

Croatia: From a War-torn Country to the EU and NATO Membership

Sandro Knezović

Introduction

The desire to become a part of the European club was undoubtedly a crucial motor of political changes in Croatia. As in any other former communist country, the EC (EU today) was regarded as a model of economic prosperity, political stability and cultural diversity that the country should become part of. It was generally represented as something exactly the opposite to the model the country had experienced during more than half of a century under the communist rule.

Furthermore, unlike in ex-communist countries that have never been a part of a multinational socialist federation, this goal was always deeply interlinked with the major desire of the Croatian nation and that is to exercise its right for self-determination and to form an independent national state. So symbolically, to 'become a member of the European club' implied to become independent and therefore the idea of Europeanism gained an even larger amount of support than it was rational to expect in the turbulent last decade of the previous millennium in Croatia.¹

Namely, 'the real transition' in Croatia, as well as in a number of other countries from the region started in 1999, followed by paramount democratic changes and introduction of the first consistent policy of the EU towards the region – *The Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP)*. The SAP represented a milestone in the relations between the EU and the region, and Croatia accordingly, mainly owing to the fact that it was for the first time in modern history that the possibility for full EU membership of the countries from the region was clearly confirmed. This was a major precondition for EU conditionality to work for the EU side and even more, it was essential for transitional enthusiasm and pro-European attitude in the countries from the region and Croatia in particular. One should not forget another aspect of the new EU's policy towards the region that was of utmost importance, especially for Croatia as a most developed country, and it is the so-called 'own merits' policy that guaranteed the individual assessment of each country concerned in its reforms progress and path towards full-fledged EU membership.

¹ BILANDZIC 1991.

From that time on, the country is experiencing a very different dynamics of the reforms process and relations with the EU that is followed by the change of substance of perception of the EU in public and political elites as well. The discourse of the debate on pros and cons for joining the EU became dominated by a rather pragmatic manner and clear arguments regardless of the position on the respective issue.

So, it is obvious that one can differentiate two periods of Croatian recent history with almost opposite attitude towards the meaning and clarity of perception of 'the European concept'. Changes that happened during the turn of the century clearly show the importance of new framework of relations between the EU and countries from the region that positively affected the political development in Croatia in particular. The perspective of EU membership was a crucial motor that helped the country to pass through its 'democratic catharsis' and reach some standards of democratic development that were almost unthinkable less than twenty years ago. In the final phase of the EU integration process, where the country was 6–7 years ago, it enabled Croatia to achieve some very painful compromises required for its successful finalisation.

The Last Years of Communism

In order to understand the current developments as well as ones that this paper will modestly try to predict, it is recommendable to turn a little bit to the past and to try glancing at the way former Yugoslavia dissolved and Croatia gained its independence and sovereignty. Having in mind the size limitations of this research, this part will concentrate in short only on the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall, despite the fact that we can find the roots of the whole process much before.

After the death of Tito,² who ensured the preservation of the 'Fraternity and Unity myth', tensions among the republics appeared. As a result, the League of Communists of Yugoslavia dissolved and the first multi-party elections were called, and nationalist parties also had the chance to take part in the political life, which catalysed the ongoing process of the dissolution.

The so-called Antibureaucratic revolution that had started from Belgrade with the political upsurge of Slobodan Milosevic resulted in the abolition of the autonomy of two provinces (Kosovo and Vojvodina) and the assurance of his absolute political domination among Montenegrin political elites. Having done this, he managed to completely block the decision-making process in the highest executive body of the dissolving federation (Federal Executive Council) and to put an additional pressure on the other republics (especially Slovenia and Croatia) that were opposing to his unitary concept of Yugoslavia and opting in favour of the more loose confederative model. Apart from this, he succeeded in recruiting the Serbian population in Croatia, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to support his political agenda of redrawing Serbia's boundaries to include the other republics' territories where Serbs were living, in case of the dissolution of Yugoslavia. By means of strong nationalist propaganda and transfer of troops, weapons as well as significant financial support, he managed to light the fire of their rebellion that resulted in the occupation of more than 30% of Croatian territory.

