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## Transition and Neoinstitutionalism: the Example of Croatia

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### *Summary*

The author examines the role of neoinstitutionalism in processes of transition in post-socialist countries, the renewal of a rather orthodox institutionalistic approach to problems of political and social transformation. For many structural reasons, this approach does not produce the results expected. This is proved on the example of the implementation of western political institutions and institutes in Croatia since 1990. The author primarily addresses the relationship between the electoral, party and parliamentary systems, especially the influence of the electoral system on the electoral and legislative party system, and on the government. She gives structural and institutional reasons for the "deviations" observed.

### *1. Introduction*

The key problem in today's post-socialist countries is how to implement transition: i.e. how to achieve transfer to a democratic political order and the market economy. The approach that is usually employed involves the introduction and implementation of western political and social institutions and institutes into post-socialist societies. This is a rather orthodox neoinstitutionalist approach, which is essentially based on a kind of cause-and-effect determinism. The model in which "an institution produces an institution" is expected to use starting institutional *inputs* to produce anticipated *outputs* on various institutional levels of political and social life.

This neoinstitutionalist approach did not produce - nor could it have produced - the effects expected. Today's post-socialist societies lack many of the structural - historical, social, political, cultural and psychological - preconditions which, had they existed, would have been able to guarantee the desired and optimum effects of the above course of action.

I will try to show this on the example of the implementation of political institutions and institutes in Croatia, primarily observing the political effects of the electoral system on the country's party and parliamentary life.

Free elections were the first step in the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic political order. Thus the electoral system was the first democratic institutional *input* in former socialist societies. The choice of a specific electoral system was expected to produce specific political results in party and parliamentary life. Since these were the first democratic elections, the electoral system was in fact geared towards shaping the party and parliamentary system as a whole.

This was the case in Croatia, too. The majority electoral system - which was applied in the first free elections of 1990, and partly also in the second pre-term elections of 1992 - was expected to encourage two-party electoral competition, the formation of a two-party parliamentary system and, above all, the formation of a stable one-party government (see Kasapović, 1991).

In this article I will first show that Croatia got a very unstable one-party government in the majority elections of 1990, and then that the majority elections of 1992 lacked the structural preconditions for two-party competition and, therefore, the formation of a two-party parliamentary system.

## 2. *Majority elections and unstable government*

The 1990 majority electoral system in Croatia was basically conceived as a way of achieving a government. Its main purpose was to enable the formation of a one-party government by making possible an "artificial" parliamentary majority for the party that won most votes. It was considered that such a government would be more stable, cohesive and decisive than a multi-party government would.

Much research does, indeed, confirm the positive links between majority elections and government stability (Blondel 1968; Powell 1982; Beyme 1984; Blais 1990; etc.). But in Croatia the majority elections of 1990 - on the basis of which the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ)\* established its "artificial" parliamentary majority - resulted in a very unstable one-party government. Governmental instability means frequent, dubious and unexplained changes in the government. This instability was finally demonstrated as the failure of the one-party government model as a whole and in its replacement by a multi-party government.

Indeed, after a two-year mandate the first parliamentary government had a really impressive "sum total" of changes.

This one-party government was not dissolved for the "usual" reasons: new elections, a vote of no confidence in parliament, resignation or conflict with the head of state. It was replaced by a multi-party government on the basis of an informal coalition agreement between the leaders of the current parliamentary parties. The new multi-party government formed after this agreement was not a classical coalition government resulting from parliamentary power relations, but a government of agreement, a government of "democratic unity".

The manner in which the first parliamentary one-party government in Croatia withdrew says nothing about the reasons for the act. It is only clear that the reason was its political inadequacy. But what were the real reasons for its failure?

\* See the List of Party Names and Abbreviations in Appendix I.

Table 1: MAIN CHANGES IN THE FIRST PARLIAMENTARY  
GOVERNMENT (MAY 1990 - AUGUST 1992)

Ministry	number of ministers
foreign affairs	5
defence	4
internal affairs	4
energy and industry	3
justice and public administration	3
work and social welfare	3
science, technology, informatics	3
environment	2
education and culture	2
trade	2
finance	2
prime ministers	3

Most analysts consider that the main reason why the one-party government was dissolved was the war - the external military aggression of Serbia combined with the internal armed ethnic revolt of the Serbian minority - which demanded an overall national political consensus. But the war was not the main nor the only reason for the dissolution of one-party government. The real reason was its inadequacy and ineffectiveness, which had many structural causes.

