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Was Tito's Yugoslavia totalitarian?

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ABSTRACT

State authorities in Croatia and Slovenia have recently indiscriminately designated Tito's Yugoslavia as totalitarian without reservations. Neither of these authorities referred to any systematic considerations of totalitarianism, nor did they analyze the manner of the alleged system's presence and its time limits. The current paper indicates that, from the middle of the 60s, millions of copies of religious newspapers were published and economic enterprises operated beyond the state command economy. In addition, the republics were largely autonomous players and catered for their own interests. Although Tito's cult was promoted, his power was limited by the federal nature of the state. Neither any other elements of totalitarianism could be found.

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1. Introduction

The state of Yugoslavia was first established as a result of events at the end of World War I, only to be dismembered during World War II; reestablished by Tito's Communist Partisan movement during the same war and then to remain a communist/socialist state until 1990/91, when it was finally dissolved (Dedijer et al., 1972; Ramet, 2006).

The integration, functioning and dissolution of Yugoslavia are issues producing very different scholarly assessment. For example, whereas Wachtel and Bennett (2009, 13) pay great respect to the personality of Tito, attributing the survival of the state "largely to [his] adeptness", Meier (1999, 2) considers his style as something demonstrating "his experience working in the Comintern", which was, of course, known for blind organizational subjugation and ruthlessness. Such ambiguity is to be expected, since the internal disputes about Yugoslavia, as well as the enduring disagreements about its demise, are many. At this point we shall limit ourselves to the opinion expressed by Jović (2009), who considers "the Serbian question" to be the dominant one during this state, in contrast to the first Yugoslavia, when it was "the Croatian question". These questions reflect some of the basic tensions, disturbances and imbalances, which are beyond the scope of the current paper.¹

The main aim of the current study is limited to the assessment of Yugoslavia's political regime. Specifically, the current study taps into the issue of whether "second," that is, post-World War II Yugoslavia was a totalitarian state. Namely, in the lands of the former Yugoslavia the use of the term "totalitarian" is frequent in public speech, but interestingly, only in two cases has official denotation been made by competent authorities in identifying the nature of government in the period 1945–1990. The first can be traced to 2006, when the Croatian Parliament adopted a declaration on "the condemnation of crimes committed during the totalitarian communist system in Croatia, 1945–1990" (Narodne Novine, 2006).² The second

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¹ For more in-depth analysis one may consult, for example, Klanjšek and Flere (2011).

² This Declaration invokes the Declaration adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe of 1996 on the same issue, where totalitarianism is primarily designated by "hyper-centralism", a quality which certainly does not pertain to Yugoslavia (Parliamentary Assembly: Resolution, 1096, 1996).

occurs in the 2011 ruling of the Constitutional Court of Slovenia. It annulled a decision by the Ljubljana Municipality, which wanted to name a road under construction after the Josip Broz Tito. In the judgment, the Court mentioned “Tito’s symbolic meaning” associated with “the post-war totalitarian communist regime”, and affirmed that “Tito symbolizes the totalitarian regime” ([Ustavno Sodišče RS: U-I-109/10, 2011](#)). In addition, the Slovenian Court also designated the entire period “totalitarian”, with no substantive or temporal reservations.

In sum, the intention of the current paper is not to assess the political order of Yugoslavia in the period 1945–1990 in entirety, even less to justify it. The sole aim is to provide insight into whether the designation “totalitarian” is appropriate for Yugoslavia as ruled by Tito and the order set up under him in this period. To do this, the concept of totalitarianism should first be clearly explained.

2. Totalitarianism

In political science the notion of totalitarianism is said to have been introduced by [Friedrich and Brzezinski \(1956\)](#) in their famous book *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*. The authors point out the following elements characteristic of totalitarian regime: an official ideology considered “chiliastic”; a hierarchically organized mass party led by a dictator; a terrorist police force; a monopoly on armed combat forces; a monopoly on mass media; and central control of the economy by state planning (1956, 9–10). Many authors find this definition to be the most authoritative ([Heywood, 2007](#), 73–74; [Apter, 1996](#); [Holmes, 2001](#)), although there are other definitions that were constructed with a particular view to the long existence of Soviet-type Communism, with the goal of accounting for the changes and variations that existed in various non-democratic systems across the globe. An important one was built by [Kassof \(1964\)](#), who, when speaking about totalitarianism, writes of an “administered society”, “characterized by a growing size and importance of an elite party and state bureaucracy” (1964, 599) that “operates by and large without resorting to those elements of gross irrationality (in particular the large scale and often self-defeating use of psychological terror and physical coercion)” ([Kassof, 1964](#), 559).