² Josip Broz Tito – President of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, died in 1980.

The war broke out, and Croatia became heavily involved in it. The war also meant the end of political stability. Croatia needed to fight a war before starting its path towards Europe, moreover, lots of its territories were under occupation. Hence, it is obvious that unlike most of the ex-socialist states that have found the opportunity to change their societal, political and economic system and to start with their path towards the European club in the 'historical year of 1989' simply by changing their state sign, Croatia unfortunately had to take a different, much more difficult road to get to where it is now. It was forced to fight the war for its independence, a significant part of its territory had been occupied for almost four years, communication between its continental and coastal part almost made impossible and any kind of development blocked.

The Process of Regime Change

So, Croatia as a country that was, apart from Slovenia, economically and structurally the most developed among the ex-socialist countries, instead of having a possibility to use such a position to advance further and to start its process of accession to the EU (at that time EC) and NATO, was forced to cope with the aforementioned situation of a war-torn country, as well as to fight for recognition of its sovereignty at the international arena. Both efforts were more than demanding having in mind that Croatia was, while being under the weapons imports embargo, facing the force (ex JNA and various Serb paramilitary forces) that was surpassingly stronger, better equipped and supported by the local population, as well as the international community that seemed, at least from the Croatian point of view, "to have difficulties comprehending" what was actually going on in ex-Yugoslavia, and trying to preserve it even though it was obviously not functioning for a significant period of time.³

The development of Croatian politics did not help create a functioning democracy. The first multi-party election was won by the HDZ (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* – Croatian Democratic Union) under the leadership of ex-communist dissident and nationalist historian Franjo Tuđman who was elected president.⁴ In the beginning of its history, HDZ was a catch-all movement of liberals, nationalists, conservatives and modernisers as well. HDZ did not dissolve after the regime change unlike other large umbrella organisations of the opposition forces in Central and Eastern Europe.

So, unlike during the first period of the transition, in the mid-1990s Croatia became more frequently regarded as a part of a backward southeastern region rather than a part of the Central European group of advanced transition countries. The initial attitude towards the country was directly related to the estimation of its transformational capacities, such as the type of the former communist regime (rather open unlike in other ex-socialist countries), political, religious and cultural tradition (mainly in reference to its history within the Habsburg Empire), level of economic development (far better than the average in ex-communist states at that time) etc.

³ An excellent example for this is a statement of the former French President Mitterrand in the eve of the dissolution of former Yugoslavia, according to which there is no reason to support the dissolution of some European countries, while the rest of Europe is in the middle of the process of unification.

⁴ Details on that in the next section.

As it was identified by scholars,⁵ this sort of change of perception of potentials of the Croatian transition happened owing mainly to two important factors: the war and the low quality of the transformation process. The war made transitional processes (i.e. the transformation of society, economic and political system in the country) of secondary importance, owing to the fact that the defence of a new-born state against the aggression and secession of its parts was given a top priority position. It is not difficult to find a theoretical confirmation to the argument that it is highly unlikely to expect from a country to start dealing with problems of political transformation unless it has its main issues of existence resolved. Even more, that can be regarded as an issue of general consent among experts dealing with democratic consolidation worldwide, not to speak about the absolute incompatibility of war with processes of democratic consolidation.

In Croatia, the war and occupation dramatically endangered the territorial integrity of the country, and hence any kind of democratic consolidation as such. After the international recognition of Croatia's independence and sovereignty, the state borders were formally confirmed, but not entirely controlled by the country's authorities until the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia in 1998 was finalised. The problem of the Croatian democratic consolidation was affected by the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well, owing to the fact that development on the ground led to the creation of parallel Croatian authorities in the country loyal to the government in Zagreb that, owing to the fact that the territorial integrity of BiH at that time was rather questionable, kept the issue of Croatia's eastern borders open due to secessionist aspiration from its side.

Therefore one may conclude, as stressed in the introduction that 'the real process of democratic transition' in the region and in Croatia as well, started with 'a decade of delay' and especially for the purpose of this research it has to be taken into consideration with special attention.

