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## Nationalism and Populism in the Balkans: The Case of Croatia

Mark Biondich

Croatian politics for much of the twentieth century turned on the twin axes of the social and national questions. Croatia's multi-ethnic character and the pre-1945 social divide between urban educated society and the socially dominant countryside were core issues at the heart of Croatian (and later Yugoslav) politics. After 1945, with the rise of Communism in Yugoslavia, nationality issues and the national question were the key nodes in Croatian politics. The purpose of this chapter is not to identify varieties of populism or to determine whether there is indeed a universal form of populism. For the purposes of this study, populism is understood to refer to protest movements directed against established political regimes, social orders, and ruling ideologies. These movements are not necessarily undemocratic, although in practice they have contributed to the strengthening of such tendencies. These movements almost by definition spoke on behalf of the homogeneous "people" (*narod*), understood in the Croatian context to be one and the same as "the nation," which was regarded as the sole authority in and the cornerstone of political society. Indeed, the populist mission has more often than not ostensibly been to hand power back to "the [Croat] people," who had allegedly repeatedly been denied their rights by perfidious elites of one form or another.<sup>1</sup>

### Modernization and the roots of populism in the Balkans

In the period between 1878 and 1914, the newly independent Balkan states attempted to make the leap towards modernity. The region's political and intellectual elites were, with some exceptions, deeply impressed with the achievements of Europe, which was their paragon of modernity and "progress." They practically equated modernization with "Europeanization"—as was the case after 1989—that is, with the advance of technology, the growth of industry and commerce, urbanization, the establishment of efficient, centralized state power, and the institutional trappings of parliamentary democracy. During these decades, the Balkans witnessed the growth of towns, ambitious public works projects, the creation of communication networks, and the commercialization of national economies, in addition to the spread of schools, literacy,

and higher education. In 1914 the Balkans remained overwhelmingly rural, with numerically insignificant and socially marginal proletariats and bourgeoisies, although urbanization, the advent of new technologies, and the establishment of modern bureaucratic states had nonetheless already undermined traditional rural society. The role of the state in promoting development was pronounced, as state revenues were invested in the formation of state administrations, modern militaries, and gendarmeries. This entailed growing government indebtedness, eventually leading to greater foreign control over national economies and a concomitant dependence on European capital markets. While it may be true that the Balkans had by 1914 experienced only the beginnings of industrialization and an “uneven” pattern of development, it is also undeniable that the path to modernity had been entered upon.<sup>2</sup>

In most Balkan states, political elites were an outgrowth of national liberation struggles of the nineteenth century that relied on the state for social status and power. The decidedly centralized state apparatuses and politicized bureaucracies that governed these states proved to be attractive instruments of social advancement. The state was seen by many in the Balkan region as the only agent capable of mobilizing the necessary resources needed to pursue social and economic reform and the concomitant tasks of state-building and national integration; the state alone possessed the power needed to mobilize national resources, carry out modernizing reform, safeguard the national interest, and thus achieve national integration. In this context, political power in the Balkan states was not wielded by liberalizing bourgeois elites, but by intelligentsias and politicized bureaucracies. They were determined to adapt their societies to the organizational patterns of the European state. As state-building was integral to the modernist project, the result was highly centralized Balkan states with relatively large administrations. Balkan political elites were dependent on the power and prestige of the state, and the only viable avenue of employment for many educated Greeks, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, and others was the state bureaucracy, whose growth intensified noticeably at the turn of the twentieth century. The emergence of bureaucratic ruling elites had a powerful impact on political culture, as existing social realities reinforced the vertical exercise of political authority. In the absence of strong party political systems, the emphasis in politics at this time was on personalities, rather than party programs or ideologies *per se*.

The growth and expansion of the Balkan state was accompanied, as was the case elsewhere in Europe, by new demands on the citizenry. In a region where the peasantry comprised a majority of the population, state-building naturally entailed coercing peasants into supporting modernization. While the progress that was achieved from the last two decades of the nineteenth century onwards was financed by foreigners and high taxation, it was necessarily borne by the Balkan peasant who was compelled to conform to nascent state structures in the name of modernity. Although the condition of the Balkan peasant varied considerably from one country to the next, the typical peasant remained by 1914 quite poor, with small and inefficient plots predominating. In Bulgaria and Serbia the peasants owned the land and smallholdings were the norm, whereas in the Romanian lands, Transylvania and Croatia, the native nobilities held title to roughly half the arable land. Modernization and the penetration of the market into the Balkan countryside wrought significant changes to traditional rural life,

leading to significant if ephemeral resistance. The Serbian Timok Rebellion (1883), during which Serb peasants attacked local officialdom and briefly neutralized state authority, is emblematic of popular resistance to state-building in the Balkans. That same year the so-called “national movement” occurred in Croatia, which was largely motivated by difficult rural economic circumstances and a substantial increase in taxation resulting from the growth of a semi-autonomous Croatian state apparatus within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy after 1868. In Croatia as elsewhere in the Balkans, the new bureaucratic state collected taxes in money, forcing peasants into the market and increasing their need for credit. The peasants’ struggle against exploitation quickly became a clash against the city, where the modernizing state bureaucracy had replaced the gentry as a veritable new scourge. During the 1883 rebellion in Croatia, peasants attacked the local intelligentsia and government officialdom. A similar situation prevailed in Romania. The enormous divide between landed elite and peasant, greater in Romania than elsewhere in the Balkans, led to several peasant disturbances, as in 1888 and, far more ominously, during the great peasant revolt of March 1907. Even in Bulgaria, where rural conditions were generally more favorable, the situation of the peasants deteriorated rapidly after autonomy was achieved in 1878. Most peasants believed they were overtaxed compared to the towns while receiving few benefits in return, harboring a deepening resentment against the town and nascent state bureaucracy.