Although the former is in line with Friderich and Brzezinski’s definition (the idea of a single state and apparatus vs. the mass), the latter introduces an important element which bifurcates the concept of totalitarianism. In essence, [Kassof \(1964, 561\)](#) introduces a distinction between “irrational” and “rational” totalitarianism. This can also be discerned when he notes that, although the pressure may have diminished as “substantial liberalization has taken place” (under Krushchev), this is seen only as “a tactical regrouping on the march from a relatively primitive to a far more advanced variety of twentieth-century totalitarianism” ([Kassof, 1964](#), 575). In other words, in his effort to account for a change in the system, Kassof introduces the distinction between “primitive” and “advanced” totalitarianism, where the difference should be understood in the context of the functionalization and streamlining of totalitarianism, where counterproductive elements are eliminated only to make the machine more operational and efficient, in comparison to the immediate post-revolution “irrationalities”.

This argument is interesting in relation to a point made by [Friedrich and Brzezinski \(1956\)](#) and others ([Kirkpatrick, 1979](#)), who consider communist systems as phenomena impervious to reform. Specifically, they argue that totalitarian systems cannot be transformed into more rationalized ones, even less into democratic or liberal ones; they can only become increasingly “total” ([Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956](#), 293–303). However, Kassof’s writing does imply that this change is possible, but that this process of “substantial liberalization” should be understood only in the context of making the system more totalitarian.

We would argue that such conceptualization produces numerous difficulties, the main one being the de-solidification of the concept of totalitarianism, which renders the term difficult to use. Although such endeavors are common in the social sciences, they often instigate discussion that adds little value to the explanation of particular social phenomena (since they revolve around the issue of “who meant what”). In addition, if we take, for example, Kassof’s rationale and apply it to the concept of democracy, we might end by arguing that the potential change that limits the civic liberties should be understood as something that strengthens democratic rule (since liberalization would need to be understood – idiosyncratically – as something that strengthens totalitarianism). Bearing this in mind, the current study will try to avoid such issues by focusing on a more straightforward definition of totalitarianism: the one introduced by [Friedrich and Brzezinski \(1956\)](#).

3. Yugoslavia – a totalitarian state?

There can be no doubt that the triumphant Yugoslav communists in 1945 had effectively begun to introduce in Yugoslavia a system with key totalitarian features. Such an intent pursues from the following: (1) doing away with the multi-party system and particularly with political opposition ([Koščunica and Čavoški, 1983](#)), and the establishment of the rule of a vanguard party; (2) mass extra-judicial executions immediately after the war (although this was not unique to Yugoslavia but significantly surpassed the incidence in France, for example ([Judt, 2007](#)), becoming even a kind of mass intimidation), as the first step in the introduction of a potent political police; (3) organizing the economy by doing away with private ownership in agriculture with catastrophic consequences ([Borak, 2002](#)); (4) control of mass media ([Koščunica and Čavoški, 1983](#)); (5) the establishment of armed forces subordinate to the Party; and (6) an official communist ideology seen as redemptive or “chiliastic”, which had a monopoly position in public life ([Jančar, 1998](#); [Cvetković, 2011](#); [Rodić, 1995](#)).

Nevertheless, the crucial question is whether the political order in Yugoslavia was totalitarian in its entirety and throughout its existence (1945–1990)?

3.1. Political order and political police

Defining the nature of a political order is always a tricky issue, since one cannot judge only by external factors, that is, by formal definitions of institutions. Thus, institutions may conceal the true power relations and political instruments. In political science, institutions are often the point of departure for analysis. This is clearly indicated in *International Encyclopedia*, where the following is stated: "Without institutions there could be no organized politics. In the absence of institutions there would be no organization at all ... [it would be] a Hobbesian hell" (Steinmo, 2001, in Smelser and Baltes, 2005, 7554–7555). Thus, institutions, in the elementary sense, with rules of established organizations, are a prerequisite for all politics.

3.1.1. Political order

The institutional representation of nationalities and republics in the federal government can basically be observed for the entire extent of Yugoslavia's existence after World War II. Even AVNOJ³ in 1943 declared that Yugoslavia would be a federal state. The six republics were enumerated in its declaration at that session in the Bosnian woods, in the midst of warfare (two autonomous units were added in 1946, partly supplementing the picture). Furthermore, this representation of nationalities and republics would later become an official principle (Constitution of SFRY, 1963).

This multi-national reality, with differently perceived economic interests, soon produced conflicts that lasted until the dissolution. As early as 1962, at a session of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia Executive, Tito commented on the discourse (promoting the interests of individual republics) at sessions of the federal government, where economic measures were adopted and the boycott of a federal parliamentary session was staged by representatives of one republic (Slovenia). On this occasion, Tito said: "What kind of discussions are these! One can ask whether this state is able to survive, without dissolving" (Zečević, 1998: 32).

