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The Distinctive Characteristics of Transformation in Eastern Europe A Combination of Democracy and Nationalism

Abstract: Transformation in the eastern part of Europe began following the “velvet” revolution and continued after the “colour” revolutions. These two types of transformative revolution have many things in common, first of all a form of mass protest combining democracy and nationalism at its roots. However, nationalism did not begin to appear immediately after the fall of communism but rather after the first halting and unsuccessful democratic changes. In other words, nationalists did not take over from communists, but from democrats.

Keywords: nationalism, democracy, transformative revolutions

The prominent Polish dissident and later influential public figure Adam Michnik described nationalism as the final stage of communism. These famous words are usually interpreted in the sense that communist regimes in the former socialist countries are first replaced by nationalism, an ideology that is cruder and easier to understand by the masses, and then by democracy, a much more complex system to comprehend and implement. Admittedly, the opposite is also known to happen. Authoritarian communist leaders employ nationalism as the last means of staying in power and preventing major changes. The most striking example of this is Milošević’s Serbia. In both cases, however, nationalism is an obstacle to democratic change.

Unlike these widespread conclusions, some researchers see a positive aspect in the rise of nationalism during the collapse of communist regimes. They believe that nationalism acted as a sort of catalyst of change in Eastern European countries and as the only force capable of uniting and mobilizing the masses in the struggle against institutions of totalitarianism. Having resolved this problem, a nationalist coalition inevitably crumbles and its factions appear as political rivals, leading to a functional pluralistic society.¹

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¹ R. Tomas, *Srbija pod Miloševićem. Politika devedesetih* (Belgrade: Samizdat, 2002), 27.

Let me attempt a more in-depth exploration of these problems. As we know, the process of abandoning the socialist path in Eastern European countries took the form of so-called “velvet revolutions” of 1989.

The forms of these “revolutions” could be very different – peaceful protests as well as revolts that included violence or round tables of the leading political forces or the organization of the first multiparty elections after a longer hiatus.² The period of “velvet revolutions” in Eastern Europe lasted ten years and essentially came to its end with the “October” or “Bulldozer” revolution in Serbia in 2000.

This revolution was of a twofold nature. On the one hand, it was the last in the series of “velvet revolutions” that had begun in 1989; on the other hand, it opened a series of new revolutions known as “colour revolutions”. This was in fact a re-edition of “velvet revolutions” in countries where the implemented changes proved insufficient and incomplete, failing to achieve the objectives of previous revolutions. The aim of these new “colour revolutions” is to put an end to the corruption and bureaucratic arbitrariness of the new regime, as well as to social insecurity, gaping stratification, and the astronomical profits of ruling clans often built on familial relations.³

A characteristic of the “coloured revolutions” of the early twenty-first century is that they usually took place in periods of election – hence they are also known as “electoral revolutions”. At the end of the twentieth century, multiparty elections were the main device of the opposition’s struggle for their electoral win and the mechanism of regime change in many Eastern European countries. An attempt to challenge or even neutralize these electoral victories has often proved the last straw.

In other words, “colour revolutions” of the early twenty-first century were meant to finish what the “velvet revolutions” had left unfinished. This is precisely the reason that new revolutions tend to occur in relatively underdeveloped countries – in the Balkans and in the former USSR. Secondly, “colour revolutions” are focused on resolving the contrasts that emerged already during the post-socialist transformation; they “achieved a stable character and began to exert moderate influence on further development”.⁴

² See, e.g., *Istoriia antikomunisticheskikh revoliutsii kontsa XX veka. Tsentral'nia i Iugo-Vostochnaia Evropa* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007); *Revoliutsii i reform v stranah Tsentral'noi i Iugo-Vostochnoi Evropy: 20 let spustia* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2011); *Konets epokhi. SSSR i revoliutsii v stranah Vostochnoi Evropy 1989–1991 gg. Dokumenty* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2015).

