

## Democracy in post-communist ethnically divided societies

The conspicuous feature of the process of post-communist democratisation in former communist countries is that, as a result thereof, three countries that had been organised as ethnic federations fell apart, namely the USSR, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Additionally, the dissolution of Yugoslavia was extremely brutal and painful; it resulted in abundant hardship and suffering. This has prompted many observers to conclude that so-called "ethno-federations" are not conducive to democracy and that multiethnic states which are territorially organised along ethnic lines do not possess the capacity to prevent ethnic conflicts from escalating into disaster. Accordingly, the conclusion has very often been that they cannot be run as democracies. The common wisdom is that Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians and Slavic Moslems (now called Bosniaks) could have been kept together only by undemocratic means, that is, by the rightist dictatorship of King Aleksandar Karadjordjevic of Yugoslavia and by communist authoritarian rule, symbolised by Josip Broz - Tito.

Already at this juncture I must note that most research in this field, conducted by "empirical" political scientists tends to be markedly a - historical. The authoritarian regime of King Aleksandar and his immediate successors lasted from 1929 to 1941 and coincided with the universal economic crisis and a great crisis of democracy in Europe. For that matter, there were very few functioning democracies at the time in the world; better said, there existed very few states that would measure up to the presently applied criteria for democracy, rule of law and observance of human rights. No unitary, nationally homogeneous neighbour state of multiethnic Yugoslavia was a democracy at that time; the multiethnic Kingdom of Yugoslavia was in that historical period much less "undemocratic" than the "old" nation states of Germany and Italy under Hitler and Mussolini. In the same vein, Tito's version of "really existing socialism" from 1945 to 1980 was much milder and friendlier to fundamental human necessities than that obtaining at the time in unitary, monoethnic Bulgaria or Poland. We should rather conclude that multiethnic states were, compared to nationally homogeneous states, less resistant to the temptations of extreme nationalism emerging as a reaction to communist rule than that democracy in general is not capable to function in multiethnic states.

It is also generally believed that new states that were established on the ruins of former ethnic federations have a better democratic record if they have managed to be unitary and be dominated by one ethnic nation. In a survey based on the Freedom House indicators of democracy, unitary countries rank among more successful, although not all of them as totally inclusive, whereas those countries that have attempted to be organised along ethnic lines appear to be the least democratic.

Freedom House ranks states as to the presence of democracy on a scale of seven, 1 indicating the best and 7 the worst situation. It was found that in the period of transition until 2001 unitary countries ranked 2.9, ethnic federations 5.2, while in some mixed situations, such as the Ukraine and Moldova, the index was 3.7. The Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia and Slovenia fared much better than Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Georgia and Uzbekistan. This corresponds to the data concerning the share of persons in the whole population belonging to the dominant nation. In the Czech Republic it is 81.2 %, in Lithuania 81,

4%, in Slovakia 85.6%, whereas in Macedonia it is 66.6%, in Serbia and Montenegro less than two thirds, in Latvia 57.7% and in Kazakhstan 53%.<sup>1</sup>

This experience leads us back to expectations expressed traditionally by political philosophers. If democracy is conceived as a constitutional arrangement able to prevent and control social conflicts, then already John Stewart Mill, in his *Considerations on Representative Government*, expressed doubts as to the viability of a representative government in a society divided by ethnic and regional allegiances.<sup>2</sup> He even doubted that proportional representation, recommended by many as the best solution, would be of much help.

When the issue of post-communist democracies came to the centre of attention of the new branch of political science, so-called “transitology”, historical parallels were sought.<sup>3</sup> The failure of democracy in many new states of Africa and Asia resulted in gloomy predictions. On the other hand, a closer and more promising model was seen in democratic reactions to totalitarian and authoritarian systems in Spain, Portugal and some countries of Latin America. However, these more optimistic views were based on successes of democratisation in countries which had always been and remained “capitalist”, even under dictatorial regimes: their major problem was not economic reform but the rehabilitation and creation of democratic institutions. This applied also to Portugal. Furthermore, Latin America cannot be compared to Europe in terms of ethno-national divisions.

