Town Twinning in the Cold War: Zagreb and Bologna as ‘détente from below’?

Writing about town twinning has largely concentrated on the emergence of municipal internationalism as a form of civic activism in the first half of the twentieth century. Much of the literature has concentrated on notions related to the social history of reconciliation and the creation from below of a European identity. Perhaps predictably, the largest literature developed in a Franco-German discussion of twinning since the 1960s, which looked back on the interwar period. It examined from various angles the intense twinning experiences between towns in these two countries, spawning the term ‘Locarno from below’ (after the Locarno Treaties of 1925, normalising relations between the former Entente and former Central powers) as a phrase capturing the spirit of the times.¹

More recent studies have broadened the scope of examination to understand the relation between twinning and urban planning, progressivism and various transnational networks.² A vast literature has appeared also on the connections between twinning and globalisation, neo-liberalism, municipal foreign policy or community development movements in more recent decades.³

The period between, generally associated with the Cold War, has only recently drawn interest, though usually from the perspective of Western Europe.⁴ This is in part because governments in Western Europe were fearful of Communist infiltration and prevented deepening of city relations.⁵ Of course, many forms of entanglement between East and West did develop during the Cold War, as recent histories have attested.⁶ In relation to twinning, however, Yugoslavia was unique in Europe, in that it was Communist-run and established intense twinning with Western, and later also Eastern, towns. Ejected from the nascent Soviet bloc in 1948, Yugoslavia tilted West in the early Cold War, which afforded it a plethora of links and relations in Western Europe which the other Communist-run states of Eastern Europe did not have until at least the 1970s.

The Yugoslav Communist government’s approach to city twinning can therefore provide a different angle from which to view twinning. By comparison with many of the initiatives springing up in the West, the Yugoslav approach to town twinning had little direct continuity with pre-war notions of civic activism and European identity. Rather, the initial Yugoslav Communist approach to twinning will be shown to have been informed by the overall diplomatic goal of ending Yugoslavia’s international isolation and reducing the risk of war with the Soviet bloc. For a time, therefore, Yugoslav approaches to twinning were led by top-down diplomatic initiatives. This did not change greatly with Yugoslav-Soviet rapprochement in the mid-1950s, since this development allowed for the Yugoslav Communists to try to foster East-West contacts and twinning, as a way to entangle East and West and thereby

increase their own security. Twinning thus lent itself well to Yugoslav Communist peace initiatives, and the fact that much of it was run by socialists in the West gave initiative particularly useful ideological shine, as the Yugoslav Communists were accused by the East of having forsaken Socialism.

Nonetheless, as Soviet overtures to the West failed after 1953, and the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 only confirming the worst in the eyes of many anyway anti-détente Western diplomats, Yugoslav diplomacy found it could not decisively shape inter-bloc relations. Not even Yugoslav attempts to get major twinning initiatives across the Iron Curtain bore much fruit. Thus, Yugoslav Communist interest in town twinning began to wane, discouraged further by initially poor responses and results from individual twinning initiatives. After the Cuban Missile crisis, however, ‘détente from below’ slowly emerged across Europe. Peoples and to some extent governments felt that the superpower game of brinksmanship needed to be countered. Twinning was an important aspect of this, and, in the Yugoslav case, twinning received a second lease of life. Many new twinning arrangements with cities in Western Europe took place in 1963. Italian towns slowly became the top choice for Yugoslav towns. This in large part reflected the need to mend relations with post-war Italy. The former occupier during the Second World War had contested the Yugoslav claim to Trieste and the Istrian coast after 1945. The two came close to war in 1953. The issue was only resolved with the aid of the Western powers as late as 1954, with Trieste going to Italy and much of the coast going to Yugoslavia. The deal removed a major obstacle to the re-emergence of pre-war economic ties, and Italy quickly became Yugoslavia’s top trading partner at the turn of the decade. Nonetheless, in the border areas, in which many forced and violent population transfers had occurred in wartime and in the years after the war, tensions continued to simmer. Twinning seemed a useful way to overcome these, by increasing social, cultural, sports, political and economic ties.