Political Institutions and Their Changes

Owing to the fact that, according to Article 1 of the Croatian Constitution,⁶ the nation exercises its power by electing its representatives, it is obvious that the concept of representative governance is accepted, and in line with that the Constitution (Article 70) clearly states that the Croatian Parliament is a representative body of the Croatian citizens, as well as the main body of the legislative branch in the country.

In the light of a discussion about the role of a parliament and its relations with other branches of power at that time, it is useful to mention that the Croatian President had the right for a life-long seat in the House of Counties after the expiration of his presidential mandate. Apart from that, he had a so-called 'virile right' that was characteristic for a pre-modern electoral history and represented a right to individually appoint several persons to the representative body and thus influence its structure and political relation within it. According to the 1990 Constitution, the president was entitled to name five representatives

⁵ KASAPOVIC 2001.

⁶ *The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia* s. a.

to the House of Counties, and owing to that he used his position to strengthen the absolute majority of his party in it.

This is only one of a number of examples of the fact that the functioning of the Croatian Parliament in the first decade of post-communist transformation was conducted in a paradoxical way. While the huge symbolic importance of the Croatian Parliament was almost unquestioned, its real political importance was somewhat different and marked with marginalisation of its position in the political system, especially in relation to a dominant executive branch personalised in the position of the country's president as well as to some non-institutional political subjects, such as political parties, security services, informal interest groups etc.⁷

The significant symbolical importance of the Croatian Parliament is derived from its historical role of 'guardian of the Croatian sovereignty', owing to the fact that during the centuries, regardless of wider political frameworks that Croatia was part of (Habsburg Empire, Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Kingdom SHS, socialist Yugoslavia), it represented a main institutional guarantee of individual political life. In general, this was frequently used as a proof of continuity of the Croatian municipal right as well as a basic argument for the right to form a modern Croatian national state.⁸

However, the development in the 1990s shows the evolution from a complicated representative body during communist times, followed by a marginalised representative body with limited functionality in the era of the dominant executive branch to a better structured and functional unicameral representative body that represents a recognisable political counterbalance to an executive branch in a new parliamentary system after 2001. Namely, the bicameral structure of the parliament introduced with the 1990 Constitution was questioned from the very beginning of its existence, mainly because of the fact that its essential ratio of defending the regional representation and decentralisation was rather questionable in a unitary state of Croatia in the 1990s. As it was already mentioned, the legal and political position of the president of the republic was among the most controversial issues of the Croatian political system in the 1990s. During the period of drafting the 1990 Constitution, a need for a powerful institution of the president in the semi-presidential political system was based on the argument about the specific environment in which the country started its state-building process, that was marked with turbulence, armed conflicts, and that required functional and stable authorities that cannot be achieved with a pure parliamentary system characterised with the fragmentation of the party system, instable parliamentary majorities and very weak governments.⁹

It would not be incorrect to conclude that the constitutional conception of governance was formulated mainly according to the understanding and preferences of the first Croatian President who was, owing to a clear majority of its party won in the 1990 elections, in position to significantly influence the main determinants of the constitution. In accordance to his 'degaulleistic perception' of politics, marked with beliefs related to historic roles of national leaders in the process of state-building, the first Croatian constitution was characterised by a dominating presidential position with competences for individual decision-making

⁷ KASAPOVIC 1993.

⁸ As it was mentioned, this symbolic importance is incorporated in the Preamble of the Croatian Constitution, representing a basis for the proclamation of independence.

⁹ CULAR 2005.

on the important political issues. Furthermore, the populist nature of the HDZ, that used to function more as a movement than as a party, required a leader in a traditional sense, whose undisputed authority will have an integrative effect on different factions within the aforementioned movement and prevent its dissolution.

