
Reviews and Reports

Complex Parliaments in Transition: Central European Federations Facing Regime Change; International Workshop, Ljubljana, 16 October 2015

The year 1990 represented a turning point in many aspects. Also in the Eastern European Assemblies, which carried out their role in the transition processes in different manners. Federations were falling apart, new states were forming, efficient ways of carrying out the transition from the socialist to the democratic system were being sought, and the majority of the population found itself in an unknown and treacherous terrain... Even the former dissidents and new leaders. Meanwhile, compliance with the law and democratic decisionmaking in the Parliaments, whatever they were like, was a vital part of the process that ensured the legitimacy of the transition. As we were able to hear at the conference, Vaclav Havel faced such an obstacle as well, and according to the opinion at the time he carried out one of the most elegant political transitions. On the other hand, fortunately the Romanian scenario was unique. Nevertheless, the unexpected course of events in the Soviet Union contributed to these events as well, besides a large number of other factors. Ephraim Kishon described this moment in his own way: *"Frankly, such a development of events was not certain. It was a true miracle. I am only trying to describe how such an impossible revolution was possible at all. And I am not doing it as one of those experts in the Soviet Union who disgraced themselves, but because I was a witness to the events. So, those who expect any new prophecies from me should stay away from this book. Not even the Delphic oracle could predict with any certainty whether Gorbachev will go down in history as a messiah the saviour or a confused wizard's apprentice. Even now everybody is saying that during the time of Brezhnev one had to stand in line for carrots a quarter of an hour less... As far as I am concerned, Mikhail Gorbachev is nevertheless an impressive person, whether the Russian market runs out of carrots completely or not. His revolution that shook the world is a special kind of a oneman show, which he has carried out himself. Moses had a brother, Aaron; Marx had a friend, Engels; and Gorbachev has nothing but worries. Still, at this moment I am as confused as anyone else. Was it all just a nightmare, a cheap horror movie? Were all those generals, faceless fossils with countless shiny medals, truly the masters of the universe? Did the bloodthirsty Count Dracula truly exist in Romania? Was that average insurance agent Erich Honecker truly a tyrant whom everyone was afraid of? Was all of this just a bad joke? Therefore my book will only describe the events that already belong to history, and which can no longer be changed by anyone. Except for the Soviet historians, of course."*¹ Thus the question of transition was dealt with by a Hungarian emigrant, as he looked into the past.

However, at that moment it was far more important to look into the future. The participants of the workshop in Ljubljana focused on the question of the role of As-

¹ Ephraim Kishon, *Pomozi sirotu na svoju sramotu* (Zagreb: Znanje, 1992), 7–8.

semblies in the former socialist federal countries. As it was stated in the presentation of the workshop, the federal states, based on the construction of the socialist relations, started to lose their primary meaning. As we could see in the cases of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, the deputies/delegates in the federal structures started focusing on their national issues, and instead of the community the individual national units gradually became more important, which ultimately resulted in the dissolution of both federations. In the Czechoslovak case the Federal Assembly, which had not played a very important political role before, nevertheless managed to complete the transition from the socialist system to a democratic regime before its term came to an end, while the Yugoslav Federal Assembly was quite an unimportant factor in this process and the Republican Assemblies played a tremendous role. The presentation of the East German example represented an interesting addition to the majority of the contributions that focused on the aforementioned countries. As it happened, after the first free elections the East German Volkskammer merely paved the way towards the legal and formal unification with West Germany. This also involved a renewed federalisation, as East Germany had no longer been divided into states since the late 1950s. However, the fact that the parliamentary transition in Germany was thus not yet concluded was pointed out by the analysis of the changed circumstances, in which the today's German Federal State Parliaments can take an active part in the European Parliament without answering to the federal authorities.

The consultation took place at the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana, where Jure Gašparič and the Director of the Institute Damijan Guštin greeted the participants in the name of the Slovenian hosts.

Accompanied by the photos from the former Czechoslovak Parliament, the introductory paper was presented by Dr. Adéla Gjuríčová, who has ample experience of her own with this Czech parliament. She presented the role of the Federal Parliament, which had, until the Velvet Revolution, been a less important institution from the political viewpoint, and where decisions were merely adopted and not created all that often. During the turmoil of the Velvet Revolution this Parliament continued working and remained unresponsive to the external influences, even though it was clearly evident from its immediate surroundings that the environment had changed radically. The revolutionary leadership did not hold the reins of the Parliament, but it quickly established that without the Parliament it would not be possible to implement the changes legally. Namely, the problems implied by the structure of the Parliament – which did not guarantee that any decisions adopted at various round tables in those days would also be processed or adopted – dictated changes in the structure of the delegates. Tomáš Zahradníček explained more about the solution, which represented a compromise between the departing old authorities and the revolutionary movement, and thus provided the missing details. As it happened, elections for the Federal Assembly were not deemed as a sufficiently swift and efficient solution, and therefore approximately one third of new delegates were coopted into the Assembly. Despite the legality of this procedure, which enabled an active cooperation between the executive and legislative authorities, the move started undermining the legitima-