There was a particular twist to Yugoslav-Italian twinning initiatives. While most took place between Croatian and Italian cities, the border region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia on the Italian side continued to be run by conservative forces hostile to Yugoslavia. For the Standing Conference of Towns of Yugoslavia, a mass organisation under the umbrella of the Socialist Alliance of Working People, itself the main Communist front organisation, establishing links with Italian towns and urban federations had been a priority from the mid-1950s. Their explicit strategy to overcome hostility on the part of Italian town leaderships was to seek partnerships with municipal governments run by socialist or communist majorities. This did not always find understanding among top town leaders. Not always cognisant of scale or importance, Yugoslav town leaderships often sought to establish links with towns with superficial or symbolic similarities. For Zagreb, for instance, the preference in the UK was to twin with Birmingham and in Italy with Milan. This was not unreasonable from the traditions of twinning; second cities in different countries often made twinning arrangements. In fact, Birmingham and Milan, the second cities of the UK and Italy, eventually twinned in 1974. Yet twinning appeared elusive between Zagreb and Milan, despite cordial links being established.

Here, the story took on a specifically ‘Communist’ turn. The communist-run city of Bologna pushed for twinning with Zagreb. The Socialist Alliance leadership made it clear to the Zagreb party that Bologna representatives had pushed for twinning at an international conference in 1962. The reasons for this move still need to be researched, though it is most likely that the Bologna Communists hoped to raise the profile of their own city as a showcase for the Italian Communist Party (PCI). With Italy turning left, and the early sixties seeing a centre left government formed of the Christian Democrats and, for the first time, the Socialists, the PCI believed the situation to be propitious for further shifts to the left under popular pressure. Raising the profile of a major municipal area run by the PCI was a central part of the strategy. Moreover, on the international plane, the PCI and the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) stood side by side with Nikita Khrushchev’s relatively moderate USSR against Mao
Tse Tung’s more radical China. The Sino-Soviet split was at that time a major problem for the Communist movement internationally, and showing solidarity for Khrushchev seemed important to the Italian and Yugoslav Communists. For the first time since the Tito-Stalin split, the PCI was pushing for visible rapprochement with the LCY and the Bologna-Zagreb twinning seemed to be a move borne of this general atmosphere. Showcasing détente from below and their socio-economic models seemed to be an important way for both parties to affect favourable change at the national and international levels.

This was to some extent at least boosterism with a Communist twist. By the close of the sixties, both the Yugoslav federation of cities (SKGI) and the new Foreign Committee of the Croatian (‘IVSKVI’) parliament asked for detailed reports on town links that had mushroomed in that decade – suggestive of a relatively autonomous dynamic ‘from below’. Indeed, ‘ISKVI’ concluded that coordination between town administrations and higher bodies like the foreign ministry were inadequate. Moreover, the materials they received were immense. Croatian town links with Italian towns proved the most numerous of all twinning arrangements – with the Bologna-Zagreb link presented by both SKGI and ‘IVSKVI’ as the model town twinning. Their reports underlined the Communist nature of the administration of Bologna as an important asset. Exchanges of municipal, party and various front organisations, as well as of specialists, became intense. The programme was visibly more successful than those of others in many spheres. At the official level, the Bologna mayor and high-ranking delegations frequently came to Zagreb, while, for instance, the programme of twinning with Birmingham was apparently at risk of being discontinued for lack of substantive plans and programmes of exchange. Public reactions to the twinning also appeared more popular than those of others. The towns had begun organising “weeks of the twinned town” in each other’s towns. The Zagreb Assembly report for 1970 noted on pg. 27 that, as part of these weeks in the preceding years, just the exhibition “Zagreb – city of youth” saw exceptional attendance in Bologna. The numbers were: in Vienna, 18,700; in Brno, 15,400; Bologna, 47,000; Salzburg, 9,200; Mainz, 17,300.