Despite the fact that the constitution itself provided the president with a significant amount of power, such as the right to appoint and dismiss the president of the government and their members, the right to issue legislations with the power of law in extraordinary circumstances and many others. The prevailing interpretations of the accumulation of power in the hands of the president during the 1990s tend to find main reasons for that in a combination between the aforementioned constitutional provisions and the environment, as well as the manner in which the governance was conducted. During the entire time in office (1990–1999), President Tudjman could rely on an undisputable parliamentary majority of the party where he preserved the position of unchallenged leader. Apart from that, he established a parallel mechanism of presidential bodies and advisers that were functioning *de facto* as highest decision-making bodies responsible only to the president. In addition, as it was partially mentioned before, the complexity of the bicameral parliamentary procedure combined with extreme conditions in the period of aggression and occupation of a significant part of the country, created a situation where the executive branch (especially the president) had a clear political initiative. These were the main reasons for constitutional changes in the beginning of this decade that followed the political changes in the 2000s and marked a new beginning in the political life of Croatia and a new dynamics in the relation with the Euro-Atlantic community. One of the main characteristics of the new constitutional setting is the transformation of the political system from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary one, with a dramatically lower authority of the president *vis-à-vis* the prime minister within the executive branch as well as improved position of a legislative branch, i.e. of a new unicameral parliament in general.

Working bodies of the parliament are undoubtedly among the most important mechanisms of functionality of parliament and its oversight of the executive branch. Their structure and number, as well as competences are determined in the Rules of Procedure of the Croatian Parliament. So-called parliamentary committees were formed in order to ensure the debate on very specific topics before the final parliamentary procedure and preparation of materials for the plenary sessions. However, the fact that they are field-oriented gives them a sort of legitimacy to influence or at least to shape the final decision in the parliament, which also makes parliament itself more legitimate and efficient in the decision-making process *vis-à-vis* the executive branch in the given issue and hence to a certain extent contributes to its oversight of the political system in general.

Owing to a changing international environment marked with integration processes and new dynamics of both domestic and foreign policy, as well as to a significant increase of the importance of parliament in the political system of Croatia after the constitutional changes, the representative body assumes more competences and responsibilities that requires division and specialisation of labour and responsible decision-making, where the role of parliamentary committees becomes more visible. One may conclude that parliamentary committees have an extraordinary significance in this constellation, especially with regards to specific relations between the legislative and executive branch.

Besides typical legislative competence (adoption of laws), the Croatian Parliament has an authority over the confirmation of international treaties (ratification), concluded by representatives of the country's executive branch with international partners. Taking into consideration the fact that international treaties are not considered relevant until they were ratified in the parliament, it is obvious that this form of confirmation gives a power of oversight over the executive branch's conduct of foreign policy to the representative body.¹⁰

Apart from the fact that, like in any other parliamentary system, the representative body appoints and dismisses the government, there are some other mechanisms that ensure its oversight over the executive branch, like the right of MPs to question members of the government during the so-called 'actual morning session' and the right for interpellation.

Also, according to Article 91 of the Croatian Constitution, the parliament may exercise the oversight of the government, i.e. the entire public administration, with its special boards for investigation that have the right to question and investigate certain activities of the government and public administration. In the parliamentary praxis in different countries, they act very often as hearing boards or some form of special courts for state officials and employees.¹¹

One may conclude that significant political changes have taken place in the Croatian political system during the last decade. These changes have had a positive impact on the transitional reform process on the country's path towards its place in Euro-Atlantic structures. Croatia had drastically changed its reputation and general image in the international community that was confirmed on several occasions, in particular by its successful accession to NATO (2009) and the EU (2013).

Governments and Party Politics

As a consequence of the inability to reach any kind of compromise on federal level regarding the course of political and economic reforms, and awareness that the transformation towards democracy and market economy in the existing federal framework is highly unlikely to happen, the ideas favouring the conduct of free multi-party elections started to be more frequently advocated in two north-western republics (Slovenia and Croatia). During 1989, the first political organisations emerged in Croatia as a core of future formation of different parties and started arguing for defence of the Croatian sovereignty, conduct of the first free elections and introduction of a multi-party democratic system. Reform oriented forces started growing stronger in the society and that process affected directly the Communist Party as well, which was of crucial importance for further developments in the Croatian political transformation.

The decision on the conduct of free multi-party elections has been made in December 1989, in a very complex interaction of party in power and new opposition movements and parties, marked by mass public demonstrations, different petitions in support to the demands of the representatives of the opposition forwarded to the parliament and other

¹⁰ An excellent example for that is the so-called Border Agreement with Slovenia that has been signed by the Prime Minister but never ratified in the parliament and hence was never considered relevant.