(a) A stable government implies, among other things, a structured party system and developed political parties. In Croatia, as in other post-socialist countries, these conditions did not exist. The political parties created on the eve of the first free elections in 1990 were unstructured and unprofiled political organizations.

In the first place, they were not programmatically profiled. The leading opposition party at that time, the Croatian Democratic Union, won the elections on the basis of a general programme to overthrow the communist regime and reinstate Croatian statehood, not on a *policy*-approach to specific fields of social life. The lack of *policy* (in reprivatization, taxation, a social policy and the like) came to expression in the post-electoral period and had a crucial influence on the ineffectiveness and failure of the government.

Furthermore, the new political parties did not develop mechanisms for recruiting a political and administrative elite. In many ways this recruitment was haphazard and subject to unprofessional criteria. This was a direct blow to decision-making and administrative potentials and capacities in all institutions, including the government. Incompetence and ineffectiveness were countered by frequent changes in personnel.

(b) The ruling Croatian party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), had already developed into a great "national" party before the first elections. All large parties, which comprise almost half the electoral body and claim to express the

political will of such a large number of voters, are in themselves "great coalitions" of various currents and factions (Rose 1983: 42 etc). This kind of structure is expressed in overall party policy. Thus ideological and political differences within the party were transferred into government, which certainly decreased its cohesion and decisiveness. In addition, such relations often demanded a personnel policy primarily geared towards preserving the delicate balance among various party currents and factions, not finding the most functional solutions.

(c) The type of executive power as a whole had a crucial effect on the fate of the government. In the semipresidential system of government that was established in Croatia, executive power is in principle divided between the head of state and the prime minister - this is the so-called dualistic executive - but the head of state is hierarchically superior to the prime minister. The president of the republic played the key role in all essential governmental changes - from appointing the prime minister to choosing the heads of the main governmental departments. He was the main source of governmental instability, although in some cases it was "positive instability". Thus "dualistic executive" was in fact annulled by "hierarchy in favour of the president" (Bačić, 1992:43).

(d) The war additionally increased the disproportion between political needs and the real potentials of the government. This was expressed, among other things, through very frequent changes in the key wartime government departments: the ministries of defence, foreign and internal affairs. The war increased the degree of risk in political decision-making, which demanded wider political consensus and wider responsibility for action. This was the main reason for the temporary and relatively sudden transition from a one-party to a multi-party government, but in no way the main reason for the instability of the one-party government, something confirmed by the fate of the one-party government formed after the second elections in August 1992.

Thus, the majority electoral system really did create formal parliamentary preconditions for forming a one-party government - a convincing "artificial" majority of the party that won most votes - but it could not guarantee its stability, cohesion, firmness and efficiency. These depended on other structural preconditions: developed political parties and a structured party system, the type of executive and type of government in general, and on overall political conditions in the country that did not require extraordinary measures.

### *3. Majority elections and the absence of two-party competition*

The second, pre-term parliamentary elections were held according to a combined electoral model.<sup>1</sup> We cannot give a detailed presentation here of why this particular electoral model was chosen. Politically, the interests and estimates of the ruling party predominated. In theory it primarily counted on accomplish-

<sup>1</sup> The elections in August 1992 were only for the Chamber of Representatives of the Sabor (Croatian parliament), as the main parliamentary body. Representatives were elected according to a combined electoral model: half the representatives were elected by relative majority in uninominal constituencies, and half at proportional elections in

ing the main goals of both proportional and majority elections: an equitable political representation of voters and the formation of a stable one-party government.

We will analyze only the majority elections for the Chamber of Representatives of the Sabor. Our interest centres on the influence of electoral patterns on the party system. Elections by relative majority should have resulted in two-party competition and established a two-party parliamentary system.

Two mechanisms for reducing the number of parties that entered the parliament in relation to the number of parties at the elections were built into the 1992 parliamentary election model: the principle of relative majority and the prohibitive clause.

The principle of majority is in itself the main restraint on the multiplication of parliamentary political parties. The prohibitive clause was a corrective mechanism of the principle of proportionality, which as a rule allows the broad access of political parties to parliamentary life. But, whereas the prohibitive clause produced the effects expected, the principle of relative majority did not.

The relative majority elections did not result in typical two-party competition, and they especially did not produce a two-party parliamentary system. The electoral process already showed the absence of the basic structural preconditions for a two-party system on the basis of a majority-type election.