That there was some interest in the ideological repercussions of such links is obvious from later reports that underlined that the Mainz authorities took a great interest in the Yugoslav self-management interest. Some interest emerged on the Italian side as well from the Communist Party’s think-tank, the Istituto Gramsci, in Bologna. Nonetheless, it seemed that in Germany, during the Brandt years, there was greater openness to the Yugoslav model than among PCI functionaries. The Italian Communists tended to be more favourable to top-down, public models, while the Yugoslavs emphasised decentralisation and workers’ control. In mutual exchanges, however, there were various forms of discussion related to ideological issues or ideological characterisations of policy exchanges. Thus for instance, in discussing pre-school education, the importance that Bologna’s experts attached to providing education to overcome class differences was flagged up in a report of a visit in the regular Bulletin set up in late 1969 on international exchanges in Zagreb (pg. 15-16). Similarly, a report on the televised opening of an important road named after Bologna and connecting the north and west of Zagreb noted several ideological issues. The presence of the Bologna mayor as children were asked to lay wreathes of flowers for fallen Italian partisans fighting on the Yugoslav side against the fascist occupiers was part of the scenario. The friendship of nations was underlined by mention of children from Bologna reading out their prize-winning school essays on Zagreb. The practical impact was noted by mentioning that exchanges of materials and staff was envisaged between the economic institutes of both cities (pg. 28-29).

Examples can also be found of presumably spontaneous forms of ideological friendship arising, albeit in other town reports. The triad of the Croatian town Karlovac, the Communist-run Italian town Alessandria, and the Czechoslovak town Hradec Králové, for instance, had a remarkable ‘weeks of
Hradec Králové’ in Alessandria during the summer of 1968. News came in of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the Yugoslav report noted that the public meeting in town transformed from a celebratory to a political event, showing solidarity with the Czechoslovaks and spontaneously showing disgust at the Soviet action.

There was, however, in the late 1960s, an increasing interest in concrete results from links. The Yugoslav economy had undergone major market reform and was seeking to compete internationally. The cited report of the Zagreb Assembly emphasised the importance of city links to this process and the need to exploit economic and other gains in concrete ways. It welcomed the currency reform, which made the dinar more convertible. It went on from calling for more entrepreneurialism to arguing the need to make partners aware of Zagreb’s needs. There had to be more than symbolic engagement, the paper argued on page 28, singling out Eastern bloc towns as examples of partners maintaining mainly the form rather than substance of links.

It is unclear how much this changed in the 1970s, though there was a clear push for more links in the Eastern bloc countries than before across Yugoslavia. Perhaps all this can be seen as the deepening of the Yugoslav system’s adaptation to processes today associated with globalisation. Twinning in many ways could be seen as one of the ways in which external pressures became evident in domestic priorities. While the liberal swing to the market met resistance already from the early 1970s, to be arguably more politically controlled from 1974 onwards, deep connections with external economic actors remained in various ways. For instance, Yugoslavia fell into the debt trap of the 1970s like much of the rest of the Eastern bloc and many Third World countries. Part of the Yugoslav Communist response to the unfavourable economic turn of the 1970s globally was to engage with global actors to struggle for the New International Economic Order (NIEO), through the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which the Yugoslav government had been key to establishing. Indeed, in many ways, the PCI and the LCY responded in similar ways. The PCI crafted an international strategy aimed at transforming the Eastern regimes as well as the Western left. The Yugoslav Communists had a similar set of ambitions, as noted, although their own claim to influence increasingly came from their leading position in the Non-Aligned Movement rather than through attempts at bridging East and West.

It is important to note that twinning with Third World cities became a priority for the Foreign Ministry in the 1970s. Yet, from the repeated calls for more to be done to twin cities and then to create real programmes of exchange, it must be clear that this was more a stated aim or orientation than a reality. From the documentation, it emerges rather that twinning remained largely a European phenomenon for most Yugoslav cities. Even here, though, there were important regional differences. Since twinning was largely a phenomenon that had developed with neighbouring countries, the more developed north-west of Yugoslavia tended to have more relations with towns in Western Europe. Meanwhile, the less developed south-east tended to have better town links with Eastern Europe.