This sheds some light upon both the integration of Yugoslavia at the time and the relations within the ruling elite, where evidently "each pulled in favor of his own republic", although not before the public. To put it differently, Tito's words cannot be considered those of a totalitarian dictator, inspired by an ideologically "chiliastic" mission, but the words of a concerned political leader. Consequently, such relations within the political elite are not the relations depicted by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956, 19–20), who wrote of passive, "henchman" like, implementers of the dictator's orders. Moreover, we are speaking of 1962, a full decade before the definitive institutional arrangement of Tito's Yugoslavia and the 1974 Constitution, with which the country would await the founder's death. Thus, even in 1962, a crisis of "total control" is discernible, one that will not go away until the dissolution, even though the citizens might not have been aware of it.

Next, although the 1963 Constitution did not strengthen the republics (this was done later),⁴ some sort of strengthening did come about during attempts at economic reform in the 60s, where the republics became autonomous subjects, and acquired a deeper sense of their interests and of pursuing them, still within a redistributive economy. Officially, the nature of the federation was changed by Constitutional amendments of 1971, where the federation was styled more as a voluntary association, a union of states, reaching decisions on all issues by way of "agreement" (although this was not majoritarian decision-making). The federal head of state became a collective one, whereas Tito's position and competences remained intact, and the cult of his personality was inflated. This pleased the "old man", masking the true nature of affairs and preparing for his natural demise (Simić, 2006; Matunović, 1997).

Inside the League of Communists, as well as within state bodies, there was a complex composition, with features of polyarchy⁵ in the sense of legitimate defense of one's interests, making this the substance of the political process (Bertsch, 1977; Burg, 1984). This complexity of decision-making can be demonstrated by the mode of composing political bodies at the federal level. The "totalitarian dictator" did not appoint the members of federal and republics bodies; instead, it was a long process of achieving "agreement", harmonization, and manipulation. In his candid testimony, at the beginning of the 70s, S. Doronjski speaks of months-long "consultations" to appoint federal functionaries from Vojvodina, where members of the province, republic and federal elite took part, as well as Tito (Končar and Boarov, 2011).⁶

We stop short of advancing the idea that it was a full-fledged polyarchy; however, a situation of complex decision-making with a multiplicity of actors could definitely be observed. In other words, there was no blind, unconditional and unquestioning following of the leader by the basic actors (republics and provinces). Strong defense of particularistic interests took place in a masked, Aesopian manner. True, there was no political opposition in the classic sense (Ionescu and Madariaga, 1968), but the republics often opposed each other and "coalesced", all this masked by an ideological unity newspeak.

³ AVNOJ (Anti-Fascist Council of National Liberation of Yugoslavia) was a Communist-sponsored and staged 'parliament' of Yugoslavia, which held its second session in 1943 in Jajce, Bosnia.

⁴ The most notable change came in the 1974 Constitution, where republics were defined as "states" and equipped with individual ministries for foreign and defense affairs.

⁵ "Every member of the organization performs the acts we assume to constitute an expression of preference among the scheduled alternatives" (Dahl, 1972, 84).

⁶ However, Doronjski does not mention that the entire elite was awaiting the leader's death (Končar and Boarov, 2011).

Furthermore, [Jović \(2009, 207\)](#) writes that the “principle of consent”⁷, in official use as of 1971, meant that a minority of republics and provinces could veto any decision.⁸

In sum, these arrangements do not fall neatly within the concept of [Friedrich and Brzezinski \(1956, 48\)](#), who assert that in totalitarian systems constitutions have primarily “propaganda value”. In order to avert open conflict between republics (and provinces), a peculiar type of decentralization came about, optimistically seen by its framers as cooperative federalism. However, this federalist decision making was dependent on the consent of each republic and province, making the process of agreement achievement ever more difficult and distant in a situation where the economy was not producing any surpluses and where the leading republics and provinces were aware of the distribution process. The distributive nature of the economy had conflict built in – particularly in the case of foreign assistance, the value of currency, credit and fiscal policy. This was a pluralistic manner of decision making, with entities bitterly fighting for their perceived interests and shares in the distributive economy. The decision-making was to be harmonized by the single Party, but it did not operate as such. This was unity in appearance only, as each republican-province leadership was guided only to enhance its particular interests. This was institutionally completed by all of the republics having their own national banks, ministries of foreign affairs and Territorial Army units under republican command (to be harmonized at the federal level).

3.1.2. Political police

For the operation of a totalitarian system, having a political police force is of crucial importance. As [Friedrich and Brzezinski \(1956, 115\)](#) write, the activity and purges within the secret police could only reinforce and reassert the central power.