¹¹ While the praxis in Croatia on this matter is still in the developing phase, these kinds of boards are very well known in countries like the U.S., France etc.

state bodies. In this context one should not underestimate the importance of international developments – the fall of the communist regime in Europe, and the violent break-up of the Ceaușescu regime in Romania. While these developments undoubtedly prompted the decision on the conduct of free multi-party elections, the crucial motive that helped overcoming political differences within Croatia and coming up with this sort of step in the process of initiation of transition was a need to form the apparatus capable of ensuring the defence of the country from a brutal aggression and basic elements for creation of a new sovereign state. In line with that, in a very short period, changes of the constitution were adopted, along with the first draft of elections legislation, as well as a number of other legislations necessary for the conduct of the first free multi-party elections.

A majority electoral system was established in Croatia that contained the use of the principle of absolute majority and two-round elections. The basis for the establishment of such a system was the French electoral system from the year 1986 that apart from the above-mentioned included the following: uninominal election counties, and a threshold of 7% for the participation in the second round of the elections, as well as the methodology of division of the state into electoral counties that drastically affects the outcome of the elections.¹²

It was obvious that the elections were taken as a precondition of the general political reconstruction and therefore one may conclude that they were treated mainly as an instrument in that process. This is proof that the so-called functional interpretation of democracy prevailed. In that sense, majority elections were regarded almost as a necessary precondition for the creation of a democratic system and, taking into consideration the fact that the number of different minor parties was growing and producing a high percent of polarisation, a guarantee for the concentration of the political spectrum was required for the creation of a sustainable government. According to that interpretation, proportional representation could have had a negative impact on the atomisation of the political life and hence on the stability of the political system as such, especially having in mind the turbulent environment in which it was created.

Political interests of particular parties related to their expectations in the electoral process significantly influenced the choice of the model of the electoral system. The Communist Party in power (SKH–SDP) advocated for the majority system owing to the fact that at that time it had a developed organisational structure with solid financial support and connections with the population. Given the fact that this type of electoral system ‘favours’ big parties while discriminating the small ones, from their position it was reasonable to expect that the outcome of the elections organised in such a way would be favourable.

The second big party (HDZ, Croatian Democratic Union) managed to gain significant support of the population and significant financial support from the Croatian diaspora and hence to take the advantage of majority elections and take the power. Remaining small parties with limited influence objected to the electoral system, mainly because of the fact that it left very limited manoeuvring space for them in the political arena that was clearly visible from the results of the elections.

¹² ZAKOSEK 2002.

The D'Hondt method of votes counting contributed as well to the final outcome of the elections, distorting the results and creating a so-called artificial majority in the parliament.

So, it was obvious that the electoral system had a crucial role in determining the results of the election and in that case, thanks to the majority system, an absolute majority of one party has been created on the basis of the relative majority of votes.

The elections undoubtedly represent the most important political process in transitional countries, given the fact that they mark a real beginning of transformation from a totalitarian to a democratic political system. In the former Yugoslav Federation they did not represent only the form of the delegitimisation of the old political system but of the former federation as such and hence acted as a milestone on the path towards Croatian independence and sovereignty. Despite the fact that, as we stated before, the 1990 elections cannot be regarded as constitutional, they represent a turning point in the modern Croatian history and therefore they are of utmost importance. In general, from the elections that followed one could have expected to contribute to the consolidation of a young democracy by ensuring the peaceful change of the party in power, as it was the case in other countries. However, that was not the case in Croatia. The next ten years represented an era of absolute dominance of the HDZ, where elections became a tool for the legitimisation of the political situation in the country and various types of electoral systems were changed according to the preference of political elites in different electoral periods.

