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WHAT ARE THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE 'ETHNICISATION' OF POLITICS IN POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE?

ABSTRACT: This essay will analyse ethnic politics and the breakup of Yugoslavia. It will consider what the key explanatory factors were for the rise in ethnic politics. There will also be an analysis as to why nationalist politics, virtually unseen during communism, ended in such brutal warfare. Whilst the focus will be on the former Yugoslavia, there will be a comparison with the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, a case which did not end in violence.

KEY WORDS: *ethnic politics, nationalism, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, civil society.*

Post-communist Europe saw the dissolution of two states: Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. This essay will focus on the former Yugoslavia, using the Czechoslovak case for comparison. The main causes of the ethnicisation of politics in Yugoslavia are related to the nature of the communist regime. Due to a weak civil society and a lack of cross-cutting identities, the post-communist environment was conducive to a rise in nationalism. Opportunistic 'chauvo-communists' adopted a nationalist rhetoric after communism had lost its legitimacy. The consequence of ethnic politics in Yugoslavia was violent warfare. Wars in Croatia and Bosnia were characterised by murder, ethnic cleansing and civilian suffering. This essay will analyse why the extremist parties prevailed and why the subsequent warfare was so violent. There will also be a comparative analysis regarding why the Czechoslovak case did not end in violence.

In order to accurately assess which factors can explain the ethnicisation of

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politics in the former Yugoslavia, one has to look backwards. Schopflin states, ‘the burgeoning of nationalism was not inherent, it can be explained by specific historical circumstances.’² The ‘Pandora’s Box’ approach argues that the Communist Party, through coercion and repression, kept nationalism at bay. Following the collapse of communism, it was therefore inevitable that nationalist elements of society would flourish. There is evidence to support this argument. For example, in 1971 there was a purge of over six-thousand prominent figures of the business and political world in Croatia and Serbia.³ This mass dismissal succeeded in pushing nationalist elements underground. Although there are other similar examples, they are limited. In fact, the Pandora’s Box approach is lacking in empirical credibility. There is no recorded evidence of the police being dispatched to deal with inter-ethnic violence under communism. In addition, various case studies of ethnically heterogeneous regions, such as Prijedor, indicate that there were no ethnic tensions simmering below the surface. In a 1990 survey conducted in Prijedor, only six percent of respondents reported inter-ethnic issues at work.⁴

Although the Pandora’s Box approach is not sufficient for explaining why there was an ethnicisation of politics in Yugoslavia, other elements of the communist regime must be analysed. Schopflin argues that a weak civil society and a lack of cross-cutting identities were both features of the communist regime, which facilitated the rise of nationalism. The former was important because nationalism was essentially an expression of social autonomy. As civil society was weak, demands for greater autonomy were expressed through nationalism. This factor is directly linked to the lack of cross-cutting identities. Schopflin argues that due to the ideological dominance of communism, all other competing identities were ‘swept away’. As a result, it was far easier for undiluted nationalism, based solely on the grounds of ethnicity, to remain intact.⁵ As no cross-cutting identities were developed during communism, and as there was no socially autonomous civil society, conditions following the collapse of communism were conducive to the rise of ethnic politics.

One must not underestimate the importance of the actual collapse of communism in explaining the rise of ethnic politics. Living standards were in

² George Schopflin, ‘Nationalism and Ethnicity in Europe’, in Charles Kupchan, ed., *Nationalism and Nationalities in the new Europe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), p.61

³ Aleksa Djilas, ‘The Breakup of Yugoslavia’, in Charles Kupchan, ed., *Nationalism and Nationalities in the new Europe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), p.90

⁴ Anthony Oberschall, ‘From Ethnic Cooperation to Violence and War in Yugoslavia’, in D. Chirof & M. Seligman, eds., *Ethnopolitical Warfare* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2002), p.133

⁵ Schopflin, *Nationalism and Nationalities in the new Europe*, pp.49-53

sharp decline following Tito's death. Between 1979 and 1984 personal income fell by thirty-four percent in real terms.⁶ As a result, communism was increasingly being perceived as illegitimate. Had this not been the case, there would have been little scope for a rise in ethnic politics. However, opportunistic politicians, seeking to preserve their power, made the most of a difficult situation. Schopflin labels this phenomenon 'chauvo-communism'.⁷ Political elites, such as Slobodan Milosevic, salvaged their political power by rapidly converting to a nationalist rhetoric. Nationalism was even used as a scapegoat by these elites. Oberschall convincingly argues that converting to a nationalist rhetoric 'saved Milosevic from the perilous politics of transition to a market economy.'⁸