At the end of World War II, People's Defense Corps of Yugoslavia (*Korpus narodne obrambe Jugoslavije* or KNOJ) and The Department of National Security (*Odjeljenje za zaštitu naroda* or OZNA) were established in Yugoslavia, soon to be replaced by State Security Service or UDBA. They carried out tasks typical of political police in a totalitarian system ([Jančar, 1998](#); [Cvetković, 2011](#)). As indicated by [Ramat \(2006\)](#), this was especially true for the “first phase” (1945–1953), when oppositionists were locked up or even eliminated when a severe suppression of the independent press occurred, and when harsh measures were put in place to force through a program of agricultural collectivization. Nevertheless, a clear turnaround came later. In 1966, with the fall of A. Ranković, the undisputed head of the Yugoslavian political police, owing to alleged abuses, the reorganization was not limited to technical features. Specifically, the reorganization made it impossible for a political police force to operate by mechanisms typical of totalitarian systems.

The substance of the changes from 1966 onward was to establish six separate republic secret police forces, supplemented by a 7th, the federal one, which was to organize cooperation.⁹ For the first time, these issues were then legally, statutorily governed at the republican level. For example, in Slovenia, in 1967, the Act on Internal Affairs was adopted, without invoking any previous republican or federal regulations. It also governed state security, including the implementation of federal statutes by the republican police. According to this law, the organization of internal affairs began and ended at the republican level, with no mention of cooperation with other republics, or with federal authorities. It shifted responsibility toward the republics' assemblies. This does not mean that parliamentary control was efficacious, but it does indicate that the organizational framework lay at the republican level. This arrangement went for the other republics as well and for the provinces after 1971.

It may also be mentioned that in 1966–1967, the network of spying was radically diminished, as well as the number of files maintained on individuals. In Slovenia, the volume of files decreased, for example, from 270,000–1000 m in length and allegedly retained only those files indicating “enemy activity” ([Cvetković, 2011, 115](#)). Criminal procedure came within the bounds of due process, although further limitation on police powers was wished by [Fisk \(1971, 291, 297\)](#).

This does not mean that there were no further offences against international human rights standards; nevertheless, it was a new and different situation, since the political police was restrained, if in no other way, by fragmentation¹⁰, and there was no leader of the secret police who could become as unquestioned and notorious as Ranković. Furthermore, the conditions did not exist for the seven services to cooperate by harmonization.¹¹

⁷ [Jović \(2009, 104\)](#), describing the situation in the 70s, writes: “Serbian leaders were surprisingly negative toward Tito's pragmatic politics, adhering to principles as they understood them … they were not soft negotiators” … they had been very firm in not accepting Kosovo as the seventh republic”.

⁸ The mode of opposition and coalescing became evident to the public only after a new balance was attained in the federal presidency, when Milošović, by amending the Serbian constitution, appointed members of the federal presidency representing the 2 provinces by the Serbian parliament (instead of by the provincial parliaments). This amounted to a constitutional coup d'état. The transcripts of the sessions of the presidency from the first quarter of 1991 make the opposition and coalescing clear and manifest ([Nikolić and Petrović, 2011](#)), whereas previous ones were not made open, although they certainly did exist regarding day to day economic decision making.

⁹ To further maintain his access to security information, Tito resorted to the military and its intelligence service (KOS), which seems to have strengthened ([Matunović, 1997](#)).

¹⁰ This fragmentation could be observed in the context of UDBA killings of Croatian nationalists abroad. These were carried out by the Croatian republic UDBA (instance Đureković, where Perković is prosecuted at the beginning of 2014), indicating independence of republic UDBAs, bringing about their in-fighting and interference in other entities, something not typical of totalitarianism. Possibly, all this is more typical of decay of the system than of its operational functionality. Thus, we were not dealing with a single secret police structure, typical of totalitarianism, but with a plurality, amongst which competition and in-fighting were common.

¹¹ The lack of cooperation and coordination may be discerned in the last bold “active measure” by UDBA, a bombing in Austria (1982) that was carried out by the Slovenian UDBA and no federal instructions or control were mentioned ([Kavčič, 1988, 476–477](#)), even though Austrian authorities supposed to the contrary ([Mekina, 2011](#)). Ivan Cvitković, former secretary of the League of Communists of Bosnia and Herzegovina remembers the Bosnian leadership in the 80s to have officially protested against the Serbian secret service (UDBA) carrying out and circulating an “analysis” on interethnic relations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that is, operating outside its area of jurisdiction (personal communication).