It is hardly surprising that, in light of these growing social crevices within modernizing Balkan society, the years around the turn of the century witnessed the proliferation of populist parties: the Romanian Peasants’ Party (1895; recast in and after 1918); the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (1899–1901) of Aleksandŭr Stamboliiski; and, the Croat Peasant Party (1904) of Stjepan and Antun Radić. Even the Serbian People’s Radical Party (1881) originally represented a populist reaction to modernization, combining socialist, anarchist, and peasantist elements into a militant program. These parties shared a number of common characteristics that gave them a populist tenor, including the shared belief that society should be remodeled to reflect the peasant majority’s values and interests, a social and economic program that emphasized peasant needs and the belief that the peasantry’s numeric preponderance necessitated a greater political role for that social group. They generally regarded the primary role of the state as safeguarding the prosperity of “the people” as a national community, rather than personal rights or civic freedoms as such. The fact that “peasantist” parties were formed at all demonstrates that a wide chasm separated the peasantry from existing urban elites; distrustful of the traditional parties, peasants turned to the emerging agrarian populist movement.<sup>3</sup>

There was abundant cause for such disenchantment. By the turn of the twentieth century, parliamentary regimes existed in much of the Balkans and were based on relatively liberal constitutional systems by the standards of the time. In practice, however, these regimes restricted popular participation. The modernizing Balkan states were controlled by oligarchs or professional politicians, even while maintaining some pluralism through legislative assemblies, which were in most cases, with the exception of Romania, Montenegro, and Croatia, theoretically elected through universal manhood suffrage. These restrictive parliamentary governments were reformed to

varying degrees only after military coups in Serbia (1903) and Greece (1909), or following the Great War, as in Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, and the other Balkan provinces of the former Habsburg monarchy, which joined with Serbia and Montenegro in December 1918 to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (“Yugoslavia”).

In short, the nature of modernization in the Balkans inevitably led to disenchantment, creating fertile soil for “populist” movements that manifested themselves in nascent agrarian or peasantist parties. The seemingly ever-growing chasm between the Europeanized cultural elites (the intelligentsia) and the political classes on the one hand and peasant majorities on the other was clearly visible to all, and increasingly deliberated. The former were increasingly criticized for losing touch with “the people”—in the Balkan context, this invariably meant the peasantry—and for betraying popular (that is to say “national”, as this was often conflated to mean one and the same) ideals. In formulating their political programs, peasantist leaders in Croatia and elsewhere in the Balkans drew on the example of Russian populism. This is hardly surprising, given the similarities between the Russian and Balkan (particularly the South Slav) countryside, the comparable communal institutions (the Russian peasant *mir* and South Slavic *zadruga*), and the common challenges posed by modernity. There was also a common idealization of the peasant, autochthonous culture and customs. The roots of Balkan (and Croatian) populism are thus to be found in the particular nature of modernization in the region; it was within this context that agrarian or peasantist movements emerged, offering their own (and supposedly distinct) paths to development premised on the existence of a socially dominant peasantry that had been victimized by a seemingly flawed, state-directed modernization. As political modernization entailed the theoretical broadening of the franchise, the logic of peasantists everywhere was simple enough: the transition to democratic governance would be incomplete unless the peasant majority obtained and exercised its political rights. This was the basic premise of peasantist leaders everywhere, from Stamboliiski’s BANU to the Radićes’ Croat Peasant Party.

### Populism in Croatia: the Croat Peasant Party, 1904–45

The establishment in December 1904 of the Croat Peasant Party (hereafter, HSS)<sup>4</sup> was part of the agrarian populist wave, and marked the appearance of one of the most important agrarian parties in the region. It also represented an important turning point in Croatian politics, although its full impact was not felt until after 1918. The HSS remained a relatively minor party during the remainder of the Austro-Hungarian period (1904–18) because of the highly restrictive electoral franchise in Croatia, but its prewar articulation of a peasantist ideology enabled it to become a veritable national mass movement in the post-1918 period, and the most important Croatian political party to 1945. The HSS’s ideology represented an eclectic synthesis of liberal and socialist principles, combining recognition of private property, democratic principles and limited state intervention in society with an emphasis on peasant (collective) rather than individual rights and opposition to the economic principle of *laissez-faire*. The party program explicitly declared that it was against “capitalist insatiability,” giving

the party's ideology a decidedly anti-capitalist dimension. It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that the Radićs, or most peasantist leaders in the region, were Luddites or backward-looking conservatives who vainly hoped to reverse the tide of modernization. What peasantists proposed, as Roman Daskalov has observed, was not an alternative to industrialization itself, but to an inadequate industrialization.<sup>5</sup> However, most contemporary critics dismissed peasantist leaders (including the Radićs) as hopeless romantics, sentimentalists or as demagogues.

The key turning point for Croatian agrarianism was the First World War, as political changes and the introduction of universal manhood suffrage paved the way for peasant representation. Wartime casualties and the introduction of a system of obligatory delivery of food production and inflationary pressures all took their toll on the peasantry. Furthermore, the wartime anti-Slav chauvinism of the Austro-Hungarian authorities, who suspected most Slavs of treachery for the simple reason that they were neither German nor Magyar, contributed to the stirrings of the non-dominant nationalities. By 1918 much of the Croatian countryside was in open revolt against the city and the old regime, helped in no small measure by the return of former prisoners of war from Russia. This radicalization contributed to the HSS's transformation from a minor party into a national mass movement. Croatia's intellectual and political elite was, as a consequence of the peasantry's revolt against the city in 1918, cast aside. But in the heady days of 1918, this elite, which at the time was overwhelmingly committed to Yugoslavist unitarism, worked to bring about the formation of a new state, known formally as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The First World War thus produced another form of "liberation," namely national, although in reality this proved to be problematic since the substance of that liberation remained to be determined at the time of Yugoslav unification on December 1, 1918.

