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The International Dimension of Democratization in Croatia

Topic of Research: The original topic that I proposed in applying to IREX outlined a project that would examine the international dimension of post-communist democratization in Croatia. Subsequently, the project was expanded and can be subsumed under the larger question of the determinants of varying paths of post-communist regime change in the Yugoslav successor states, with Croatia as a principal case. Bosnia-Hercegovina does not play a major part in the study due to its status as an international protectorate. The role of external forces, as in the original project, is highlighted.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field: The motivation for this project arose in part from dissatisfaction on my part with a conspicuous void in the existing literature on the former Yugoslavia, which has focused mainly on the causes of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the wars of Yugoslav secession. Very rarely have social scientists examined these countries as cases of regime transition, whether as individual case studies or within cross-national comparative analyses. There is a need to analyze, in a broad and comparative perspective, the larger processes that have occurred there in recent years in order to understand the context in which phenomena like nationalism, ethnic conflict, state disintegration, and war occurred.

Features of post-communism that the existing literature on the former Yugoslavia has focused on, such as nationalism, war, and leadership, could be better understood if examined in such a context. Nationalism (and ethnic conflict) in its anti-democratic and anti-liberal forms arises and takes hold in particular conditions, and it is necessary to understand these conditions and how they shape the strategies of political elites and the expectations of the masses. In other words, it is critical to see nationalism as a dependent variable and consequently to understand why it emerged where and when it did. The role of war in transition must also be reconsidered. War certainly reinforced authoritarianism, but at the same time war became an instrument of legitimization for undemocratic politics. Even after war ended, the idea of defending national interests in the face of an “other” was used by ruling parties to justify their continued undemocratic practice and to hide economic mismanagement. As a prominent scholar in the region told me, *“trazicija se uklopila u rat, a rat u tranziciju”* (“the transition became embedded in the war, and the war in the transition”). Finally, the existing literature has been preoccupied with the role of a few (in)famous post-Yugoslav leaders. The leading role of these individuals cannot be denied, but it is also important to remember that they also arose in certain conditions. Furthermore, in almost all cases they were elected and supported by large numbers of people, often in multiple elections. These elections were not always free and fair, but this does not change the fact that the leaders were the choice of a large part—indeed often a majority—of society.

Understanding the determinant and implications of post-communist political change in the Yugoslav successor states also promises to make a contribution to both East European area studies and comparative politics. For area studies, both in terms of historical antecedents and divergence in post-communist outcomes, the Yugoslav successor states in many ways represent a microcosm of the region as whole and thus contain a potential reservoir of analogies for the region. An important methodological advantage of studying these cases is that the common Yugoslav legacy allows one to “control” for some explanatory factors while simultaneously highlighting others. For comparative politics, the dissertation addresses issues

central to the study of macro-political change. This includes debates about the determinants and prerequisites of liberal democracy, the relationship between economic development and liberal political ideologies, and the relative utility of structural, rationalist, voluntarist, and institutional accounts of political change. Furthermore, it aims to bring in the international dimension of regime change, a factor which has thus far been largely neglected by work on democratization. Including the international dimension allows one, furthermore, to reconcile the study of comparative politics with international relations. Thus, on one level its aim is to contribute to a research tradition in social science that goes back to the classical theorists of political sociology and continues through the large literature on democracy, democratization and its prerequisites. On another level, the study aims to contribute to the burgeoning literature on the determinants of different paths of post-communist change in East-Central and Southeast Europe.

The policy implications of the research are equally numerous. First, recognizing the international dimension of democratization and how external actors can both positively and negatively influence the course of regime change may lead the United States and other Western countries to rethink their strategies and policies towards the Balkans and the larger post-communist world. Second, understanding the complex confluence of factors that led each Yugoslav successor state down a unique path of regime change after the fall of communism and the dissolution of the former Yugoslav federation could affect the views of the American foreign policy community and lead to an end of “quick-fix” or outdated approaches.