All this is in complete contradiction of Friedrich and Brzezinski's description of the political police and its varieties within totalitarianism.¹²

3.2. The economy

As the nature of the economy was also not the same for the entire period 1945–1990 (Horvat, 1976), the comprehension of the essence of the economy in Tito's Yugoslavia is again quite complex, especially with respect to who managed economic entities, who was their formal leader and who the substantive master. One cannot believe the official doctrine on workers' self-management,¹³ although it did contain more than a grain of truth regarding the substance of management (Županov, 1977). As indicated by Vetta (2009), the whole system, although "it did not derive from a grassroots initiative but was more a revolution from above" (80), could be seen as a step toward participatory democracy, as "it was the means to shift the locus of bargaining over wages and jobs to the level of the firm or lower" (Woodward, 1995, 329).

Not surprisingly, efforts to implement the idea that came close to "market socialism" (Klanjšek, 2013) spawned great interest among various scholars. The large number of Western economists studying the Yugoslav economy was impressive, as well as the number of their publications, even as early as the 60s (Chowdhury et al., 1990; Dirlam and Plummer, 1972; Estrin et al., 1988; Gregory and Stuart, 1985; Marschak, 1968; Milenkovich, 1971; Tyson, 1977; Ward, 1968; Wechtel, 1972.). Although none was able to discern a clear model and none affirmed the economy to be effective, the autonomy of the economic entities was indicated by Rusinow (1967, 21) who wrote that, regarding the economy, the Yugoslav state "could not reasonably be called a totalitarian one". In addition, such exposure, that is, to be studied by independent foreign investigators, is in itself contrary to the nature of the totalitarian economy. As noted by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956, 198), in a totalitarian state, economic statistical data are always incomparable, doctored, and available only to the top officials.

In Yugoslavia, economic entities (enterprises) were structured, had autonomous competences and even in the 60s did not operate in the manner typical of totalitarian economies (on the basis of orders from a central bureaucratic instruction as to production and exchange, without influence from the money economy). There were no "quotas" imposed upon enterprises in order to exchange them for other commodities by way of planned economic transactions (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956, 203). Truly, as of the 1960s, there were no attempts to impose a planned economy. True state economic control was also lacking, bringing about an unexpected recession in 1961–1962, despite the "directives" of the 1961–1965 "plan" and of the current economic policy (Borak, 2002, 59). This plan was abandoned, and all further ones were "indicative" in nature (Borak, 2002, 49). They also happened to be "late" in adoption (Borak, 2002, 53), and even "based on social compacts" inter-republic/province agreements (Borak, 2002, 58). In the absence of state control, other mechanisms operated in governing the economy, including market, and welfare (Županov, 1977).

In the Yugoslav economy, both federal and republican authorities had competences, particularly over investments. However, the General Investment Fund, a non-market institution of distribution, was abolished in 1963, and financing of underdeveloped areas remained under federal competence. With reference to a late moment in the history of Yugoslavia, the British economist Flakierski (1989) even opined that, at the beginning of the 1980s, the economic functions of the federation were too minor for a sound economy.¹⁴ In other words, although the economic system lacked efficacy (Borak, 2002), its complexity and differentiation were features alien to totalitarianism to a large extent, since totalitarian power is by definition concentrated in one location, at the central level.

3.3. Culture and religion

The concept of a totalitarian state as indicated by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956) presupposes that the entirety of cultural life, education and particularly the media are subjugated to an official "chiliastic" ideal of a future society that would also allow for all political and repressive instruments to be applied.

In Yugoslavia, there certainly was such an idea. On the one hand, there was the idea of communism that was increasingly supplemented by "socialist self-management", and on the other, there was an idea of "non-alignment".¹⁵ However, at issue is whether these ideas were as monolithic and strong as to permeate all of the education and culture throughout the period.

Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956, 77) assert that in the Soviet Union the proletariat replaced the position held by the nation in democratic societies. Although Tito never ceased to speak of "brotherhood and unity" among nationalities, one can discern

¹² On the state of cooperation and harmony among republics, it is indicative that their elites' favorite topics of discourse were as follows: computing the representation of their own cadres in the federal vs. other units and studying the economy from the point of view of 'exploitation' of their own republics (Zukin, 1987).

¹³ Self-management, envisioned by Milovan Djilas, Edvard Kardelj and Boris Kidrič, could be seen as a system that tried to be something in between centralized socialist planning and the market economy. It rested on the enterprise as its fundamental unit in which workers, had (at least formally) the right to deliberate and vote on basically all important issues, including business plans, wages, and others (Horvat, 1976; Kardelj, 1980).

¹⁴ Intentionally, we do not invoke authors publishing in the former Yugoslavia.