Radić's national ideology, and hence the national program of the HSS, acknowledged the importance of Slavic reciprocity and struck a delicate balance between Croat political rights and cultural Yugoslavism. Radić was a Croat nationalist, but remained committed to his Slavophile ideas and recognized that Croats and Serbs, in linguistic and even cultural terms, formed part of a larger Slavic family. But this did not translate into support for Yugoslav statehood, let alone state centralism. His Slavophile sentiments notwithstanding, Radić never believed that the South Slavs' political individualities and historical identities should be sacrificed for the sake of a greater Yugoslav community. That is why he and his party opposed Yugoslav unification in 1918–19 and the highly centralist political order that was established according to the 1921 constitution. The peasants had only a vague comprehension of the Yugoslav idea—which was at the time a phenomenon of the intelligentsia—and were being asked to sacrifice their own national identity for the sake of a concept which they did not truly fathom. When that concept descended from the nebulous realm of ideas to the hard ground of reality in 1918, the Croat peasantry quickly experienced the Yugoslav state as a new affliction, even more burdensome than the defunct Habsburg monarchy. Moreover, the Yugoslav state soon came to be seen as a Great Serbian state.

Radić's significance in Croatian politics emerges in this context. In 1918 the popular disturbances in the Croatian countryside demonstrated the existence of deep social fissures in the country. Possessing a peasant populist and Croatian republican platform,

Radić and his party offered the peasants a program which affirmed not only their political and socio-economic rights, but their national identity as well. Burdened throughout the 1920s by pressures from the new Yugoslav monarchical state, the Croat peasantry coalesced around “the party of Radić,” which soon became a national mass movement. By 1923, the HSS was the second largest party in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. The cornerstone of its policy, from 1918 until 1925, was peasant republicanism, a demand for a neutral Croat peasant republic and opposition to Yugoslav unification, which had taken a monarchical and centralist form. The HSS’s rhetoric repeatedly criticized Croatia’s intellectual elite for rushing headlong into unification. As pressures from the new Yugoslav monarchical state increased—a state that perpetuated many old, and imposed many new, burdens on the peasantry—peasant solidarity coalesced around Radić’s party. By 1925, Radić’s juggernaut had emasculated the other Croat parties, which were grudgingly forced to recognize his political leadership. This was based on their realization that Radić’s party was the only political force of significance in Croatia, as well as their own disenchantment with Yugoslav centralism. By the mid-1920s Radić’s name had become synonymous with the preservation of Croat national individuality. Indeed, in early 1925 the HSS leadership claimed that “the Croat Republican Peasant Party has become the Croat people.” In light of its repeated electoral returns in Croatia in the 1920s, this claim was essentially correct.

The HSS’s leadership placed great emphasis on creating a local party organization, internal democratic practices and fostering party cohesiveness. By the eve of the First World War, it had established a party cadre and a membership which probably ranged in size from 10,000 to 15,000 people. By 1923, however, the party’s central leadership claimed that it had more than one million organized members. It was the party’s grass-roots organizational work that set it apart as a modern political party with unparalleled executive deftness in Croatia. And yet the party never managed to sustain its internal democratic machinery. It devoted great attention to organization in its first years and held regular party assemblies between 1905 and 1912, but these became biennial in 1907 and then ceased during the First World War, only to be recommenced intermittently after 1919. In terms of policy formulation and initiative, Stjepan Radić and the central leadership assumed the dominant role. But this was certainly not at variance in any way with the party’s populist nature: Radić saw himself as an interpreter of the people’s will, and his charismatic personality meant that he shaped the contours of party (and hence “national”) policy. As the HSS established its electoral dominance in the 1920s, the party press increasingly equated the HSS’s party platform with Croat national interests, and the party leadership was cast as synonymous with the leadership of the Croat nation. By the late 1920s the party had become, in effect, an informal autocracy. This was never remedied, either in Radić’s lifetime or under his successor, Vladko Maček (1928–45). Moreover, toward the end of Radić’s life a virtual cult of personality had developed around “the Leader” Radić, further testament to the fact that the party had become populist in form and internally undemocratic. Despite this undemocratic trend, “the party of Radić” carried out a veritable national revolution in Croatia, and in this respect it played a progressive role in Croatian politics. In this sense, this early variant of Croatian populism may be said to have had a reformist and

progressive component, insofar as it advocated for liberal social reforms, supported the franchise for women, and insisted on greater political representation for the peasant majority. Peasant populism inaugurated the era of mass politics and democracy in Croatia.

In Croatia, as elsewhere in the Balkans, peasant parties were eventually neutralized and pressured to submit to existing political establishments or revolutionary forces of the right and left. Radić and his party were no exception, as they were compelled (after Radić's imprisonment in 1925) to recognize the Yugoslav monarchy. Following Radić's assassination in 1928, the HSS remained the only significant political force in Croatia.<sup>6</sup> Under Maček's leadership, the HSS entered the most difficult period of its history: it was forced to contend with the Yugoslav royal dictatorship (1929–34) of King Aleksandar Karadjordjević; the Great Depression; growing nationality tensions in Croatia and Yugoslavia; an increasingly volatile political climate in which the extremes of the right and left, represented in Croatia by the Ustaša and Communist movements, respectively, contended for power; and, finally, the painful experiences of war and occupation between 1941 and 1945 which overlapped with and culminated in Communist revolution. In the period between 1928 and 1941, the populist mantle in Croatia increasingly passed to native fascists and the radical right, who were violently opposed to the existence of the interwar Yugoslav state and critical of the HSS leadership for its policy vis-à-vis Yugoslavia. If Croat populism originated as a peasant movement predicated on the social question, after 1928 it gradually migrated to the political right as nationalist groups opposed to Yugoslavia used populist rhetoric to undermine the Croat peasant movement, which they saw as an impediment to the resolution of the "Croat Question," and the Yugoslav state.