This was a form of ‘Europeanisation’, Cold War-style. Moreover, it went hand in hand with an increasing interest in national diasporas in neighbouring or nearby states. Twinning and other forms of town links ever more explicitly in the documentation of the 1970s became linked with the need to look after national minorities or migrant workers (so-called gastarbeiter, using the German term). In the Italian case, this tended to be about Croatian and Slovene nationals in the border areas, whereas in the German case it was more about migrant workers, which gave different feels to the varied links that had mushroomed in the 1960s and 1970s. Adriatic and Mediterranean links also created strong attraction for different markets and relations abroad in a way in which town twinning in Eastern Europe, while similar, found it more difficult, given the increasing crisis of the Eastern regimes in the late 1970s and early 1980s. That this had an impact on town twinning became obvious, in that the
foreign policy apparatus of Croatia, which had been established in the years of liberal economic and constitutional reform post-1965, looked to broaden town links in Italy beyond the communist- and socialist-run town administrations. The hope was openly to establish more links with Christian Democrat-run towns in the border areas to help bridge the divide that had persisted for decades. The Treaty of Osimo in 1975 between the two countries which formally settled the border disputes of the past certainly helped matters in this direction.

The Bologna-Zagreb link survived a short crisis of the mid-1970s, which ended when the Bologna party decided to look beyond the purge of many top Zagreb politicians accused of liberalism and nationalism. In October 1975, the Bologna city authorities invited a Yugoslav delegation led by Ivo Vrhovec, mayor of Zagreb, and brother of the next Minister of Foreign Affairs, Josip Vrhovec, who served in the period 1978-1982, and had a pro-Western reputation. The report of the trip was suitably positive as relations appeared mended, though it is important to note that Vrhovec suggested to the Bologna leadership Zagreb’s relations with Mainz, with such new forms of cooperation as the “mixed [ownership] enterprises”, as a model to fix their now less than good economic relations (page 6 of the report). This is suggestive of the fact that the economic rise of West Germany, Brandt’s tenure as head of the SPD, post-1968 suspicion of the USSR and, partly by extension, Croatian suspicion of many Serbian politicians, had increased Zagreb Communist leanings on Mainz as the new model twinning in the 1970s. The overall political shift in the 1970s as the PCI and Croatian section of the LCY sought to engage wider forces more deeply, especially in Western Europe, can probably be seen as a nascent Europeanism, which stayed with the Italian and Croatian lefts into the 1980s and 1990s. The European component arguably strengthened the national component in Croatia, as deeper links with Western Europe encouraged the possibility of life outside Yugoslavia.

Moreover, the only oral history interview I have conducted so far, with a librarian in the university library in Zagreb, who visited Bologna on a party delegation in the early 1980s, suggested ‘Communism’ as a ‘lived ideology’ was on the wane. Her memories were fuller of aesthetic memories of the city, consumer opportunities and youth than of political events or discussions. This tallies with work done on Yugoslav shopping expeditions to Trieste in the 1970s and 1980s. The contrast between the possibilities in the West, even though crisis ridden, with the Yugoslav crisis of the 1980s, with its deep austerity in the first half of the decade and the rise of nationalisms in the second half, seems patent. Certainly, a speech by the head of the foreign relations committee of the Stalna konferencija gradova Jugoslavije in 1975 made it clear that economic links above all should be the guiding principle to setting up links with towns beyond the border regions, and he often referred in particular to Western Europe, though he often underlined the Third World should be included more than it was at the time (pages 4-5). Thus, it is clear that even after the supposed closing off into import substitution, economic links remained paramount in the view of city authorities in terms of setting up international links. This is all very suggestive about the fact that twinning in Yugoslavia is a privileged angle to understand the rise of globalisation and its impact on the neoliberal transformation of lived ideologies in the 1980s. Although more oral history interviews could open new layers to the question than any of the documentation at hand, which begins to peter out in the mid-1980s, it is plausible to presume that this was a process happening at all levels of Yugoslav and Croatian society.