¹⁵ The "Non-Aligned Movement" was founded in Belgrade in 1961 and included a group of states that considered themselves not aligned formally with or against any major power bloc.

in the official ideological texts that proletariat had not replaced nationality. Reading official ideological texts, one can find that “alleged internationalism” is in fact a “counterfeit vanguardism” ([Resolution of the Eighth Congress of the LCY](#)), or that inside Yugoslavia “respect for nationalities sovereignty and parity” is “a fundamental condition” ... “for cooperation among republics”¹⁶ ([Ninth Congress of the LCY](#)), which we can also read as recognition of the lack of such cooperation. Here, it should be stressed that the point of departure was the absence of Yugoslav essentialism, and of originality in the federal state, which would necessarily be present in a totalitarian version of ideology ([Jović, 2009](#)).

Truly, it cannot be denied that an ideological monopoly existed and that differences and deviating opinions were often expressed in an Aesopian way, without express renunciation of the “Marxist truth”. However, cultural life in the country, especially after the 60s, exhibited great variety and pluralism. In Slovenian theatres, vanguard Western dramatists, such as Ionesco, Miller, Camus, Osborne and Albee, were staged on a regular basis ([Poniž, 2007](#)), while in Belgrade a theatre (Atelje 212) operated that was devoted to vanguard trends. Books containing concepts alien to Communism were published, including those by Camus, Sartre, Schumpeter and even [Marcuse \(1968\)](#), who denied the role alleged by the working class, according to communist dogma.

In the case of the press, content analysis would reveal whether a media monopoly existed, but such an analysis would be very demanding, particularly considering the Aesopian manner of expressing republic-province distinctions in manifesting identity, interest and animosity, all of which pretended to be in line with Marxist doctrine phraseology. Thus, we will deal with the matter from a somewhat more indicative point of view - from the perspective of religious communities/freedom. Namely, for the determination of totalitarianism, the attitude toward religious communities is of utmost relevance, since totalitarian ideology excludes all other views containing absolute values as well as the organizations which pursue from such views. Although Yugoslavia was not a model of respecting human rights, the question is whether it was totalitarian.

Various sources ([Roter, 1976](#); [Alexander, 2008](#)) indicate that although the repression was truly acute until the 1950s, during which major groups lost most of their properties, a vigorous range of religious activities still took place. True, the regime suppressed all activities outside the spiritual, particularly any church/religious group intervention with public, let alone political nature, causing dissatisfaction among the main religious group clergy. Interestingly, [Alexander \(2008\)](#), one of the most knowledgeable students of the issue, does not critique this position and behavior by the regime, since “religion and nationalism were profoundly identified... each of these concepts had been affected and in their most extreme forms distorted by the other...” “the communists were determined to change this by enforcing a fundamental separation of church and state” (1979/2008, 121). She uses no harsh words for the regime, although she does note that the activities of religious groups were limited.

The Yugoslav federal, republic and provincial legislation from the 70s allowed registration of religious communities without substantive limitations. The number of religious communities grew, which is something that is contrary to totalitarianism. With respect to the religious press, which was the medium of greatest relevance at the time, it is possible to document 65 newspapers with a total of 3,591,000 copies being printed in 1966 ([Statistički bilten, 1967](#)), while in 1987 “religious societies, churches and associations” issued a total of 99 newspapers, with a circulation of over 3,700,000 copies ([Statistički bilten, 1988](#)). This does not necessarily mean that all religious press could be found at state retail press vendors, but postal circulation was not known to have been disrupted.

This indicates that not only could a variety of religious press be found (as would be expected in a multi-confessional country), but that even the citizenry had considerable choice in the middle of the communist period, well before the signs of the breakdown became visible. The activity of religious entities in the media arena is thus quite at odds with what [Friedrich and Brzezinski \(1956, 107\)](#) write on the issue, since Yugoslavian proponents of the most communism-incompatible worldview had significant opportunities for media activity, and made abundant use of them. Of course, it is again important to note that this was not the case for the entire period of Tito’s rule.¹⁷

In sum, it seems inapt to speak of an ideologically monolithic media and cultural block, as would be typical of totalitarianism. The content of the press may have been limited on politically sensitive issues, but choice was available to the readership with variety, in full contrast to the Soviet Union, where, for example, until 1990 only the *Journal of the Moscow Orthodox Patriarchate* was available.

3.4. Armed forces

During World War II, the Communist partisans founded the Yugoslav People’s Army ([Dedijer et al., 1972](#)) as part of the Communist anti-fascist armed effort and in the presence of a civil war and a commitment to assume power. At the end, it developed into a totalitarian model. However, in 1968, and even earlier, republican armed forces began to be established in the form of “territorial defense” ([Bubanj, 1972](#)). Thus, the republics were not without their own institutionalized armed forces. This is again an indication of a model that contradicts what is advanced by [Friedrich and Brzezinski \(1956, 9–10\)](#).