³ V. Inozemtsev, “Trudnyi vozrast elity. Novye ‘narodnyye revoliutsii’ kardinal'no otlichaiusia ot sobytii, imevshikh mesto shestnadtsat' let nazad”, *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 6 April 2005.

⁴ A. Riabov, “Moskva prinimaet vyzov ‘tsvetnykh’ revoliutsii”, *Pro et contra* (July–August 2005), 19–20.

Hence, in my view, both the first and the second revolution are phenomena of the same type and should be regarded as a single process. They can collectively be termed “transformative revolutions”.⁵

One revolutionary shift, it should be understood, is often insufficient to achieve a full transition to a new democratic system, particularly in underdeveloped countries. And although one revolutionary impulse was enough for Central European states such as Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, for Serbia and some post-Soviet countries new revolutionary upsurges proved necessary.

For example, in Russia, to facilitate the beginning of real transformation two revolutionary shifts were needed: firstly, the August Coup of 1991, the suppression of which put an end to the Communist monopoly on power; and secondly the events of October 1993, which ended the Soviet organization of power. In Ukraine, the “velvet revolution” did not make much of an impact, but it was immediately followed by two “colour” uprisings: the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the so-called Euromaidan of 2013–2014.

Again, this is hardly unusual. Let us remember that in many Western European countries a whole series of revolutions was needed to fully establish the bourgeois system. The most illustrative, textbook example is provided by French history.

Let me note once again that the two types of transformative revolutions highlighted here – “velvet” and “colour” – have a lot in common: above all mass protests with a combination of democracy and nationalism at their roots. We need to understand how this works.

Firstly, nationalism does not seem to emerge immediately after the demise of communism, as might perhaps be understood from Michnik’s above-quoted formula; rather, it seems to appear after the first – uncertain and unsuccessful – democratic changes. More specifically, the nationalists did not take over from the communists, but from the democrats. Secondly, shifts such as these occurred not only during the most recent transformative turnarounds or immediately after them, but also a long time before any “velvet” or “colour” revolutions.

Let me mention just two examples from the history of Yugoslavia, beginning with the events in Croatia in the early 1970s. During a discussion on constitutional amendments, there emerged in Croatia the so-called MASPOK (an abbreviation of *masovni pokret* [mass movement]), also known as the Croatian Spring to analogize the Prague Spring.

⁵ There is still no established name for these revolutions. The terms “velvet” and “colour” have little actual meaning. They are sometimes defined by negation, for example as “anti-communist”. But where these revolutions lead and what their purpose is remains unclear from these terms.

Protests and rallies took place throughout the republic. It all began with the question of the Croatian language and culture and ended in the glorification of the fascist Independent State of Croatia and accusations of unitarism against the federation and of “Great Serbdom” against the Serbs. There were demands to immediately re-evaluate foreign trade and the monetary and banking system of Yugoslavia in favour of Croatia. Serbs living in Croatia began to be discriminated against in daily life, employment etc.

The nationalist forces rallied around Matica Hrvatska (Matrix Croatia) – the leading cultural and educational republic-level institution, as well as around the University of Zagreb. The movement was headed by the leadership of the League of Communists of Croatia: S. Dabčević-Kučar, M. Tripalo, and P. Pirker. F. Tuđman, who would go on to become the first president of independent Croatia, actively participated in MASPOK. Tito took his time, made no moves for a while, and then finally came out and said that he had been deceived. The Croatian nationalists had indeed glorified him in the press as a “Croat” and organized opulent receptions for him. However, as MASPOK began to acquire increasingly nationalist overtones and get out of hand, Tito intervened in December 1971, arresting the movement’s leaders and removing the Croatian leadership.⁶

All of this is well known. But here it is important to underline that the initial democratism of the Croatian movement rather quickly took on a nationalist and anti-state character.⁷