In the former Yugoslavia, the consequences of the ethnicisation of politics were extremely grave. Two elements will be considered here. Firstly, extremist parties that adopted a nationalist rhetoric were successful in the 1990 elections; events following these elections are important for explaining the violence. Secondly, the war itself will be looked at. In the 1990 elections, almost of the parties competing adopted a nationalist rhetoric. However, the extreme parties prevailed at the expense of the moderate parties. Tudjman's CDU won two-thirds of the seats in the Croatian parliament and Milosevic's party won sixty-five percent of the votes in Serbia.⁹ Before analysing the implications of this, it is important to consider why people voted for extremist parties.

There are two important factors which might have led people to vote for extremist parties. One is the manipulation, by political elites, of the economic and political situation. Another is the influential role of the church and intellectuals. Milosevic exploited the economic crisis in Serbia. His rhetoric was characterised by reductionist mobilization and he provoked feelings of monopolistic closure. Reductionist mobilization is the interpreting of all problems on ethno-national grounds. Schopflin argues that Milosevic convinced Serbs that the reason for their economic plight was related to various 'aliens'.¹⁰ In addition, he focused on a perceived international anti-Serb campaign. The failure of the Western media to report on the crimes committed against Serbs in Croatia merely played into Milosevic's hands, as voters resonated with his claims. Intellectuals and the Orthodox Church were also influential. There are numerous examples of orientalist quotations from prominent academics

⁶ R. Hodson, G. Massey & D. Sekulic, 'Ethnic intolerance and ethnic conflict in the dissolution of Yugoslavia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(5), (2006), p. 804

⁷ Schopflin, *Nationalism and Nationalities in the new Europe*, p.64

⁸ Oberschall, *Ethnopolitical Warfare*, p.132

⁹ Djilas, *Nationalism and Nationalities in the new Europe*, p. 93

¹⁰ Schopflin, *Nationalism and Nationalities in the new Europe*, pp.56-57

and clergymen, which played into the hands of the extremists. The academic Miroljub Jevtic stated, 'Islam is opposed to any just relations, tolerance, dialogue or coexistence.' The Orthodox Church routinely labelled territorial expansion as legitimate and one of its bishops, Abbot Atanasije, labelled Islamic tendencies as 'primitive'.¹¹

Events following these elections are crucial in explaining the outbreak of hostilities. There was a symbiotic process of propaganda becoming more vitriolic and minorities facing greater persecution. In Croatia, many innocent Serbs were slaughtered by the police prior to the war. It is estimated that roughly ten-thousand Serbian homes were blown up before the war.¹² What were once ethnically heterogeneous regions became increasingly homogeneous, due to the persecution of minorities. Due to this ethnic polarization, people were more likely to believe the 'de-humanising' propaganda, which in part explains the violence. Oberschall argues that ethnic polarization was a key explanatory factor as it 'broke down the structural protection against propaganda.'¹³ The wars in Croatia and Bosnia which ensued were of an extremely brutal nature. It is estimated that well over ten-thousand people died in the Serb-Croat war. In addition, over ten percent of all houses and apartments in Croatia were destroyed.¹⁴ The suffering of civilians, due to policies of ethnic cleansing, was what made the war exceptional. In Prijedor, of the fifty-thousand Muslims who lived there in 1992, only six-thousand remained, a year after the war started.¹⁵

One of the most common arguments, for explaining the violence, is the Primordial argument. This approach stresses that the violence was as a result of ancient hatreds, which came to surface following the collapse of communism. This argument is problematic as it lacks empirical credibility. Sekulic et al. argue that for this thesis to be correct, levels of ethnic intolerance would have to have been high before the war. However, the research done suggests otherwise. There were low levels of ethnic intolerance in Croatia prior to the outbreak of war, intolerance increased with the war.¹⁶ It was a consequence of the war, rather than a cause of it. In addition, there were high rates of inter-ethnic marriages in Yugoslavia. The Primordial argument suggests the

¹¹ Norman Cigar, *Genocide in Bosnia* (Texas: Texas University Press, 1995), pp.28-30

¹² Djilas, *Nationalism and Nationalities in the new Europe*, p.96

¹³ Oberschall, *Ethnopolitical Warfare*, p.137

¹⁴ R. Hodson, G. Massey & D. Sekulic, 'Ethnic intolerance and ethnic conflict in the dissolution of Yugoslavia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(5), (2006), p. 808