The absence of structural preconditions was shown through:

- (a) the very large number of candidates in uninominal constituencies both as a whole and on average;
- (b) the relatively small joint participation in the votes of the two strongest parties;
- (c) no clear polarization of the electorate around the two strongest political parties, i.e. around their candidates.

618 candidates stood in the elections, or 10.3 candidates per constituency. The ratio of candidates was 16:6. This is an unusually large number of candidates for elections by relative majority. For the sake of comparison, in the 1990 elections by absolute majority there was an average of 4.8 candidates per constituency in the first, and only 2.7 candidates in the second round of voting.

This type of competition resulted in the dispersion of votes among a great number of candidates and in no bipolarization of the electorate. The wide competition also expressed the lack of coalition needs and potentials among opposition political parties. The majority elections did not increase coalition potentials in political parties. Coalition was rare and sporadic in the first round. Contrary to expectations, the only real coalition - the coalition of three regional parties - appeared in the proportional elections.

an *at-large* system and with a prohibitive clause of three per cent. Elections for the Chamber of Zupanije, the second chamber of the Sabor, were held in February 1993 after - following longlasting political contention and friction - Croatia was divided into Zupanije (counties). Representatives for that chamber of the Sabor were elected in proportional elections in three-mandate electoral units (Zupanije) This article describes only elections for the Chamber of Representatives of the Sabor, as the main parliamentary body.

The lack of election coalitions, the large number of candidates and the dispersion of votes directly resulted in the inexistence of real two-party competition. Whereas the Croatian Democratic Union convincingly held the status of first party, the status of the Croatian Social Liberal Party as the second party in constituencies was not as convincing. This is shown by almost all electoral indicators.

The Croatian Democratic Union won in 54, or 90 per cent, of the constituencies. In five of the remaining six constituencies its candidates came second, and only in one constituency (Pula) did the CDU candidate come fourth in number of votes.

The Croatian Social Liberal Party, as the second party in number of votes, in fact experienced complete defeat in the constituencies. It won only one out of sixty mandates. It came second in number of votes in only 25 constituencies. Its candidates came third in 23, fourth in 8, fifth in 1 and sixth in 2 constituencies. Had majority elections been the only pattern of elections in 1992, the proportions of the second party's failure would have been dramatic. As it is, it won its status as second parliamentary party on the basis of results of the proportional elections.

The same can be seen on the basis of its participation in the total number of votes in constituencies. Candidates of the Croatian Social Liberal Party won only 13.3 per cent votes in constituencies. That is the second best result, but it falls far behind the results of the strongest party (37.3 per cent) and is closer to the results of the third (8.8 per cent), fourth (7.4 per cent) and fifth (7.3 per cent) party.

Since the electoral results of even the party that won most votes are relatively low, the joint participation in votes of the two strongest parties was small and came to only 50.6 per cent. Compared with the joint participation of the Croatian Democratic Union and the Party of Democratic Change-Socialdemocratic Party in the majority elections of 1990 in the first (78 per cent) and second (about 82 per cent) round, this is obviously a decline in the votes of the two strongest parties and the fading of pre-conditions for real two-party competition and a two-party system.

The indicators given show that the electorate in Croatia in the 1992 elections was not polarized between two political options, which would represent two great political parties. Voters did not concentrate sufficiently convincingly around the candidates of the Christian Democratic and Liberal political options, which the two parties that won most votes pretended to represent. Together they won just over half the votes. The remaining votes were divided among parties of different political options: nationals, social democrats, members of the Party of Rights, regional parties and others.

There are three basic reasons why typical two-party competition and the two-party system that stems from it did not result from the one-round majority elections: the inexistence of a structured party system, the uneven geographical distribution of votes and the inexistence of clear ideological and political lines of polarization in the electorate of Croatia. Giovanni Sartori, it seems rightly so, called the first two reasons "necessary conditions" for the formation of a two-party system from relative majority elections (1986). The third precondition is linked with the first, but it did not come to full expression until the 1992 elections. In the earlier 1990 elections the electorate of Croatia was clearly polarized between the, roughly said,



Table 2. RELATION BETWEEN VOTES AND MANDATES IN THE MAJORITY ELECTIONS FOR THE CHAMBER OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SABOR IN 1992.