Spain could have served as a useful example for ethnically divided societies in Eastern Europe: a functioning constitution was elaborated there after the disappearance of Franco, in spite of the horrible memories of the Civil War which could have been used for ethnic mobilisation. This leads me to conclude that the absence of structural economic problems was also an important favourable factor in Western Europe and Latin America, a factor which should not be eliminated from our considerations. Post-communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe had to solve a huge problem with no historical precedents. In some of them, such as Bulgaria, more than 90% of literally *everything* had been owned by the state.<sup>4</sup>

The legacy of communism in the economic field has been too lightly ignored when examining the success or failure of democracy of post-communist societies. State socialism was a society of scarcity and permanent need. There was never enough food, dwelling, elementary consumer goods, space, money... Naturally and understandably, scarcity and deprivation were combined with social envy – if I am allowed to paraphrase Shakespeare, massive social envy was the stuff of which the communist dream was made. Such destructive “socialist” attitudes were supported by totalitarian propaganda, which blamed the “enemies of the people” and foreign countries and their “hirelings” for the miserable quality of life. Ideology was omnipresent and helped explain everything by the “we”, “you” and “they” syndrome, accompanied by rejection of democracy, conformism and collectivism. The human individual was practically non-existent; politics was outside the reach of ordinary citizens. All these factors resulted in conformism and social fatalism, which are now

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<sup>1</sup> Sources quoted in Alina Mungiu – Pippidi, «Miloševićevi birači – objašnjenje za nacionalizam u postkomunističkoj Evropi koji je potekao iz masa», in Alina Mungiu – Pippidi and Ivan Krastev (eds.) *Nacionalizam posle komunizma*, Belgrade, Beogradski fond za političku izuzetnost, 2004, p. 55 ff.

<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Politics and Society*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, p. 547.

<sup>3</sup> See: Vojin Dimitrijevic, *The Insecurity of Human Rights after Communism*, Oslo: Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, 1993, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> See: Veneta Yankova, "Democracy's first steps", *East European Reporter*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1992, p. 44.

in some places represented by electoral abstention and despise of democratically elected politicians.

And indeed, comparative measurements of nationalism and authoritarianism in post-communist countries indicate that the index of authoritarianism has tended to be higher than the index of nationalism.

The typical determinants of nationalism lie in affirmative attitudes towards the following statements:

Some territories outside our state truly belong to us;

Some ethnic groups in this country represent a danger to our sovereignty;

Persons who do not speak the official language shall not have the right to vote;

No foreign country or international organisation should give us any advice on how to run our affairs.

Authoritarianism can be detected in affirmative answers to statements such as:

Most people will behave properly if they are controlled by an iron fist;

Our country is rich and beautiful but it has many enemies;

Elections have no sense because same people (politicians) will always be on the top;

Our country would be better off if some inferior groups should know what their right place is.<sup>5</sup>

It is frightening to realise to what extent authoritarian attitudes, developed under communism, have been successfully used by nationalist leaders to promote values allegedly opposed to communism. "Communism" has been generally blamed by them for all previous ills of their own nation, including allegations that communism was introduced by aliens, such as Jews and Russians. In the case of Serbia, the villains were also Croats (Tito was a Croat); in Croatia it was Serbs (communist partisans were mostly Serbs, etc.). The predilection to blame others, including unknown, occult forces, is another incarnation of the previous, communist but xenophobic anti Western "internationalist" ideology as nationalist harangue. By the way, this is quite understandable for many vociferous nationalist leaders used to hold high political and economic positions in communist times. Nationalism thus proves to be an ideology of those who have no ideology, based on the frustration caused by transition and the perception of danger coming from the outside. It is also interesting to note that present collectivism is not the collectivism of the left, but collectivism of the far right. In many ways it was communist heritage that has been a force supporting nationalism in post-communist countries, a factor maybe stronger than earlier mythical traditions, which are being so eagerly invoked by present leaders.<sup>6</sup>

If we have attempted to define democracy in the loosest manner, let us try to understand what we mean by "nationalism". A neutral definition was offered by Ernest Gellner, who suggested that nationalism is the demand that state borders correspond to ethno-national borders, the postulate that all persons belonging to an ethnic nation should live in one state.<sup>7</sup> Given the number of ethnic groups or even groups that are considered to be nations (whatever that means), this is clearly

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<sup>5</sup> Research conducted by Freedom House, reported in Alina Mungiu – Pippidi and Ivan Krastev, *op. cit.*, pp. 68 ff

<sup>6</sup> See: Alexander J. Motyl, «Nach der Sintflut: Totalitarismus und Nationalismus im ehemaligen Sowjetreich», *Österreichische Osthefte*, 1993, pp. 236 – 239.