cy of the Assembly itself, as its coopted members started undermining the Assembly's previous political consistency as well as its regional proportionality. The majority of the new members came from large cities, and the essential differences in perception between the Czech and Slovak parts of the state were evident as well. Censorship and the consequent political turmoil were significantly less prominent in Slovakia, and soon after the introduction of the most important changes the Assembly deputies started acting more in line with the expectations of the individual parts of the state. Then Petr Roubal presented an indepth analysis of the subsequent parliamentary discord and the origins of the problems of Czechoslovak federalism, which was the only political remainder of the Prague Spring (perhaps also because of the Slovak role in its conclusion; author's comment). Thus Roubal supplemented the introductory lecture with regard to the final but consenting breakup after the consolidation of the two national leaders, Vaclav Havel and Vladimir Mečiar. At this point we should also underline the discussion about how easily this breakup was actually accepted by the Czech public and politics, which saw the West through rosetinted glasses at the time but disregarded the East.

From the today's perception of the established democratic parliamentary practices, the East German example of transitional parliament is actually closest to us. The first and last free elections in the German Democratic Republic took place in May 1990, and the Parliament operated successfully until 2 October of the same year, that is, until the day before the German reunification. Its mandate was clear, despite the organisationally unchanged structure: to pave the way for the reunification. Unlike other transitional states, where the political parties had yet to be established, the last East German Parliament enjoyed a strong support in the traditional political parties from the Federal Republic of Germany. If we disregard the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschland), the former East German party that came in third, most of the parties worth mentioning were actually copies of the existing West German parties. Bettina Tuffers presented the influence of the Bonn parties on the political developments in the Berlin Parliament, as its delegates also followed the events from the balcony. The inexperienced new Members of Parliament had yet to learn about the significance of parliamentary procedures and basics of political appearances from the veteran West German politicians. Further elaboration was provided by Aron Buzogany, who focused on the somewhat more recent issues. With the example of the German Federal State Parliaments he demonstrated that these independent bodies have – apart from the Upper Chambers of the National Parliaments – the possibility of successfully influencing the adoption or rejection of legislation in the European Parliament. While this calls for enormous organisational efforts, it has born results in at least two cases. Therefore the weakened national and regional parliaments have retained or enhanced their significance in the process of the "European federalisation".

The comparisons between the various constitutional and legal systems and the role of parliamentary institutions in these systems usually turn out to be very significant for the presentation of the last stage of the Yugoslav system, the so-called "mature selfmanagement". The convoluted language that accompanied this system

can also be seen in the foreword to the collected works of the Yugoslav President of the Government Milka Planinc: *"The current stage of the Yugoslav socialist revolution involves the struggle for the development of socialist selfmanagement as an integral social relationship and principle of the construction of the society, struggle for the construction of the associated labour society or the rule of the working class with regard to income, social reproduction and social decisionmaking. The everyday constancy of this struggle results in the totality of the revolutionary practices and attests to human creativity on the path towards the further liberation of work, the working class and the masses, led by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia as the leading ideologicalpolitical force."*² This totality and creativity resulted in the fact that formally almost everyone could take part in the political decisionmaking at the various levels, which Jure Gašparič demonstrated schematically in his introduction to the explanation of the transition in the Slovenian Assembly. Gašparič brought the attention to the fact that in this process the Federal Assembly became increasingly irrelevant, while the fundamental political discussions started coming to the forefront in the Slovenian Socialist Assembly. The Socialist Assembly and the subsequent first democraticallyelected Assembly, still based on the old organisational principles, were seen as exceedingly positive by the Slovenian public. This is also apparent from the results of the public opinion polls, which was one of Slovenian peculiarities, as this research has gone on continuously since as early as 1967. However, public opinion polls can occasionally be wrong, especially when it comes to election results. On the basis of public opinion patterns and election results, Simona Kustec Lipicer showed the trends of the changes in the Slovenian political space, where the already established parties keep losing their positions, while the newlyformed parties (sometimes actually established during the official election campaign) keep making their way into the parliamentary life with each new elections and have enjoyed very large percentages for the past few years. The lecturer is also the president of a parliamentary group of one of these parties. Therefore she could bring together her practical and research experience, while the workshop participants were able to observe the everyday parliamentary life in the Slovenian Parliament.

The constructive debates following each individual contribution and the provided comparative dimension set excellent foundations for the future research challenges. These results will not only remain limited to the participants, as they are freely accessible to anyone: the workshop was recorded, and the recordings are published at the History of Slovenia – SIstory portal (www.sistory.si).

Jurij Hadalin

² Milka Planinc, *Savez komunista Jugoslavije u socialističkom samoupravljanju* (Zagreb: Centar za kulturnu djelatnost, 1982), 2.