In Croatia, fascism was associated with Ante Pavelić's Ustaša movement, which emerged after 1930 as the most radical nationalist group, committed to a program of Croatian independence.<sup>7</sup> Its core membership was drawn from the Croat Party of Right (1918–29), whose social base was the Croat petty bourgeoisie and nationalist intelligentsia. Like the HSS, the Croat Party of Right originally opposed the new Yugoslav state. The two parties were the leading opponents of state centralism in Croatia, albeit with quite distinct social constituencies. Given its relatively narrow social base, however, the Croat Party of Right remained a marginal political group and never polled more than 2 percent of the vote in Croatia in the 1920s. After Radić's assassination in 1928, all Croat political parties and even the leading Croatian Serb party, the Independent Democrats, rallied to the Croatian national cause. The HSS was the nominal leader of this united front, which began to unravel as Pavelić's nascent Ustaša movement began mapping a distinct political trajectory based on a fundamentally different understanding of the national question in Yugoslavia.

After January 1929, the dictatorship of King Aleksandar Karadjordjević systematically worked to indoctrinate the populace into an abandonment of their old "tribal" identities in favor of a new Yugoslav national identity.<sup>8</sup> The ideology of integral Yugoslavism was promoted with new vigor by the authorities. The state administration was reformed to do away with historic and cultural entities. In October 1929 the state's name was officially changed to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The September 1931 constitution guaranteed personal liberties but simultaneously forbade most forms of

political activity, while granting the monarch and executive extensive new powers; elections to the National Parliament were no longer by secret ballot and half the members of the Senate were nominated by the King. The state apparatus, army, and judiciary remained firmly in Serbian hands and the new government party, the Yugoslav National Party, was a predominantly Serb affair. In the same period (1931–4), many of the moderate non-Serb leaders spent time in prison and were otherwise harassed by the authorities; Maček would spend nearly six months in detention in 1931 and the better part of 1933–4 in prison for his alleged anti-state activities.<sup>9</sup> King Aleksandar's Yugoslavist project began to unravel even before his October 1934 assassination in Marseilles by a Macedonian terrorist working for the Ustaša movement.

After October 1934, a Regency Council was established, headed by Prince Pavle Karadjordjević, the late King's cousin. Much of Aleksandar's system, like the 1931 Constitution, was retained, although the reins of dictatorship were definitely loosened. Prince Pavle was keen to reach a political compromise with the HSS.<sup>10</sup> Despite elections in 1935 and 1938, attempts under two different premiers to consolidate the political situation in the country failed. During this period, Maček headed the country's United Opposition, which brought together the HSS, the Croatian Serb Independent Democrats, and the Serbian Democratic Party and Agrarians. A significant change came only in early 1939, with the appointment of Dragiša Cvetković as premier. In August 1939, Cvetković and Maček negotiated the *Sporazum* (Agreement), which created a semi-autonomous Croatian province<sup>11</sup> within Yugoslavia that incorporated most regions with a Croat plurality. Croatia had its own elected legislature and autonomy in most internal administrative matters. In 1939 the HSS joined a coalition government in Belgrade, with Maček assuming the position of deputy prime minister of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

Pavelić and his movement were committed to Croatian independence at any cost and hoped to exploit revisionist sentiment among Yugoslavia's neighbors to achieve statehood. Dialogue with Belgrade was rejected out of hand. The decisive rupture between the Ustaše and the HSS came in 1935, following the HSS's decision to participate in the May 1935 elections and to lead Yugoslavia's United Opposition.<sup>12</sup> The former's criticism was predicated on the belief that Maček and the HSS were working to reform Yugoslavia instead of working for her destruction. Ustaša rhetoric dismissed Yugoslavism as a failed ideology and Great Serbian project; their message to the Croat people questioned the motives of the current HSS leadership, and they asked how any political agreement with Belgrade was possible.<sup>13</sup> Maček's courtship of the Serbian opposition was denounced as a betrayal of Croat national interests, as the Serbian parties were determined to preserve Yugoslavia and perpetuate Croatia's subordinate status within it.<sup>14</sup> In the Ustaša worldview, all Serbs shared complicity in the exploitation of Croatia and the Croat people.<sup>15</sup> An Ustaša leaflet of January 1939 called attention to the point that the HSS had failed to achieve any meaningful political goals in the twenty years of Yugoslavia's existence. But over that same period, Germany had been reborn as a great power and a handful of Irish nationalists had achieved Ireland's independence, not through "decrepit" pacifism and negotiation, but by "a policy of resistance and blood." Ustaša rhetoric repeatedly emphasized "the spiritual and ideological unity of the leader and the nation itself," and their program of using "all

legal and illegal means for the accomplishment of national freedom.”<sup>16</sup> In short, Pavelić was a man of action while Maček was a failed leader and traitor; he was weakening the Croat liberation struggle through dialogue with Belgrade, repeated references to Yugoslavia and Croat–Serb unity, and his insistence on democratic principles.<sup>17</sup> It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Ustaše railed so vehemently against the HSS after the conclusion of the August 1939 *Sporazum*. Maček and his party were attacked for betraying the Croat people; their policy was not “an interpretation of the will of the Croat nation, but an attempt to save Yugoslavia at any cost.”<sup>18</sup> The HSS was jealously guarding the Croat village from political penetration, but this same village was suffering economically and socially as a result.<sup>19</sup>