¹⁶ Calling upon cooperation between republics indicates a permanent crisis in their relations.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, one should not think Tito’s regime allowed this out of pure favoring of worldview pluralism. On the one hand, the major religious groups accessed media outlets only with great effort (mainly before 1960); on the other hand, Protestant groups, in particular, availed themselves of the use of the press. The communist regime hoped that pluralism would weaken the major traditional religious groups ([Rodić, 1995](#)).

3.5. Other features

Other features mentioned in scholarship regarding totalitarianism may be relevant in assessing the nature of the state. Such is the issue of “purges”. Allegedly, it would have sufficed for the dictator to give the nod for the leaders in question to find themselves dismissed (Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956, 155). Today, we know that the Yugoslav system did not operate in this way, that many dismissals and depositions of leaders after the 60s were not a product of Tito’s caprice. For example, the Slovenian political leadership successfully defended Edvard Kardelj, who remained his “closest associate” and the “architect of constitutionality”. In 1962, Tito intended, in the midst of economic crisis, to dismiss Kardelj, but was unsuccessful (Matunović, 1997, 272; Pirjevec, 2011, 460).

Next, Tito’s removal of the Croatian leadership in 1971 followed unrest among Croatian youth, when the leadership lost control over events, and not because the leadership unleashed heated discussions on inter-republic and interethnic issues¹⁸ (Tripalo, 1990, 121–79).

The Serbian leadership was removed in 1972 but only after long disputes between the leadership and Tito, lasting for years. The Serbian leadership was not prepared to remove eight teachers from Belgrade University and opposed Tito on numerous issues, particularly on the issue of the former being too “soft on democracy” (Simić, 2006, 297–337; Nikezić, 2003).

Associated with the examples above is the assertion by Arendt (1961) that totalitarianism serves to fragment and atomize society, creating and maintaining a depersonalized mass but not creating “structures”. Arato (2002, 486) expresses the same thought in stating that totalitarian systems destroy institutions, while authoritarian ones rely on them. Arendt (1961, 305–479) contrasts Lenin, who worked to establish nationalities, and Stalin, who “atomized”.

In sum, Tito’s rule, although not an example of civil society development, did stimulate the development of republics and provinces, institutions and quasi-institutions, the abundance of which eventually assumed a somewhat grotesque appearance — degrees of organizations of “associated labor”, “self-management communities of interest” with their assemblies and chambers.

4. Conclusion

The current paper has tried to address the issue of whether Yugoslavia was a totalitarian state. Since it is often a matter of dispute what the terms “totalitarianism” or “totalitarian regime” mean and represent, the concept used in the study was the one advanced in the classical study by Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956) as it seemed most operationalizable, that is, it most clearly expressed the dimensionality and character of said regime. Given a concept such as “a measure of totalitarianism”, the examples and findings offered in the study indicated that qualifications expressed by the Slovenian Constitutional Court and the Croatian Parliament cannot be corroborated for the entire period of the existence of Tito’s Yugoslavia: namely, the regime’s being totalitarian without qualification, in substance and time.

The current paper indicates that as of the middle of the 60s, the republics were largely autonomous players and catered for their own interests, economic enterprises did not operate within a state command economy and millions of copies of religious newspapers were published. What is more, although Tito’s cult was promoted, his power was limited by the federal nature of the state. Of course, this does not mean that repression was nonexistent, that there were no elements of a totalitarian regime. This was especially true for the 1945–53 period. Repression was directed toward religious institutions, the imminent opponents of communism, toward political dissidents and toward a general control of the intelligentsia. Nevertheless, some of this should be seen in light of the fact that religious entities, for example, were themselves acting to split up Yugoslavia (the Catholic and the Orthodox Church were in a state of open excommunicatory conflict until the Second Vatican Council) and that some of this repression could be nominated totalitarian mainly by exterior manifestations.¹⁹

Now, if Yugoslavia wasn’t totalitarian for more than half the period in question, what type of political system was it? Since it did not claim to be continuing some revered tradition in invoking legitimacy, it is difficult to argue that the system was authoritarian. The complex nature of Yugoslavia is indicated by Linz and Stepan (1996: 366), who said, “... theorists put Yugoslavia in a different category from all other Communist systems, because they believed that worker self-management was a form of democracy ...”. Interestingly, Linz and Stepan (1966) also omitted to consider Yugoslavia, that is, the post-Yugoslav states, in a special chapter describing democratic transition, as they did for many other transition cases. We would argue that this was certainly not because the topic lacked interest, but because it was a complicated and muddled matter. Even Friedrich and Brzezinski (1956, 48) were silent on Yugoslavia, mentioning it only once marginally, relative to relations with Bulgaria in the immediate post-World War II period.