This brings me to some concluding thoughts. Looking at Yugoslav town twinning policies generally sheds new light on several aspects of town twinning. If ‘Locarno from below’ was a useful term for the interwar period, ‘déten from below’ can apply to Cold War twinning in many of its aspects, especially from the Yugoslav Communist side. While its impact on international relations between states was limited, especially during détente between the superpowers in the 1970s, it helped cement certain real connections across borders. Towns could therefore be seen as legitimate actors on the
international scene. Even in tightly controlled Communist regimes, town initiatives were only broadly channeled, but towns had real autonomy in their actions, and could shift policies, drag their feet over those they disliked or found less easy, and pursue links more actively where they had their interests. Bigger cities like Zagreb mattered. The 1970 report from which I quoted extensively suggested links with cities like Bologna, Mainz and Hamburg led to improved inter-state relations by establishing links with regional or national politicians. Whether this was self-promotion is unclear but it sounds plausible and is worth pursuing. The importance of cities clearly went beyond just better diplomatic and other links by the end of the period in question as, at times, cities could pursue their own interests directly. As suggested, like interwar twinning, Cold War twinning was frequently a European phenomenon, even if a specifically Cold War European phenomenon.

In the Yugoslav case, this in a sense showed an arguably darker side to ‘Europeanness’. The European identity, being sundered in half, was now also a political project of West or East. With Yugoslav neutralism and weakness, and its internal divisions, came a fragmentation linked to different visions of Europeanness: the Atlanticist and increasingly neoliberal one, and the stagnating and increasingly authoritarian Soviet one. Europeanness also became linked to the Yugoslav diasporas as a nationalising or even nation-building project. This is clear from looking at Zagreb’s relations with different towns in the 1960s and 1970s. The pull of West Germany was not just purely economic, but also linked to the gastarbeiter phenomenon, in which Croatia was most deeply involved of all the Yugoslav republics. Yet it also became clear in the general Europeanness shared increasingly with the Eurocommunist PCI. The Bologna-Zagreb relation is a clear indication of that, although other city links in Croatia show similar trends, as the Karlovac-Alessandria-Hradec Králové triad showed in 1968. In this sense, perhaps town twinning was not just about agency but also a backdrop for studying wider processes, like détente, globalisation, European integration and nationalist revival. The slow death of Communism as a lived ideology was tacitly posited by the end of the paper and needs more exploration. The suggestion is nevertheless that, looking at it over a longer period, 1989/1991 seems less of a clear turning point, with European integrations, East and West, already established processes much before the formal collapse of the regime(s) ruling Yugoslavia.

This paper would also tentatively suggest that twinning was important to the actors themselves as it became both a practical and a symbolic measure for many actors in the post-1989 framework. For many, it became a road to political or civic activism. In Serbia, it came to be claimed by Serb nationalist or religious activist circles in the 1980s, pushing for a revival of links with Greece. For Milošević, launching links with Israeli cities in 1990, it was a form of symbolic differentiation from the past, an overture to the West, and an overture to Serbian nationalism aimed rather obviously against Bosnian Muslims. In Italy, it was ironically many regional and town branches of the Christian Democrats that called for recognition of Slovene, Croatian and Bosnian independence in 1992, before the national party did so, which of course relates to the debates over the question of recognition of independence as a contributing factor to the wars of the 1990s. Later, many of the twinning links were important or were newly established as Italian civil society tried to help stranded civilians in the Bosnian war zones, and later also symbolically over the bombed factory of Kragujevac during the NATO war of 1999. Overall, then, the issue continued to have salience, which suggests it requires more attention than scholars have given it even in the narrower Yugoslav context.