Another example is provided by Serbia, which after Tito’s death underwent processes that were in many respects reminiscent of the Soviet Perestroika. The catalyst for the activities of Serbian opposition intellectuals was the regime’s ban of Gojko Djogo’s poetry book *Vunena vremena* [Woollen Times] in April 1981. The poet had targeted Tito himself in his poems. Djogo’s subsequent arrest led to a wave of protests of the Serbian intelligentsia; group letters were written and “solidarity evenings” organized in his defence. These initiatives grew

⁶ For more detail see B. Petranović, *Istorija Jugoslavije 1918–1978* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1981), 580–582; *Tsentral’no-Vostochnaia Evropa vo vtoroi polovine XX veka*, in 3 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 2002), vol. 2, 495–496; I. Goldstein, *Hrvatska 1918–2000* (Zagreb: Znanje, 2008), 532–552. See also I. V. Rudneva, *Khorvatskoe nacional’noe dvidzenie: konets 1960/kh – nachalo 1970/kx gg.* (Moscow: Institut slavianovedeniia RAN; St. Petersburg: Nestor, 2014).

⁷ Goldstein, *Hrvatska*, 538, writes that “two main ideas were dominant in the movement – the national and the liberal-democratic idea. In some participants and in some circumstances one or the other was more prominent, but usually it was an amalgamation of both with a dominant national component”. However, it should be noted that democratization in Croatia primarily meant the expansion of the autonomous rights of the Croatian people. This was another difference between Croatia and Serbia, where it primarily meant the democratization of political life, see Z. Radelić, *Hrvatska u Jugoslaviji 1945–1991: Od zajedništva do razlaza* (Zagreb; Školska knjiga; Hrvatski institut za povijest, 2006), 379–380.

into a protest against the economic situation, political and constitutional system, the lack of political freedoms and freedom of the press etc. In May 1982 the Association of Writers of Serbia formed the Committee for the Protection of Artistic Production, which quickly became the symbol of the democratic protest against the regime.⁸

Many scholars of a range of humanities, primarily those who had previously worked with the famous Yugoslav magazine *Praxis* (in publication 1964–1975), took part in the criticism of the regime and the entire communist past and present. Serbs were once again the most active: philosophers Ljubomir Tadić and Mihailo Marković; economist Kosta Mihajlović; legal scholars Vojislav Koštunica and Kosta Čavoški. The last two co-wrote the book *Partijski pluralizam ili monizam* [Party Pluralism or Monism], which denied the legitimacy of the communists' rise to power in Yugoslavia and their implementation of a one-party system. In this period a special role was played by the book *Saveznici i jugoslovenska ratna drama* [The Allies and the Yugoslav War Drama] by the Serbian historian Veselin Djuretić, which portrayed the Četnik movement as an anti-fascist force for the first time in academic literature.⁹

The main myths of socialist Yugoslavia gradually began to crumble. The Partisans were no longer seen as the only anti-fascist movement of the war years and Yugoslavia itself was no longer seen as a country that had built a very different and more progressive type of socialism. It was revealed that the revolution in Yugoslavia had been carried out following the Bolshevik model and that even after 1948 local Stalinists – genuine or alleged – had been treated by Stalinist methods. A little while later, the author A. Isaković demanded a re-evaluation of Tito's personal cult, just as it had been done after Stalin's or Mao's death; Lj. Tadić argued that, denying the dogma of the infallibility of Stalin as their former supreme authority, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia had not rejected these dogmas but had merely nationalized them.¹⁰

The regime cannot be said to have been completely inactive. It tried to stop these emerging processes using its usual methods. In April 1982, twenty-eight Serbian intellectuals were arrested, with six of them later tried in court. However, like Djogo, almost all were soon released.

