatia as a group of countries with "illiberal democracies", together with Slovakia, Bulgaria and Romania ^[12].

During this period, the main opposition party SKH-SDP as a successor to the former Communist Party, reformed into a center-left Democratic Party, renamed as Social Democratic Party (SDP). In the next parliamentary elections in 2000, SDP won power with the center-left coalition of six political parties, which ushered in a new era of intense democratization, a result that put Croatia in the group of post-communist countries with consolidated democracy over the past decade.

With the onset of democratization, the process of accession negotiations for Croatia's full EU membership opened. These processes influenced the main opposition political party - HDZ, to begin its internal reform from a political party based on national ideology to a modern European Christian Democratic Party, a member of the European People's Party, which won the next parliamentary elections in 2003 and 2007.

After the opening of accession negotiations with the EU, the democratic processes of Croatian society intensified, in accordance with the dynamics of opening negotiation chapters with well-defined conditions set by the EU. A particularly significant shift has been noted in the implementation of the anti-corruption strategy.

However, after gaining EU membership (in July 2013), Croatia stalled in implementing the key reforms necessary to further democratize society, primarily because of the lack of political will to carry out structural reforms systematically and thoroughly. This is due to the crisis of the party system. As well as in developed European countries, the transformation of a massive political party into a type of professional electorate is at work in Croatia. The characteristic of mass parties is the mobilization of a particular stratum of citizens on the question of ideology or nationality, thereby creating "a large base of dues-paying members, hierarchically structured party organizations linking the national and local levels" ^[13].

Today, the tendency in the Croatian political space is to separate political parties from society and to firmly attach them to the state (or rather to the state budget, from which they are largely financed). Contact with their own electoral base is lost, elements of democracy disappear, as party leaderships represent narrow elitist groups of people, led by an undisputed leader, of an authoritarian way of governing. The decision-making process is in the hands of several people - the president of the party and his closest associates, while "ordinary members" are used as "voting machinery", which is initiated and motivated exclusively on the eve of each election cycle. It is precisely the exclusive right of a few party people to create party politics that directly affects the party's undemocracy, since the electoral base deprives the possibility of any control over the actions of the party leadership, which opens the space for the arbitrariness of party leaders and their associates. Thus, a common feature of all political parties in Croatia is the persevering cultivation of a kind of dirigiste democracy which is used to control their activities in the national political space by the party's leader and his closest associates. Furthermore, the closest associates, as a rule, are recruited from like-minded circles, who base their political existence on the unconditional obedience and loyalty of the party leader. The consequences of this are visible in the crisis of identity of political parties, because, according to Walter Lippman, "where all think alike, no one thinks very much" ^[14].

Also, in order to make the political parties more efficient on the aforementioned grounds, they have built strong and expensive professional apparatus. Such functioning of party management, by the method of "domino effect", also affects the behavior of other party members. Namely, when they join a political party, they see an opportunity to realize certain personal gains, materially or career-motivated (securing employment/leadership in public administration, or in public companies for themselves and family members, membership in the supervisory and management boards of state-owned companies, and other forms of bargaining). As a result, noncore party members become mere followers and obedient of their party leaders with the ultimate goal of securing their own gains. Consequently, a layer of people with average / below average abilities and knowledge, above average ambitions, and a very important characteristic of "political" obedience, is recruited into various institutions within the public administration system (state administration, public services, local and regional self-government units).

Looking back at the current stages of the development of the political system in Croatia, one can see a certain pattern of functioning of the same, in the sense that the step in the democratization of the Croatian political system, as a rule, depends on the degree of democracy within the leading political parties.

According to the above mentioned conditions in which political parties function in Croatia, it is exactly their undemocratic organization that generates political clientelism, conflicts of interest at all levels of society, and institutional or systemic corruption that has become a generally accepted way of life. This is also evident through the perception of corruption in post-communist societies see.

Sajo who explains the increased perception of corruption in post-communist countries from several points of view: moral, cultural, historical, institutional and political and states that it is not the result of the absence or termination of citizens' trust in public servants, but is the result of "the needs of the political structures" ^[15].

Writing about political corruption, Issacharoff states that "the existence of public power is an opportunity for motivated special interests to seek to capture the power of government, not to create public goods, but to realize private gains through subversion, of state authority" ^[16].

On the other hand, the term of political clientelism could be explained as a patron-client relationship in which a political exchange between the politician ("patron") and the client is realized in the sense of giving patronage for the vote or any other kind of support of a client ^[17].

Conflict of interest "exists when a public employee's public responsibilities clash, or appear to clash, with his or her private economic affair" ^[29]. The same can be said to overlap with corruption in the sense that corruption cannot exist without a conflict of interest, because each and every corrupt act is driven by an underlying conflict ^[18].

We concluded that the absence of a tradition of Western-style political pluralism is a common "childhood illness" of all post-communist countries, but also developed countries are not immune to these "democracy faults".

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