<sup>7</sup> "Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent", Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 1.

impossible. There will always remain situations where states have to go existing which include among their nationals (citizens) persons of different origin, who speak different languages, profess different religions and do not fully share a common past. Sometimes, as in the former Yugoslavia, ethnic borders are not easy to draw and a nationalist solution would lead, and in fact led, to “ethnic cleansing” and genocide.

There have been many suggestions, not only by nationalist ideologues but also by observers from abroad, to achieve peace by “humane” transfers of population; the latter would allegedly lead to the “favourable” results described at the beginning of my talk.<sup>8</sup> Such solutions are again collectivistic and generalised, and imply values far removed from those which modern Europe attempts to support and preserve. The prevailing values, which even hypocrites must publicly profess, are the individualistic tenets of autonomy of the human being, rights of the individual and his/her freedom to decide how and where to live. This brings me back to my personal experience of trying to oppose some kind of lethal determinism which denies, or declares as unrealistic, any possibility of political action and protest against the forces which lead to foreseeable disaster and human suffering.

To be sure, there have been efforts to influence events in multiethnic societies from abroad in order to avert catastrophes. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia these efforts were directed mainly at preserving a multiethnic framework. This is quite obvious in the Dayton-Paris agreement of 21 November 1995<sup>9</sup> and the Ohrid agreement of 13 August 2001<sup>10</sup> while less conspicuous in the Constitutional Framework for Kosovo, adopted on 15 May 2001<sup>11</sup>. For many reasons, and not exclusively for altruistic care for the local population, the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina was ended by forcing the hitherto warring parties to cohabitate within a complicated federation, while ethnic Albanians and Slavic Macedonians in Macedonia were led to reach a power-sharing agreement. The totally asymmetrical situation in Kosovo, where the Kosovo Albanians are a huge majority compared to Serbian, Turkish, Roma and Bosniak minorities, seems to be preserved as a nominally multiethnic entity within Serbia and the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro by fears that a totally independent Kosovo would result in further turmoil in the Balkans. In fact, Kosovo Albanians rank very high on the scale of nationalism: 81% believe that some territories outside Kosovo belong to them (in Serbia the corresponding figure is only 50%), 72% reject any foreign advice (in Serbia 74%), whereas 78% think that minorities represent a danger to the community (in Serbia 75%).<sup>12</sup>

It is clearly in the interest of Europe to prevent the total failure of states that cannot be transformed into unitary entities without too much harm. This even more so bearing in mind that the prospect of joining the European Union is a strong motive for politicians and their voters to accept some modern attitudes and to adapt accordingly their behaviour and their approach to political and economic affairs. The question remains on how to do it and what to learn from previous experience.

It is trite to say that economic development will greatly contribute to the lessening of ethnic and religious tensions. Another suggestion is to observe the

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<sup>8</sup> For a survey, see A.J.R. Groom, "After the 'Peace': Pathways and Problems", in: Milica Delevic Djilas – Vladimir Djerić (ed.), *The International and the National*, Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Human Rights, 2003, pp. 125 ff.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.oscebih.org/essentials/gfap/eng/home.asp>

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.coe.int/T/E/Legal\\_affairs/Legal\\_co-operation/Police\\_and\\_internal\\_security/Police\\_cooperation/OHRID%20Agreement%2013august2001.asp](http://www.coe.int/T/E/Legal_affairs/Legal_co-operation/Police_and_internal_security/Police_cooperation/OHRID%20Agreement%2013august2001.asp)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.unmikonline.org/constframework.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Alina Mungiu – Pippidi and Ivan Krastev, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

warning that most ethnic conflicts are not totally endogenous but are fed by influences from abroad. These influences have come not only from kin states (such as Russia in Moldova and Serbia and Croatia in Bosnia and Herzegovina) but also from Diasporas, the role of which has not been properly studied. In handling some crises the West has manifested disunity. At some moments, the situation on the Balkans resembled the pre-1914 stage, with foreign powers trying to regain and control their old spheres of influence. A united international community is therefore the necessary precondition for maintaining the reputation of democracy as a system capable of controlling existing and potential conflicts between ethnically and religiously divided communities forced by history to live in common states. The final advice is to support and reward moderate political leaders who will hopefully emerge after the movements of national solidarity, obsessed as they are by great national goals, become themselves influenced and mellowed by normal political divisions in their constituencies, dictated by different secular interests instead of grandiose historical myths.

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