

The Political Usage of History in Tuđman's Croatia and Mečiar's Slovakia

Dora Komnenović

Abstract:

This book examines how the ruling parties in Croatia and Slovakia in the 1990s made use of history in politics in order to gain and maintain power. The politics of history and nationalist ideologies developed by the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica – HDZ) and the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko – HZDS) are analysed against the backdrop of historical legacies, political contexts, and the dissolution processes of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, respectively. Apart from a number of differences, the comparison reveals considerable similarities that could be useful in explaining the presence or absence of a democratic deficit in countries that held the position of 'junior partners' in the socialist federations of Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union.

How to cite:

Komnenović, Dora: „The Political Usage of History in Tuđman's Croatia and Mečiar's Slovakia [Review on: Đurašković, Stevo: The Politics of History in Croatia and Slovakia in the 1990s. Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2016.]“. In: KULT_online 47 (2016).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2016.980>

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Đurašković, Stevo: *The Politics of History in Croatia and Slovakia in the 1990s*. Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2016, 225 pages, hardcover, 25 Euro, ISBN: 978-953-7963-37-8

In this volume, Stevo Đurašković comparatively analyses the ideology, politics, and governance of the ruling parties in Croatia and Slovakia in the 1990s, namely the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica – HDZ) and the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko – HZDS). As the author himself admits, the way in which this "political science cultural comparison" (p. 7) is articulated renders it asymmetrical in favour of Croatia: in fact, the description of Croatian particularities usually precedes references to Slovakia. Furthermore, Đurašković's greater familiarity with the Croatian case and the complexity of Tuđman's ideology, considered the key factor in determining Croatia's identity-building process in the 1990s, have also contributed to the disparity. The book is divided into three chapters, the first of which is devoted to the history of the Croatian and Slovak national identity-building processes prior to the 1990s, followed by a chapter on the deployment of history in politics, which is then analysed through specific policies of history in the third and final part of the volume.

Đurašković takes up what previous research has only partially addressed, that is, the democratic deficit and stronger presence of historically based nationalist claims in Croatia and Slovakia, when compared to other East Central European (ECE) countries. More specifically, in Croatia and Slovakia grievances over past injustices (what Erika Harris has called 'resentment nationalism') were combined with the legacy of the 'minor experience', or 'junior partner' position in Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia. While the interwar experience of the two countries slightly differed (Serb – dominated kingdom opposed to a Prague – centred liberal democracy), the Nazi puppet states that were created during the Second World War left an indelible mark in the history of both. These 'shadows of the past' were partially used after 1945 by the Serbian and Czech élites to curtail state-building processes, which created grievances that were later exploited in Slovak and Croatian identity-building narratives. The former constituted an attempt at absolving both nations of their fascist past through the nationalization of the anti-fascist struggle and the interpolation of all warring factions into an all-encompassing, statehood-striving process epitomized by the idea of national reconciliation. The process was led by post 1968 ruling communist élites in Slovakia and by post 1971 dissidents in Croatia.

The author in fact argues that the final articulation of Slovak 'red-national' ideology occurred during the Normalization period, when collectivist social-economic modernization was incorporated into the national political idea at the expense of the previously central Catholic component. The HZDS endorsed the red-nationalist discourse in the 1990s and imposed itself as an "'all-embracing people's movement' consisting of 'national-democratic, liberal-democratic and social-democratic factions'" (p. 89). On the other hand, HDZ's ideology stemmed from Tuđman's conceptions of history and was given further impetus by the political constellation of the time and by Serbian expansionism. The concept of national reconciliation under the auspices of an all-embracing national movement rested upon the legacy of the Croatian medieval state, Starčević's and Radić's ideas, and the experiences of the Croatian left. Both the HDZ and HZDS "were announced as the synthesis of the teleological statehood history and the subsequent representation of an all-embracing national movement that strived for statehood" (pp. 110-111). Nation and state-building overshadowed other transitional issues, which contributed to the marginalization of all other parties, including the ones that had a stronger historical legitimization, such as the Slovak Christian Democratic Union (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie - KDH) and the Coalition of People's Accord (Koalicija narodnog sporazuma - KNS) in Croatia.

De-communization legitimized the founding role of HDZ and HZDS as state-founding movements, which is why in both cases lustration was omitted. However, when it comes to the role of the Church and the political, educational, and administrative spheres, some differences emerge. Đurašković asserts one of the reasons for this is that in Slovakia "independence 'suddenly happened' rather than being directly legitimized by the people; while in Croatia the struggle for independence was unanimous, eventually bringing about a defensive war against Greater Serbian expansionism" (p. 179). In Slovakia, policies of history faithfully reflected the HZDS politics of history, which resulted in a combination of pre-World War II legacies and a 'nationalized' communist past. For instance, the discourses of the Normalization period were kept, but devoid of Marxist contents and with the addition of Christianity. In Croatia the positive traditions of the left and anti-fascist struggle were completely suppressed, albeit declaratively one of the pillars of HDZ's ideology. This is due to the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, greater emphasis on the statehood of the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna država Hrvatska - NDH), and the bargaining power of far-right émigrés.

Đurašković's comparative analysis certainly constitutes an invaluable contribution to the ever-increasing body of literature on post-socialist transition. His well-founded observations explain the wide electoral appeal of the 'nationalist middle course' politics promoted by the HZDS and HDZ at the time of dissolution of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia and the creation of independent Slovakia and Croatia. Furthermore, the democratic deficit experienced by both countries is ascribed to cleavages that the identification between the party and the nation provoked, which led to the exclusion of ethnic minorities and political opposition from the body of the nation. Conversely, the author attributes the differences between the two 'all-embracing national movements' to historical legacies, dissimilar contexts of dissolution and the personalities of the two leaders, as well as other influential members of the party. What

he does not cover as extensively is the decline in popularity of the HZDS and HDZ after the consolidation of independence. Finally, Đurašković concludes his book on a very positive note by stating that his conclusions, together with a model that would explain the nexus of the 'junior partner' position and the presence / absence of democratic deficit, could contribute to the process of dealing with the past, which he does not elaborate further. Even if it does not reach this often invoked but abstract and intangible goal, the volume will undoubtedly find its way into the hands of many readers.