Despite their instrumentalisation, numerous functions of the elections and expectations from them in the initial stage of the post-communist period made their legitimacy almost unquestionable so they were very frequently conducted. During the decade after the first elections in the 1990s, there have been three elections held for the House of Representatives of the Parliament (1992, 1995, 2000), which reveals the fact that the regular term of mandates has been shortened from four to approximately less than two and a half years. Apart from that, there have been two elections for the House of Counties of the Parliament (1993, 1997) and three presidential elections (1993, 1997, 2000).¹³

As it was mentioned before, in accordance with political preferences of political elites, a very high level of institutional reformism marked this period in Croatia. During only ten years, all major models of electoral systems have been applied – the system of absolute majority (1990), two types of combined electoral systems (1992, 1995) and the system of proportional representation (2000). Given the fact that it is very difficult to find a similar trend in any other transitional country during the 1990s, it is obvious that decision makers, by changing different systems, tried to follow the change of preferences of the electorate and adjust the general institutional framework to the needs of the party in power.

The political system itself tells enough about the character of governance, owing to the fact that its semi-presidential form with the strong position of the president, coupled with various mechanisms that ensured the domination of the party in power, made the constitutional declaration about the multi-party system rather questionable and the level of democratisation dependent on the ruling party's political will.

¹³ Apart from that, a constitutional referendum was held in 1991, and up to now it seems to be the only one conducted in modern Croatian history.

In general, one may conclude that the first decade of political transformation was not successful and find various reasons for a stalemate of Croatia's development, as well as for the fact that it found itself lagging behind the countries that showed significantly lower transitional potential in the early 1990s. Having achieved formal international recognition of its statehood, the country needed to achieve another goal in order to finalise the first phase of its state-building process, and that was the liberation of the occupied territories. With two victorious military missions in 1995 (Flash in May and Storm in August) and peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia in 1998, Croatia has taken control over its entire territory and by achieving that satisfied the basic precondition for the 'real start' of the transition process. However, it takes political will to initiate such a process and that is the main reason why we can conclude that 'the real transition' started with the political changes in late 1999 and early 2000.

On the 3rd of January 2000, a coalition of six opposition parties led by the centre-left Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the centre-right Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLHS) swept the parliamentary elections, taking 71 of the 151 seats (including six seats reserved for Croats living abroad). Thereupon presidential elections took place, following the death of Franjo Tudjman, and the HDZ candidate failed to reach the second round, which represented an end of an era of their absolute dominance in the Croatian political life.¹⁴

The victory of the coalition of opposition parties undoubtedly opened new opportunities for Croatia's transitional reforms conduct and integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, the processes that have been frozen for long owing to the lack of political will of the previous regime and its negative image abroad.

One of the crucial preconditions for a new start was a structural change in the political system, i.e. reductions of the unnecessarily strong position of the president and improvement of the position of parliament in it. It was announced by the government in the very beginning of its mandate that it wants to depoliticise the bodies of state, which have been bastions of nationalist party support for the past decade. In order to create institutions that citizens can start to have faith in, it planned to bring under parliamentary scrutiny especially the army, police and security services. Constitutional changes that have taken place in the 2000s had shown a strong determination of new political elites to change the political praxis in Croatia, avoid unreasonable dominance of the executive branch in the future and make the state apparatus more efficient and compatible with the difficult tasks of reforms process and EU and NATO accession before it.

The new government *inherited* a semi-isolated country with a weak democratic and economic system, burdened by negative results of shady privatisation that has taken place during the 1990s. Political and economic problems were likely to force a successor to remain focused on internal issues.

Besides this, unlike its predecessor, the new government has shown a clear political will to fulfil its obligation to fully co-operate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Also, very soon after taking power, the government made it clear that issues of most serious concern of the international community, such as the return of refugees and regional co-operation will be placed very high on the government list

¹⁴ CULAR 2005.

of priorities,¹⁵ as well as that some ‘unpopular’ measures like rationalisation in the sector of economy and state administration, especially the downsizing of the large and costly security sector, will be conducted.

The recognisable success of the coalition government brought the country closer to the Euro-Atlantic community and changed the overall picture of Croatia abroad. It had started the painful process of transitional reforms, changed the political discourse and brought the country ‘back to the right track’. Nevertheless, the situation was everything but rosy owing to the difficult political and economic reality, burdened by complicated relations with the region, EU, NATO and a number of other problems.