Methodology and Research Sites: This study employs the inductive comparative case study approach, which focuses on a well-defined set of cases, is concerned with the unfolding of causal processes, and uses systematic comparison to generate explanations of outcomes at the level of national politics. Though it is based primarily on qualitative techniques, it also employs descriptive and inferential statistics. During my year of fieldwork (partially supported by IREX) in the region, I conducted interviews and gathered materials and data mainly in Zagreb, but also in Belgrade, Ljubljana, and Skopje. Interviewees included political figures who were close to the transition in Croatia and the other successor states, and others with whom I could discuss the respective transitions, such as journalists, diplomats and scholars. The goal of all of these interviews was to reconstruct what happened during the last fifteen years. I was especially interested in tracing the political dynamics within each republic in the final two to three years before dissolution: what were the main debates, which political configurations were coming to the fore, and which ones were becoming marginalized? What were the calculations and strategies of the political forces that won the first free elections, setting the stage for the subsequent transition? I also interviewed key external actors, such as diplomats from Western countries and EU officials.

One main task was to conceptualize and measure the outcomes themselves. For one dimension of the dependent variable—procedural democracy—I am using a combination of quantitative and qualitative measures and reports developed by organizations such as Freedom House, while measuring outcomes on the second dimension (the liberal quality of democracy as embodied in the party system) requires more in-depth primary research, especially interviews with those familiar with the main political actors and the divisions they embody. I made an effort to interview one to two individuals from each party in all four countries, asking questions about the party’s platform, strategies, constituency, and goals.

Another task is to conceptualize and measure the independent variables for each case. For economic conditions, during fieldwork I gathered data on each Yugoslav republic in the 1980s on a number of parameters, including: GNP per capita and how much it fell in the 1980s,

unemployment rate, inflation, the structure of the economy (types of industries, agricultural vs. industrial sector, etc), and the orientation of exports. These measures and qualitative description can be combined to create a profile for each republic that suggest very different potentials for domestic reform and adaptation to new international conditions. Measuring the positive or negative influence of the international environment is a much more tricky enterprise. It is especially difficult because the terms like the “international community” or “West” hardly refer to a monolith with a singular policy towards the former Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, I believe that careful empirical research and description can highlight the key countries and policies that made a difference—for instance, Italy was not very supportive of Slovenia at times but it was the crucial support of Germany and the United States that helped to ensure stability there. Interviews with domestic political elites and those making policy decisions in key Western governments and organizations are crucial, but so are archives of newspapers and other documents that will allow me to reconstruct Western policies towards each successor state and the implications of this policy. The global market and its effect on individual successor states, however, can be measured more precisely. For instance, it can be shown that structural changes in the world economy of the 1980s hurt Croatia and Serbia much more than Slovenia.

The remaining task is to connect causal variables with outcomes. One method I plan to use to make the causal link is that known as “process tracing” and involves empirically trace the rhetoric, strategies, and behavior of ruling elites to show how their policies reflected the prevailing conditions. In this sense, intervening variables that directly affected the prospects for democracy, such as individual leaders, ruling parties, and prevailing ideologies (such as nationalism) will be part of the narrative. It will be also important to show how dealing with the problem of varying levels of economic scarcity (often through the reproduction of state power through clientelistic networks, sometimes based on primordial loyalties) was a feature of each regime. Another way to demonstrate causal links is to show how public preferences reflected these same conditions through public opinion research and electoral results: for instance, the popularity of pro-European parties among Slovenes and quasi-socialist-nationalist ones among Serbs.

Summary of Findings: It would be impossible to summarize the entire range of my findings in such a short space, so I will mention just a few of the most important ones here:

- Varying levels of economic collapse in the 1980s among the Yugoslav republics directly shaped the prospects for liberalism in these republics. Where conditions of material scarcity were worse, illiberal political configurations came to the fore and turned to nationalist ideologies to generate support among a disillusioned public.
- I did not find significant variation in democratic attitudes among the republics prior to independence. Thus, hypotheses about more or less democratic political cultures do not seem to work, even for Slovenia. Rather, I have found that democratic attitudes come about with success and cooptation into Western structures. A prosperous, liberal road away from communism seems to lead to democratic values, and not the other way around.
- In Croatia, clientelism became the biggest obstacle to democratization in the 1980s. Those that consistently supported the ruling authoritarian party were those who benefited materially from its rule through clientelist networks.
- The role of external factors is largely contingent. Pressure and a mandate for stability, however, may momentarily support procedural correctness, but cannot support a truly liberal polity. At the same time as including the role of the international environment provides a corrective to overly-structural accounts of change, it also provides a corrective to those analyses that are overly-voluntarist very balance of power in the international environment structures the strategies of domestic actors.