The Belgrade intelligentsia advocated human rights, not only in Serbia but throughout Yugoslavia. The centre of these activities was the Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Thought and Expression led by the eminent author Dobrica Ćosić. Representatives of the Slovene and Croatian intelligentsia

⁸ D. Jović, *Jugoslavija: država koja je odumrla. Uspon, kriza i pad Kardeljeve Jugoslavije (1974–1990)* (Zagreb: Prometej, 2003), 336–337.

⁹ D. Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest* (Zagreb: Golden marketing, 1999), 698–700; Tomas, *Srbija pod Miloševićem*, 56–57.

¹⁰ Bilandžić, *Hrvatska moderna povijest*, 698–699.

refused to join the Committee despite being expressly invited. Regardless of this, the Committee voiced its protest against the arrest of Alija Izetbegović and other Bosnian Muslims in Sarajevo and demanded the release of Vlado Gotovac and other MASPOK members incarcerated in Croatia. The Committee also defended the Kosovo Albanians convicted after the developments of 1981. In the period 1984–1989 the Committee sent out over a hundred letters protesting against the violation of basic democratic rights in Yugoslavia.¹¹

Immediately following the events that unfolded in Kosovo, the Serbian authorities once again tried to broach the question of constitutional changes.¹² However, Serbia's opponents in the Yugoslav leadership from other republics saw every such attempt as a return to etatism, centralism and aspirations to a "Great Serbia". Any constitutional changes were blocked. However, it was precisely the "political system established by the Constitution of 1974 that deepened the ongoing crisis and made it more serious and hopeless".¹³

The lack of a legal mechanism to resolve the problem of the Constitution of 1974 could not but result in the gradual radicalization of the mood among the Serbs. The old conflict in the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia between the "liberals" spearheaded by I. Stambolić and the proponents of a radical solution for existing quarrels also intensified.

Then, in 1984, Slobodan Milošević – the main protagonist of Serbian history in the 1990s – appeared on the political scene of Serbia. The "liberals" in the ranks of the Serbian communists were defeated and a few years later the "radicals" made Milošević the leader of the party. The Serbian historian Lj. Dimić believes that at the time when the totalitarian model – including ideological utopianism and unlimited power of the party elite with its charismatic leaders – began to lose momentum in Europe, it began to solidify in Serbia, previously the most liberal among the Yugoslav republics.¹⁴

It could be said that the regime in Serbia – after already having collapsed in Eastern Europe – underwent a revival and was fundamentally re-established with Slobodan Milošević's rise to power. Interestingly, the "party that had ruled for 40 years, now governed through a new, 'purified' (to borrow the term used at the time) leadership, becoming both the government and the opposition at

¹¹ Ibid. 698–699.

¹² Ibid. 339.

¹³ Attempts to reconsider the Constitution were launched by Serbia in 1975, 1981, 1984 and 1985. See, e.g., Lj. Dimić, "Srbija 1804–2004 (suočavanje sa prošlošću)", in Lj. Dimić, D. Stojanović and M. Jovanović, *Srbija 1804–2004: tri vidjenja ili poziv na dijalog* (Belgrade: Udruženje za društvenu istoriju, 2005), 102.

¹⁴ Ibid. 100.

once".¹⁵ It was precisely the fact that Milošević managed to "ride" this wave of nationalism that lent such stability to the regime.¹⁶

In late 1988, with the help of protests against the local bureaucracy which he had considerably inspired, Milošević managed to replace the leadership of Vojvodina and Montenegro with his own protégés. Similar attempts were made in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but with little success. These shifts were called "anti-bureaucratic revolutions". Of course, they had little to do with the "velvet revolutions" that swept Eastern Europe in 1989. As communism counted its last days throughout Eastern Europe, the old regime in Serbia, under the slogan of an "anti-bureaucratic revolution", managed to consolidate its power.

The boom of nationalism in Serbia, spearheaded by Milošević, was also boosted by the concurrent rise of nationalism in Yugoslavia's north-western republics – Slovenia¹⁷ and Croatia. This was followed by the rapid deterioration of the Yugoslav economy and, even more importantly, by the events in Kosovo, where the position of the local Serbian population was becoming increasingly difficult. In order to attract attention, the Serbs of Kosovo began sending collective petitions to the higher government organs and organizing protest marches to Belgrade.