From that period onwards, different governments and coalitions in power were changing places. What was important for the functionality of the electoral system is the fact that the new framework provided by the parliamentary system ensured a relatively stable framework in which democratic processes run smoothly, including the changes in the cabinet, providing an environment for the sustainable reforms process necessary for the successful EU and NATO accession process. While the elections have produced difficult situations in which it was not easy to form a stable coalition government, the established political framework provided for a firm and broad coalition in the parliament, across the political spectrum, supporting the process of European integration. The project was recognised as the one of highest strategic importance for the state and the aforementioned coalition prevented daily political disputes from slowing it down or blocking it. On the other hand, the system of proportional representation cleansed the parliamentary life of the absolute domination of big parties and made sure that any government in the upcoming period will be formed by a coalition. This was of utmost importance for the development of a consensual model of governance that was fundamental for the evolution of a political culture comparable to that of western societies, at least to a certain extent. In practical terms, it proved instrumental in cleansing the system of concepts like ‘fathers of nation’, that was burdening the country in the 1990s.

Conclusion

The transformation of the political system in Croatia to a certain extent may be compared with similar processes in societies of Central and Eastern Europe. However, this process in Croatia has some special characteristics that differentiate it from the aforementioned ones: the state building process had been conducted in parallel with the Homeland War that significantly affected the dynamics of the political transformation during the 1990s. Apart from the burden of war, there was another element that had negatively affected the transformation process in the 1990s, and that was the semi-autocratic nature of the political elites that were, while declaratively opting for ‘European Croatia’, showing very modest political will for their claims. The combination of these two elements left the country far behind the average pace of the transition shown by the countries of ‘the fifth enlargement’. Political and economic systems burdened with consequences of war and the rudimentary democratic culture praxis simply could not offer answers to transitional challenges that followed the fall of the communist system.

¹⁵ Full co-operation with the ICTY, return of refugees and regional co-operation were three main conditions for the normalisation of relations with the international community, and with the EU in particular.

Therefore, it is legitimate to argue that the ‘real transition’ in Croatia started with ‘a decade of delay’ in comparison with Central and Eastern European countries. The turn of the century brought the semi-autocratic regime to an end, opening new perspectives for the Croatian democratic future. The most important consequences were the transitional reforms and integration into the Euro-Atlantic community, the processes that have been frozen for a long period of time, which have started taking place and began ‘moving the country forward’. In that sense, the inauguration of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) from the EU side at the Zagreb Summit (2000), that for the first time offered a possibility for full-fledged EU membership for countries from the region, represented a main turning point in the relations between the EU and Croatia and a main motor of transitional reforms. Its conditionality and mechanism had an extraordinary importance for the pace and direction of Croatian transitional efforts, while the principle of ‘own merits’ guaranteed the individual evaluation of each country from the region and removed political concerns from the regional SAP package that were dominating the political discourse in the country.

The complex of changes had a significant impact on the whole political system and political preferences in general. Apart from that, the changed political environment brought the practice of consensual power sharing for the first time to Croatia, due to the fact that political performances of parties made the individual formation of government impossible, so the ‘era of coalition’ started in the 2000s and continued until the present. The importance of the fact that no single party can form the government in the period of crucial transition changes speaks enough for itself while on the other hand there is a symbolic proof of the positive impact of the process of European integration into the political praxis in Croatia, and into the parliamentary one in particular.

Therefore, it is obvious that the process of European integration was of utmost importance for the process of political transformation in Croatia. As it was presented in this text, it helped changing the political discourse in the country, introducing new elements that made trends of the Croatian society comparable with those of the European Union and eliminated its rudimentary pieces, marked with populist rhetoric and values that had a negative impact on the transitional process and political preferences in Croatia. The continuation of this process and the finalisation of the accession to the EU were irreplaceable guarantees for the continuation of positive trends in the Croatian political transformation and represented a major priority for both political elites and society in general. Only that ensured a sustainable democratic development in the country and offered it a possibility to support similar processes in the region, where Croatia with its experience had already played a significant role as a promoter of the EU in its long-term efforts for regional stabilisation.

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