Numerous other political scientists were also aware of the peculiarity of Yugoslavia. Besides those already mentioned, Ionescu and Madariaga (1968) considered that Yugoslavia could not be classified into either of the prevalent systems in Europe at the time but formed a special class, together with Franco’s Spain. The American political scientist Fisk (1971, 292), after an extended stay in Yugoslavia, considered that it was “becoming a *Rechtsstaat*”. Even one of the most important figures in the field, Sabrina Ramet (2006) has not employed the term “totalitarian” in describing any part of the socialist era in Yugoslavia.

¹⁸ It is true any reconsideration of interethnic relations would have produced such an uncontrolled situation if not channeled - as the future would prove.

¹⁹ Although these instances were rare, the case of Vojislav Šešelj should be mentioned. He was sentenced in Bosnia for what he wrote, and much was invested in his release on the part of the civil society in formation. But Šešelj proved not to be democratic in stature but a pernicious ethno-nationalist.

We would thus argue that the Yugoslavia of Tito is almost impossible to slot into a classification of political systems. In regard to the issue of totalitarianism, it seems that Yugoslavia only came close to being a totalitarian regime in its first phase, that is, in the period from 1945 to 1953. As early as the mid-60s, however, the elements of polyarchy were present in the legitimate defense by participants of the interests of their historical regions as they comprehended them.

This said we would like to emphasize that this does not mean that Yugoslavia was democratic in any sense. In addition, what has been argued here should be understood in the context of the concept used. It may well be that, were a different, that is, toned-down, more muddled, concept to be used, the interpretation of what Yugoslavia would have been different. Nevertheless, would using a different conceptualization of totalitarianism help to explain Tito's state? Would it be possible that such a mould would better fit Yugoslavia under Tito? We do not think so. For example, even given the elements suggested by [Kassof \(1964\)](#), the issues regarding the classification of Yugoslavia would still remain. Specifically, although Tito's state did progressively exert less pressure upon its citizens (with political coercion incompatible with democratic standards of human rights occurring occasionally only), by its own measures of rationality, or by general measures of instrumental rationality, the state did not become more functional, did not come closer to being able to operate economically and politically in a viable manner, as would stem from [Kassof's \(1964\)](#) writing. In both ways the institutional policies were utopian and out of contact with reality, ever more so as time passed. In addition, the system of *social stratification*, although social disparities were always a policy issue, they turned out to be mainly a product of spontaneous forces, with education turning out to be the main variable producing distinction ([Flere, 1994](#), 120; [Popović et al., 1977](#); [Hafner Fink, 1988](#)), of *educational policy* (which always remained under the jurisdiction of republics and provinces), of *controls on industry and agriculture*, of *youth organizations* (for which it can be said at least what was said for the LCY, besides some extra-systemic initiatives springing from them, like the 1970 requests that higher education students be awarded salaries), of *literature and art*, would continue to defy easy classification of Yugoslavia. This is also true when thinking of sociology, which in the then state was typical of a plurality of positions, and often regarded by the regime with suspicion as an anti-systemic force ([Flere, 1994](#), 116–124) and not vice versa, as [Kassof \(1964\)](#) found in Russia.

Next, it should also be mentioned that our analysis was not an elaboration of the political structure of Tito's Yugoslavia; it was limited only to analyzing whether it could be considered totalitarian in the strict sense. We also did not enter into the particularities of political life in the various republics and provinces, although these were certainly relevant and substantial²⁰.

Despite these limitations, our findings point toward the fact that Yugoslavia cannot easily be compartmentalized. They also generate questions about the assertion of communist totalitarianism being non-reformable ([Kirkpatrick, 1979](#); [Friedrich and Brzezinski, 1956](#)). True, the Yugoslav case cannot be generalized, because it was not only a complex multi-ethnic system, but also a system in gradual dissolution. It is also true that Yugoslav communists "took their words seriously" regarding the voluntary and essentially contractual nature of Yugoslavia ([Jović, 2009](#)), thus also contributing to the processes of dissolution, finally and to "an interlinked failure" of many organs ([Wachtel and Bennett, 2009](#), 13).

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²⁰ At least one interesting attempt to analyze this issue was the study of political culture in some of the republics by [Bertsch and Zaninovich \(1974\)](#). In a study where data were collected in 1967–1968, the authors found that in Macedonia a traditionalist political culture prevailed, in contrast to Slovenia, where a "decentralist-competitive" one did. They also consistently found League of Communists members to be less parochial minded as to political culture (1971), in comparison to the rest of the populace studied. Differences in outlook among republics were "diluted" by "League of Communists membership" (1974, 242; [Zaninovich, 1971](#)). Thus, on the one hand, strong differences were found; on the other, Communist members appear as counter-authoritarian. Finally, as early as the 60s, Yugoslav authorities allowed such an investigation to be carried out, on a sensitive issue involving into inter-republic differences in culture and politics.

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