¹⁵ Oberschall, *Ethnopolitical Warfare*, p.122

¹⁶ R. Hodson, G. Massey & D. Sekulic, 'Ethnic intolerance and ethnic conflict in the dissolution of Yugoslavia', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(5), (2006), p. 800

violence was conducted by neighbour against neighbour, however only ten to twenty percent of eligible men served in militias or the army.¹⁷ The Primordial argument is too simplistic for explaining the violence. Instead, there should be a focus on elite manipulation, opportunistic politicians and the subsequent effects that followed from ethnic polarization. The organisation of the extremists and their persecution of the moderates was also key.

The 1st January 1993 marked the dissolution of another post-communist state, Czechoslovakia. There are a number of notable differences from the Yugoslav case, the lack of violence being the most striking. Following the collapse of communism, there were increasing demands in Slovakia for greater autonomy. The main reason for the dissolution of Czechoslovakia was the incompatibility of the two leading parties of the respective republics, following the 1990 elections. In Slovakia, Meciar’s party advocated devolution of power to Slovakia. Klaus, on the other hand, was concerned with the ‘shock-therapy’ economic reforms. The Czech right argued that this process required a strong centralised state, which was clearly in opposition to Meciar’s demands. There were also institutional barriers to an effective consensus democracy. Due to the minority veto and the separate party system, which lacked cross-cutting cleavages, Henderson argues that ‘the system limited the room for manoeuvre which would have allowed consensus democracy to operate.’¹⁸

It is important to analyse why the Czechoslovak case, unlike Yugoslavia, did not end in violence. Firstly, the Czechoslovak population at large was in favour of staying in the union. Opinion polls as late as May 1992 show that over half of all Czechs and Slovaks were in favour of staying in the union.¹⁹ Secondly, both republics were ethnically homogenous; this meant that there was no scope for the persecution of minorities, which was one of the short-term factors which led to the outbreak of hostilities in Yugoslavia. As of 1988, Czech lands were ninety-four percent Czech and Slovak lands were eighty-six percent Slovak (and only one percent Czech).²⁰ Thirdly, Slovak nationalism was characterised by demands for greater autonomy, rather than secession. Had the Slovaks demanded independence and pursued policies of aggrandizement, like in Yugoslavia, the outcome may well have been different. Finally, the events leading up to the dissolution of the republic were deliberative. There

¹⁷ Oberschall, *Ethnopolitical Warfare*, p.142

¹⁸ Karen Henderson, ‘Czechoslovakia: The failure of consensus politics’, *Regional and Federal Studies*, 5(2), (1995), p.121

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.111

²⁰ Stanislav Kirschbaum, ‘Czechoslovakia: The Creation, federalization and dissolution of a nation-state’, *Regional Politics and Policy*, 3(1), (1993), p.78

were a number of conferences and discussions in parliament. In the meantime, quite the opposite was happening in the former Yugoslavia.

A weak civil society and a lack of cross-cutting identities, created an ideal environment for a rise in ethnic politics in the former Yugoslavia. Also, opportunistic politicians turned to ethnic politics as communism began to lose its legitimacy. The consequences of this shift were grave in nature. Extreme parties were voted into power and pursued violent policies, resulting in warfare. A Primordial argument is too simplistic to explain the warfare as it is lacking in statistical evidence. Various factors including ethnic polarization and instrumental elite manipulation should be considered. The dissolution of the Czech Republic was also in part due to communist legacies. However its ending was not bloody, largely due to popular support for the union. Also, political elites focused on deliberation as opposed to manipulation.

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KOJI SU UZROCI I POSLEDICE ETNIČKE POLITIKE U POSTKOMUNISTIČKOJ EVROPI?

SAŽETAK: Esej analizira etničku politiku koja je prethodila raspadu Jugoslavije. Uočeni su ključni faktori koji su doveli do uspona etnopolitike i nacionalizma. U radu se pokušao dati odgovor na pitanje kako je nacionalistička politika bila gotovo nevidljiva tokom komunizma, da bi eskalirala u postkomunističkom periodu i dovela do brutalnog rata i raspada države. Za razliku od Jugoslavije, rad je pokušao da objasni i raspad Čehoslovačke, koja je takođe bila višenacionalna država, ali koja se raspala bez nasilja.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *etnička politika, nacionalizam, Jugoslavija, Čehoslovačka, civilno društvo.*