In the context of this topic, it is important to note that the developments in Kosovo had a decisive impact on the fact that the Yugoslav democratism of the Serbian opposition intelligentsia increasingly gave way to nationalist ideas. While many pro-opposition figures, including Dobrica Ćosić, had previously believed that the Yugoslav federation was the best solution for the Serbian question, they now began to see it as a suppression mechanism directed at all things Serbian.¹⁸ The pattern observed above came to the fore – the replacement of initially democratic tendencies by national or even nationalist ones.

A similar pattern can be observed in the territory of the former USSR. For example, in many Soviet republics, particularly in the Baltic states, popular

¹⁵ D. Stoianovich, "Porochnyi krug serbskoi oppozitsii", in *Serbiia o sebe* (Moscow: Evropa, 2005), 117. For more detail see Jović, *Jugoslavija, država koja je odumrla*, 423, 430, 449.

¹⁶ The words of Slobodan Jovanović used to describe an earlier period in Serbian history come to mind and seem as current as ever: "Serbia did not create an intellectual and political elite with a modern understanding of nation. The semi-intellectual became prevalent, leeching on nationalism as the only tradition, even when it was no longer so." Quoted in L. Perović, "Iskustvo sa drugim narodima", in *Jugoslavija u istorijskoj perspektivi* (Belgrade: Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji, 2017), 207.

¹⁷ According to Jović, *Jugoslavija, država koja je odumrla*, 423, 430, 449, Slovene nationalism was no weaker than Serbian. Like in Serbia, the Slovene leadership was becoming increasingly tolerant towards its opposition and in the end a pan-Slovene bloc of sorts emerged in this republic. Like in Serbia, the Slovene communists could become both the government and the opposition.

¹⁸ S. K. Pavlović, *Srbija: istorija iza imena* (Belgrade: Clio, 2004), 218, 227.

fronts were organized as informal coalitions of very diverse forces opposed to the monopolist position of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). Generally speaking, they were led by democratic convictions and enjoyed the support of both the titular and the Russian-speaking population. However, in time, and particularly after coming to power, these organizations or political parties and the coalitions that had emerged from them took up extremely national or even nationalist positions. For example, it is well known that many Russians and native speakers of Russian in Latvia and Estonia, even those born in these states, did not receive Latvian or Estonian citizenship.

At a very different time, in the period 2011–2013, very different events took place at Bolotnaya Square in Moscow. Mass protests were held against the alleged falsification of the results of parliamentary and then presidential elections. For the purposes of this paper it is important to note that nationalist forces gradually began to emerge and become prominent in the joint democratic movement of protesting citizens. Although certainly in the minority, these forces were far more united and better organized than the others. It can be assumed that they could have completely taken over the initiative if the government had not quelled the protests.

Finally, another example is the abovementioned Ukrainian Euromaidan – the political crisis that erupted in the country in 2013–2014. The protests began with democratic demands and were aimed against social injustice, the low standard of living, rampant corruption etc. only to quickly radicalize, with the leading role taken over by nationalist and even extreme nationalist forces that glorified Nazi fascist collaborators in the Second World War.

Let me underline once again: nationalism, as we have seen, tends to enter the stage in times of democratic changes, while democratic ideas are clearing their path but still remain underdeveloped and have yet to win the final victory and become deeply embedded. In this case nationalism makes use of new possibilities that have emerged, among other things, owing to democratization processes. I am of the opinion that this is one of the obvious patterns of democratic transformations, which always bring a very real danger of the rise of nationalism. Encouraging nationalism in the name of the struggle against totalitarian or authoritarian regimes always means playing with fire. Nationalism will not necessarily yield the positions it has won to democracy.

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