In 1939 the other radical right groups in Croatia, such as the Catholic clericalists, National Socialists, and others, began coalescing around Pavelić and his Ustaša group, breaking completely with the HSS as the undisputed leader of the Croat cause. These groups had been clamoring for independence since at least the mid-1930s. The Croat political right often commented on fascist intervention in Spain, and how fascism in general could be applied in the Croatian case.<sup>20</sup> For the political right, democracy and liberalism were no longer assessed as viable solutions to the Croat Question. Yugoslavia’s failed democratic experiment had already confirmed them in this view. Their criticism of liberal democracy became in no uncertain terms an assault on Maček and the HSS. By 1939 the rupture between the mainstream peasant movement and the political right was virtually complete; the two currents of interwar Croat nationalism, represented by the HSS and the political right, parted company for good. The HSS, which had dominated Croatian politics since 1918, now committed itself to the preservation of Yugoslavia at a time of looming crisis in Europe. The Croat political right generally and Pavelić’s Ustaša movement specifically committed themselves to independence at any cost. The Ustaša movement’s populist rhetoric condemned both the Yugoslav (read Serbian) political establishment for perpetuating the Croat people’s subordinate status within Yugoslavia and the HSS for its *de facto* complicity. This populist rhetoric sought to exploit nationality problems in the 1930s to disgrace established Croat elites and to elicit popular support. To this end, the Ustaša movement repeatedly invoked and utilized the memory of Radić—since 1928 widely regarded as a martyr of the Croat national cause—as did the Croat (and Yugoslav) Communists. Both the right and left vilified Maček; neither the Croat radical right nor the Croat/Yugoslav left had much sympathy for his cautious policy of dialogue with Belgrade. For the former he was a national traitor, for the latter a bourgeois reactionary in peasant garb. During their stint in power between 1941 and 1945, the Ustaše interned him in the notorious Jasenovac camp from October 1941 to March 1942 and then placed him under house arrest for the duration of the war. Maček’s hurried flight from Croatia in May 1945 anticipated a much harsher fate at the hands of Josip Broz Tito’s Communists.

By the 1930s, Croat populism had migrated to the radical and fascist right and was premised almost entirely on the instrumentalization of the national question and nationality problems. Native fascism in Croatia, represented by the Ustaša movement, did not result from a structural crisis of society—the weakness of the bourgeoisie and liberal ideology, rapid social change, or fear of Communist revolution—but was a by-product of the nationalist struggles arising from Yugoslavia’s vexing and increasingly

acrimonious national question. Pavelić's group deliberately modeled itself on Italian fascism, hoping to utilize Italian sponsorship and Croat popular opposition to Yugoslavia in order to achieve independence. The Ustaše had developed a cult of personality around Pavelić, their charismatic "Leader" (*Poglavnik*) who unquestionably dominated the movement from beginning to end, and who also embodied its ideals and spirit. Their rhetoric was directed at Croatia's established political elite—that is, Maček and the HSS—and sought to exploit disenchantment among youth and disaffected nationalist elements in Croatia. Many young Croat nationalists, reared during a period of dysfunctional democracy (1919–29) and royal dictatorship, ceased having any meaningful commitment to democracy. Unlike traditional conservatives, however, they were not afraid to engage the masses and adopted an ostensibly populist rhetoric to that end.

### War and Communist revolution, 1941–89

Following the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941, Croat nationalists proclaimed the "Independent State of Croatia." The wartime Croatian state, which included much of present-day Croatia and all of Bosnia-Herzegovina, was an Italo-German condominium and integral component of the Axis new order in Southeastern Europe. The Ustaša movement assumed control, as Pavelić was transplanted from exile in Fascist Italy to Croatia. In an attempt to safeguard Croatia's newly won independence, the Ustaša regime proceeded almost immediately to unleash a campaign of mass murder to rid the state of all "undesirable" elements, among whom it counted the Serb and Jewish populations. Of all the Second World War Axis satellite states in East Central and Southeastern Europe, only in the Ustaša-run Independent State of Croatia did the number of non-Jewish (specifically Serb) civilian victims exceed the number of Jewish victims as a result of deliberate government policy. What is more, the democratically oriented Croatian political groups, headed by the HSS, were effectively marginalized during the war and, in light of the eventual victory of the Yugoslav Communists, ceased having any meaningful impact on Croatian politics.

Josip Broz Tito's Communist Partisans came to power in Yugoslavia in May 1945. In August 1945 a Communist-dominated Provisional Assembly laid the groundwork for elections to a Constituent Assembly the following month. Harassment of non-Communist politicians and suppression of their press during the election campaign precluded a fair election. The candidates of the Communist-backed People's Front won over 90 percent of the vote in September 1945. The Constituent Assembly dissolved the monarchy and established the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia (later the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) on November 29, 1945. Two months later it adopted a constitution that provided for a federation of six republics. The country was firmly in the hands of Tito and the Communist Party of Yugoslavia. As there was no democratic political process as such during the Communist period (1945–89), it is virtually impossible to discuss populism in this period.

Thereafter Yugoslavia was ruled as a federation of six republics under the highly centralized Communist Party of Yugoslavia. Following the 1948 split with the Soviet

Union, the Yugoslav Communists initiated several ideological innovations. In 1952 the Party was renamed the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, and a system of workers' self-management was introduced that ostensibly distinguished the Yugoslav socialist experiment from the Soviet model. Tito evidently concluded by the early 1960s that strict party centralism would undermine the equality of the country's nations and nationalities, upset the equilibrium between the six republics and possibly even halt the progress of cautious reform. To that end, after 1962 several liberalizing tendencies emerged. In the face of dissent and internal debate, in 1966 the Yugoslav leadership embarked on a major political shift: decentralization of political and economic authority and decision-making. Tito opted for toleration of limited debate and accommodation of regional interests. Party and state centralism were progressively restricted while greater rights were conceded to Croats, Bosnian Muslims, and the Albanians in Kosovo. Institutional decentralization now became the norm, as more authority was transferred to the republics and their parties. This proved problematic in practice, as the decline of central planning contributed to republican competition for resources and prerogatives.<sup>21</sup> It also gave rise to liberal and nationalist tendencies in both Croatia and Serbia.