Party	Votes %	Mandates*	%
HDZ-Hrvatska demokratska zajednica	37.3	90	+ 52.7
HSLŠ-Hrvatska socijalno liberalna partija	13.3	1.7	- 11.6
HNS-Hrvatska narodna stranka	8.8	0	- 8.8
SDP-Socijaldemokratska partija	7.4	0	- 7.4
HSP-Hrvatska stranka prava	7.3	0	- 7.3
HSS-Hrvatska seljačka stranka	5.6	0	- 5.6
IDS-Istarski demokratski sabor	2.6	5	+ 2.4
DSR-Demokratski sabor Rijeke	0.6	1.7	+ 1.1

\* One mandate (1.7 %) was won by an independent candidate.

pro-regime and anti-regime orientation, which primarily expressed the basic traditional values of the electorate of Croatia (see Zakošek, N., in: Grdešić *et al.* 1991). Those two orientations were clearly expressed by what was then the pro-regime (League of Communists of Croatia-Party of Democratic Change) and the leading opposition party (Croatian Democratic Union). However, in the 1992 elections the main, traditional line of polarization in the Croatian electorate, that concerning the attitude towards the question of Croatian statehood, disappeared. New *cleavage structures* had not yet been formed and stabilized, and the electorate was not yet polarized by new, clear *cleavages* (see. Lipset/Rokkan 1967). What is more, as a rule majority elections do not encourage emphasis on ideological differences among parties and their voters. This state in the electorate of Croatia was expressed in party competition.

The party system of Croatia could not be structured in the short period of two or three years that passed from the formation of modern political parties to the second competitive elections in Croatia. During that time significant changes took place in the party life of the country: new political parties were born and some of the existing ones disappeared, some parties entered the parliament and others left it, the power relations among parliamentary parties changed. It was also important that the second strongest party changed between the two elections: in the 1990 elections the second party was the Party of Democratic Change-Socialdemocratic Party, and in the 1992 elections the Croatian Social Liberal Party. But whereas the PDC was a "real" second party in the 1990 elections, in the 1992 elections the CSLP was not. As we have already said, this can be seen from the number of mandates won by the second party, its participation in the votes, and the number of second places it won in constituencies. It follows from the

preceding analysis that this state of affairs cannot be ascribed only to party relations, i.e. to a weak second party, but to fundamentally changed relations in the electorate of Croatia.

The distribution of votes according to party shows that only the strongest party has voters relatively equally distributed throughout the country. The Croatian Democratic Union won less than 10 per cent votes only in one constituency, in three it won less than 20 per cent votes, and in all the other constituencies it won over 20 per cent votes. In as many as one third of the constituencies it won the support of over 30 per cent voters, and these constituencies include an enviable number of true party bastions.

The Croatian Democratic Union gained a structural foothold in all the parts of the Croatian electorate, building voter-party links of stronger and more lasting allegiance. Its voters were attached to it on several different grounds: national, religious, family, interest and party. A profile analysis of the average CDU voter in the first elections showed the existence of the most important types of lasting voter-party links (see Grdešić, *et al.* 1991:74-75). Empirical research in 1992 confirmed these results.

The voters of the Croatian Social Liberal Party are not by far as equally distributed throughout country in a respectable number. Its candidates did not win more than 30 per cent votes anywhere, and only in six constituencies did they win more than 20 per cent votes. In quite a number of cases they won less than 10 per cent votes (in sixteen constituencies).

Therefore, the "rule" by which majority elections in one round produce a two-party parliamentary system really does not hold true under all historical, political and socio-cultural conditions. For it to really hold true, some conditions must exist among the electorate and in the institutional system of a country, and these obviously did not exist in Croatia in 1992.

The relations that did exist were directly expressed in the party structure of the Chamber of Representatives of the Sabor. In it there were some corrections in favour of opposition parties thanks to the proportional electoral system, but the superiority of the ruling party was still quite obvious. The Croatian Democratic Union won 85 seats, or 70.8 per cent, of the 120 "regular" seats. After the second elections the parliamentary party system of Croatia can be called a multi-party system dominated by one party. It could conditionally be said that in two years the parliamentary party system in Croatia had been transformed from a two-party system into a multi-party system with a dominant party.

In short, the 1990 majority elections formed a two-party parliamentary system and an "artificial" mandatory majority of the party that won most votes, but no stable one-party government. After the 1992 majority elections it could come about that only one essential effect is realized, i.e. the formation of a convincing mandatory majority of the first party. The relative majority elections certainly did not produce true two-party competition and a two-party parliamentary system. Time will have its say about the fate of the new one-party government.



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