- In general, a balance must be struck: in some ways, even Slovenia's "success" was not assured, but this does not mean that Macedonia could have gone Slovenia's way.
- Procedural measures of democracy have serious limitations.
- Nationalist politics may have unintended consequences.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas: To save space for my policy recommendations, I will only state here again that I think it is important for more scholars to begin to examine the Yugoslav successor states as cases of regime transition and not only as cases of state breakdown and ethnic conflict, which has been the dominant research agenda to date.

Policy Recommendations: One conclusion of my research with important implications for policy is that the politics of meeting international demands and conditionality can have negative effects for democratization if the demands and conditions are applied in the wrong way by external actors. Too much pressure and certain kinds of pressure often play into the hands of nationalist and anti-democratic forces. I do not mean to imply, however, that international institutions are deliberately sabotaging the process of democratization in post-communist countries. Nor am I suggesting that the ICTY should stop pursuing the arrest of indicted war criminals, or that the EU should no longer encourage regional cooperation in the Balkans at risk of angering extremist groups. To some degree these domestic responses are unavoidable. Moreover, the ICTY in particular has shown sensitivity to local concerns at several critical moments and actually improved the prospects for cooperation. However, there are ways in which international institutions and their leaders can adjust their tactics to avoid some of the negative consequences discussed in this essay.

Western institutions and leaders should be sensitive to local concerns and frames of interpretation and aware of the historical context and high sensitivity of certain issues. Regional cooperation in the Balkans can only be a positive thing, but at this point in history mentions of it only evoke bad memories for many Croats. In the same way, the Homeland War is a very fresh memory for many Croats who suffered and lost family members and friends. Whether these associations, connotations and meanings are justified, real or constructed is a matter open to discussion, but the fact that they exist should be taken into account and tactics should be adjusted appropriately to help governments meet Western conditions. Heavy-handed tactics should be avoided and publics should be kept educated and informed both by the international institutions and domestic governments, for a lack of transparency can only arouse mistrust. The ICTY in particular could do a better job of presenting its indictments in such a way that the notion of individualized guilt is clear. The European Union could do a better job of treating Croatia individually and not continually associating it with the Balkans or the former Yugoslavia out of sensitivity to local concerns. Much of this could be accomplished with better and more frequent public relations campaigns and public education strategies. The ICTY, EU, and other institutions must also be within reason fair and consistent in their approach to making demands and setting conditions. Political elites and society at large are very well aware of how similar processes are playing themselves out in neighboring countries, and it is difficult, for instance, for many ordinary people to understand why Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, perhaps the most notorious war criminals, have not been arrested while Croatian generals who liberated occupied territory are being targeted. Moreover, the perception that Operations Flash and Storm were at first given the blessing of the United States and are now being condemned has contributed to a feeling of betrayal. Conditions should be made clear and uniform and the rewards for meeting them should also be distributed consistently and uniformly: there was deep resentment in Croatia, for instance, when following the downfall of Milošević in Serbia, the new leaders were given Western recognition and rewards that it took the post-authoritarian leadership in Croatia much longer to achieve.

Domestic governments and parties also have a responsibility, and that is to avoid scare tactics but also avoid making unrealistic promises: in other words, they should present issues to the public in a balanced way. Moreover, taking a strong stand on an unpopular issue may have benefits in the long run, both for the decision maker and for democratic stability. Decisive leaders and governments may be able to counter right-wing pressure and make future cooperation easier. At certain junctures, moreover, the government may have more room to pursue pro-Western policies than the activities of certain extremist groups may suggest.

Most importantly, the benefits of cooperation, especially financial help, should come quickly so that the historical moment to strengthen and legitimize liberalism is not lost. The Marshall Plan in post-World War II Western Europe, after all, was key to securing prosperity and liberalism there. It is a fact of international politics that the strategies of external actors will inevitably reflect their interests and that these interests cannot always be reconciled with the benevolent desire to encourage democracy, but where the very legitimacy of Western institutions and the democratic and market institutions and way of life they are trying to promote are at stake, it is of utmost importance that their strategies and demands are fair, balanced, and sensitive to local conditions, as this can only improve the chances for democratization in the region.