The Croatian Spring was a cultural-political movement of the late 1960s that called for greater cultural, economic, and national rights for Croatia within the Yugoslav socialist federation. The movement originated in the 1967 declaration of a group of Croatian linguists and writers on the status of the Croatian literary language, which touched off a discussion in Croatia about national and republican rights within Yugoslavia. The movement gradually won a grass-roots following and the support of reform-oriented figures within the League of Communists of Croatia, such as Miko Tripalo and Savka Dabčević-Kučar, who sought greater popular validation for their policies. Their objective was not to destabilize Yugoslavia as such, however. In this sense, one cannot characterize the "Croatian Spring" as a populist movement, insofar as established, reformist elites sought to effect change within proscribed limits. In the event, popular demands outpaced the Croatian party reformers and, as a result, Tito and the Yugoslav party leadership interpreted the movement as a dangerous restoration of Croatian nationalism. In December 1971 the Croatian League of Communists was purged of reform elements, including Dabčević-Kučar and Tripalo. Among those arrested was the former Communist general and future president of Croatia, Franjo Tuđman. After 1971 the League of Communists of Croatia was dominated by an orthodox leadership committed to Tito and the Yugoslav status quo.<sup>22</sup> The suppression of the Croatian Spring proved important, as it alienated many Croats from socialist Yugoslavism and was seen as proof that Croat national rights could not be genuinely accommodated within socialist Yugoslavia. The purge ushered in a period of "bitter quiescence" in Croatia, which lasted until 1989–90.<sup>23</sup>

## Post-Communism and democratic transition

Post-Communism in Croatia was closely intertwined with the disintegration of the Yugoslav state and concomitant war of independence between June 1991 and August

1995. The early Croatian transition from Communist rule to the first democratic elections, in 1989–90, was noticeably influenced by only one actor, namely, the ruling League of Communists of Croatia. By the late 1980s, this party was deeply divided on the question of reform, but the reformist wing, following the lead of its Slovenian counterparts, gradually succeeded in neutralizing hardline elements and initiating the first steps toward democratization. Croatian society and public opinion did not influence this early transition in any meaningful way, nor did they influence the December 1989 decision of the League of Communists of Croatia to hold democratic elections in Croatia the following year. Rather, the Communist reformers in Croatia, evidently confident of their own electoral victory in spring 1990, did not negotiate with the nascent political opposition on issues such as the nature of electoral system. As a result, and much to the surprise of Communist reformists, the early transition went in unexpected directions. The nationalist Croat Democratic Union (hereafter, HDZ) won the first elections of April–May 1990, ensuring its absolute parliamentary majority and complete control over the next phase of Croatia’s transition, namely, the drafting of a new constitution and concomitant state and institutional building. During this second phase, tensions between Croatia and Serbia escalated rapidly and Croat–Serb relations in Croatia deteriorated appreciably.<sup>24</sup>

During the early transition in Croatia, both the Croat and Serb populations were mobilized by populist and ethnically exclusive appeals. The Croatian transition to democracy was marked by the emergence of new, alternative movements that questioned the legitimacy of the Communist order. The HDZ was by far the most significant anti-communist movement in Croatia, bringing together disparate political factions, including former and reform Communists, liberal reformers, and hardline nationalists, under the leadership of the former Communist general and dissident Franjo Tuđman. After winning the 1990 elections, the HDZ party/movement sought to transform and institutionalize itself, according to Goran Čular, into a form of political regime.<sup>25</sup> The HDZ entered the Croatian political scene in 1989 as an officially registered political party, but from the beginning it resembled a populist movement rather than party. Instead of a clear party program, the HDZ offered a fairly vague platform for democratic transition that was in actual fact dominated by the issue of Croatian state sovereignty. In the context of the growing political conflict between Croatia (and Slovenia) on the one hand and Yugoslavia on the other, the HDZ’s appeal to nationalist sensibilities gave it a significant advantage over its political opponents and especially the reform Communists, who ever since the suppression of the Croatian Spring were seen in Croatia as insufficiently “national” in form. Similarly, its populist rhetoric juxtaposed Croatia’s supposedly “European” values with Serbian “Balkanism.”<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Tuđman served as more than a party leader. Despite his Communist pedigree, he was, certainly for his followers, a charismatic persona whose nationalist credentials had already been cemented during his stints in prison. Tuđman acquired the attributes of a charismatic populist who seemed to embody Croatia’s drive for sovereignty. Although theoretically a democrat, Tuđman appeared unwilling or incapable of making the transition from Communist dissident to liberal democratic reformer. He remained to the end a rather dogmatic nationalist intellectual. Nevertheless, Tuđman’s emotional appeal to suppressed nationalist values gave him

and the HDZ a decidedly populist flair and appeal; their rhetoric claimed that Croat rights were threatened by existing “Yugoslav” elites, whether by the Serbian Communists under Slobodan Milošević or their Croatian counterparts, who were characterized as insufficiently loyal or even disloyal to the nation and its interests. Tudjman and the HDZ played on several Croat national grievances against Yugoslavia, not least of all the belief that Second World War crimes of the Ustaša regime had been exaggerated and used for political ends by the Communist authorities to undermine legitimate Croat aspirations for statehood. The fact that the nationalist revival in Serbia after 1987 under Milošević instrumentalized Ustaša crimes for contemporary political purposes further fueled this sentiment in Croatia. Only Tudjman and the HDZ claimed to hold out the promise of sovereignty and, thereafter, prosperity in a future Croatian state.

After the HDZ won the 1990 elections, and in the context of conflict with the Croatian Serbs and Yugoslav state, the party was progressively institutionalized as a semi-authoritarian regime. Tudjman and the HDZ transferred many of their principles into the institutional framework of the nascent Croatian state. This entailed a restrictive definition of Croatia as the state of the Croat nation, a rather problematic historical revisionism of the crimes of the collaborationist Ustaša regime, and the cultivation of authoritarian practices. Party symbols were conflated with national symbols and, in the context of what became known as the “Homeland War” of 1991–5, the HDZ portrayed itself as a state-building movement and as the bearer of the national struggle for independence. Critics and political opponents were criticized in the party and state-affiliated media as undermining popular morale and even for disloyalty to the nascent Croatian state. What is more, the populist charisma of Tudjman was institutionalized in the form of a semi-presidential system; Tudjman served as President from May 1990 until his death in December 1999, exercising significant political authority throughout that period. In this manner, the populist nature of the HDZ movement was transplanted to the Croatian state with a deleterious impact on the transition to and consolidation of democracy in the country.

The post-Communist transition in Croatia may therefore be divided into two general periods: the first, corresponding to the populist presidency of Franjo Tudjman and the rule of his HDZ from May 1990 to December 1999; and, the second, the period since 2000, during which Croatia has gradually moved toward democratic standards, liberal economic reform, and European Union membership. Despite lingering problems, Croatia has evolved since 2000 as a relatively stable multi-party democracy. The country joined NATO in April 2009 and the EU in July 2013. Nevertheless, Croatia still has political groups, primarily although not exclusively on the nationalist right, which continue to resort to populist rhetoric in their opposition to NATO, the EU and the country’s cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which has been repeatedly criticized for its alleged effort to criminalize Croatia’s war of independence.<sup>27</sup> While Croatia’s post-Tudjman politics now revolve largely around two leading parties—the Social Democrats and reformed HDZ, which lead distinct party coalitions—an increasing number of “independent” candidates and populist parties continue to fill a void in a society still suffering from economic lethargy and numerous social problems. They often pin their anti-elite message on popular fears of the loss of Croat national identity.

## Conclusion

This brief overview of the history of Croatian populism has sought to demonstrate that the term should not always be used in a negative light and need not possess negative connotations. The earliest manifestations of Croat populism were rather distinct from later expressions of the phenomenon. The case that has been made here is that agrarian populism, as represented by the Croat Peasant Party, was democratic in form and generally progressive, even though the party became more monolithic and internally autocratic over time. Agrarian populism in Croatia and elsewhere in the Balkans was a movement of radical change that sought not merely to defend peasant social interests but to give that group a voice in politics. Later manifestations of populism turned almost entirely on the national question in Yugoslavia and sought to exploit nationality problems for the sake of Croatian statehood. The other two variants discussed in this essay, the interwar Croat radical right and Tujman's HDZ, were authoritarian and semi-authoritarian movements, respectively, although the latter won repeated electoral victories in the 1990s.

What the Croatian case suggests is that populism should not be regarded as an ideology, as it has over time encompassed movements from the democratic left to the far right. In this regard, populism in Croatia has been ideologically inconsistent. Radić and Pavelić were certainly ideological opposites, the former a peasant democrat and the latter a fascist demagogue, but both were populists in their own ways. Apart from their common interest in Croatian statehood, however, there was very little ideological unity between them. Similarly, and as the foregoing discussion has sought to demonstrate, neither the left nor the right can claim ownership of the populist phenomenon. One might be tempted to conclude that, in the Croatian case, populism was a phenomenon of the right since the examples discussed all shared a nationalist nexus. However, Radić belonged to the democratic left, Pavelić to the fascist Right, and Tujman began on the Communist left and migrated to the semi-authoritarian right.

What unites the three cases under consideration here is their assault on existing political structures and elites, and their common desire either to reform or dislodge those structures. As part of that assault, there was an unvarying and unending appeal to "the people" as part of a strategy of mass mobilization. In this sense, the history of Croat populism appears to confirm Margaret Canovan's definition of populism as a phenomenon rooted in an appeal to the people against established structures of power and the dominant values of society. The people (*narod*) here are understood to be a monolithic body and their interests are juxtaposed to those of the political elite. The Croatian case would also appear to confirm Glenn Bowman's view that the construction of popular identity lies at the core of populist politics. In other words, the appeal to the people against both structures of power and the values of a society requires that populists operate on an "Us versus Them" dichotomy which necessarily requires the delineation of identities.<sup>28</sup> Identities may be crystallized within a populist framework, whether it is peasant against the urban elite, Croat against Serb and so on. What has facilitated the emergence of populism in the Croatian case is the repeated failure of existing political and social institutions (Austria-Hungary, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and the discrediting of and

disillusionment with ruling political elites (several “bourgeois” parties, the Croat Peasant Party and then the League of Communists of Croatia/Yugoslavia, respectively). This has all been accompanied by significant and often violent economic, cultural, and societal shifts. In the Croatian context the existence of internal and external “others,” namely, the Serb minority and Serbian political establishment in Belgrade, served increasingly as rallying points for populists. Since the end of the Croatian war in 1995, however, populists have increasingly turned to the alleged threat to national values posed by the EU and other supranational institutions. Populist rhetoric characterized these “others” as threats to the national community, “the people” and its incipient national state. From Radić to Tujman, populism in Croatia has represented an assault on established configurations of power and the status quo. While it may be tempting to view populism in the Balkans as a legacy of Communism or problematic transition to democracy, the phenomenon clearly has much deeper historical roots.

## Notes

- 1 See Margaret Canovan, *The People* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005), 66.
- 2 On modernization in the Balkans, see John Lampe, *Balkans into Southeastern Europe: A Century of War and Transition* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–10; Diana Mishkova, “Modernization and Political Elites in the Balkans, 1870–1914,” *Center for Austrian Studies Working Papers* (1997); Victor Roudometof, “The Social Origins of Balkan Politics: Nationalism, Underdevelopment, and the Nation-State in Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, 1880–1920,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11: 3 (2000), 144–63; Roumen Daskalov, “Ideas About, and Reactions to Modernization in the Balkans,” *East European Quarterly* 31: 2 (1997), 161–71; and Mark Biondich, *The Balkans: Revolution, War, and Political Violence since 1878* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 50–63.
- 3 On peasant movements and populism in Eastern Europe, see Ghita Ionescu, “Eastern Europe,” in G. Ionescu and E. Gellner (eds.), *Populism: Its Meanings and National Characteristics* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969), 62–96.
- 4 The party’s nomenclature changed several times. It was known originally as the “Croat People’s Peasant Party” (with the Croatian acronym HPSS), and then from 1920 to 1925 as the “Croat Republican Peasant Party” (HRSS) and then simply as the “Croat Peasant Party” (HSS) after 1925. For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to it throughout as the “Croat Peasant Party.” On the HSS, see Mark Biondich, *Stjepan Radić, the Croat Peasant Party and the Politics of Mass Mobilization, 1904–1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).
- 5 Daskalov, “Ideas About, and Reactions to Modernization in the Balkans,” 161–71.
- 6 The standard work on Maček is still Ljubo Boban, *Maček i politika HSS, 1928–1941: Iz povijesti hrvatskog pitanja*, 2 vols. (Zagreb: Liber, 1974). For other relevant works, see his autobiography, Vladko Maček, *In the Struggle for Freedom*, eds. Elizabeth and Stjepan Gaži (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1957), and the translated version, *Memoari* (Zagreb: Hrvatska seljačka stranka, 1992).
- 7 On the Ustaša movement, see the relevant sections of Jozo Tomasevich, *War and Revolution in Yugoslavia, 1941–1945: Occupation and Collaboration* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); and, Bogdan Krizman’s multiple works, *Ante Pavelić i*

- ustaše (Zagreb: Globus, 1978), *Pavelić između Hitlera i Mussolinija* (Zagreb: Globus, 1980), and *Ustaše i Treći Reich*, 2 vols. (Zagreb: Globus, 1982).
- 8 On interwar Yugoslavia and the national question, see Ivo Banac, *The National Question in Yugoslavia: Origins History, Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984); and the relevant sections of John Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History: Twice There was a Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
  - 9 On the different political currents in Yugoslavia during the dictatorship, see Todor Stojkov, *Opozicija u vreme šestojanuarske diktature, 1929–1935* (Belgrade: Institut za savremenu istoriju, 1969).
  - 10 Aleksa Djilas, *The Contested Country: Yugoslav Unity and Communist Revolution, 1919–1953* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 131.
  - 11 On the *Sporazum*, see Ljubo Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček* (Belgrade: Institut društvenih nauka, 1965).
  - 12 Boban, *Sporazum Cvetković-Maček*, 266.
  - 13 “Mi nismo Srbohrvati!,” *Hrvatski narod* (Zagreb), July 14, 1939, 2. For further discussion of the right’s attack on Maček, see Mark Biondich, “Vladko Maček and the Croat Political Right, 1928–1941,” *Contemporary European History* 16: 2 (May 2007), 203–13.
  - 14 “Osjećaj političke realnosti,” *Hrvatski narod*, June 30, 1939, 1.
  - 15 Hrvroje Hrvatinić, “Mačekova ‘umjetna borba’” *Nezavisna Hrvatska Država*, December 10, 1938, 1.
  - 16 “Hrvatska borba i hrvatska politika,” *Nezavisna Hrvatska Država*, March 18, 1939, 8.
  - 17 “Još jedan ustaški proglaš hrv. narodu!,” *Nezavisna Hrvatska Država*, April 22, 1939, 8; and Mile Budak, “Zdravlja, zdravlja, gospodine!,” *Hrvatski narod*, February 17, 1939, 1.
  - 18 Ivo Rojnica, *Susreti i doivljaji, 1938–1945* (Munich, 1969), 28.
  - 19 Mato Jagatić, “Značajeva nam treba,” *Hrvatski narod*, March 31, 1939, 1.
  - 20 See Vjeran Pavlaković, “Vladko Maček, the Croat Peasant Party and the Spanish Civil War,” *Contemporary European History* 16: 2 (May 2007), 233–46; and his “Matija Gubec Goes to Spain: Symbols and Ideology in Croatia, 1936–1939,” *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17: 4 (2004), 727–55.
  - 21 On the federal structure as a flexible balance of power among the constituent republics after 1962, see Sabrina P. Ramet, *Nationalism and Federalism in Yugoslavia, 1962–1991*, 2nd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
  - 22 Dejan Jović, “Yugoslavism and Yugoslav Communism: From Tito to Kardelj,” in Dejan Djokić (ed.), *Yugoslavism: Histories of a Failed Idea, 1918–1992* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), 168.
  - 23 See Jill Irvine, “The Croatian Spring and the Dissolution of Yugoslavia,” in L. J. Cohen and J. Dragović-Soso (eds.), *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia’s Disintegration* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2007), 149–78.
  - 24 On the post-Communist transition in Croatia, see Paula M. Pickering and Mark Baskin, “What is to be done? Succession from the League of Communists of Croatia,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41 (2008), 521–40; Garth Massey, Randy Hodson, and Duško Sekulić, “Nationalism, Liberalism and Liberal Nationalism in Post-war Croatia,” *Nations and Nationalism* 9: 1 (2003), 55–82; and Dejan Jović and Christopher K. Lamont, “Introduction: Croatia after Tudjman: Encounters with the Consequences of Conflict and Authoritarianism,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 62: 10 (2010), 1609–20.
  - 25 Goran Čular, “Political Development in Croatia 1990–2000: Fast Transition—Postponed Consolidation,” *Politička misao* 37: 5 (2000), 30–46.

- 26 Maple Razsa and Nicole Lindstrom, "Balkan Is Beautiful: Balkanism in the Political Discourse of Tudjman's Croatia," *East European Politics and Societies* 18: 4 (November 2004), 628–50.
- 27 Vjeran Pavlaković, "Croatia, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, and General Gotovina as a Political Symbol," *Europe-Asia Studies* 62: 10 (2010), 1707–40.
- 28 Glenn Bowman, "Constitutive Violence and the Nationalist Imaginary: The Making of 'The People' in Palestine and 'Former Yugoslavia,'" in Francisco Panizza (ed.), *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy* (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 118–43.