

Croatia: Deep-rooted Conflict and Its Resolution. The History of Eastern Slavonia

ZVONKO LEROTIĆ

Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb

Summary

The conflict between the Croatian government and the Serbian minority in the UNPA zones in Croatia was deep and irreconcilable. The Croatian government tried, at any price, to bring the UNPA zones under the authority of Zagreb while the Serbian secessionists wanted to separate the UNPA zones from Croatia and bring it under the authority of Belgrade and Serbia. The conflict between Croats and the ethnic Serbs in Croatia corresponds to the concept of a deeply rooted conflict as described by John W. Burton and Donald L. Horowitz.

The author analyses the process of the negotiations between the Croatian authorities and the local Serbs from the UNPA zone East in the fall of 1995. The ethnic Serbs agreed to a compromise with the Croatian government after they had found themselves in a stalemate. By this term William Zartman understands when one ethnic group sees no other way out, since all the military and political moves have been blocked for it. The author thinks this is the main reason why the local Serbs in eastern Slavonia agreed to a dialogue, accepted the compromise and signed the Erdut Accord on 12 February 1995.

The conflict between the central government in Croatia and the local Serbian secessionists in Eastern Slavonia (the name covers Baranja and Western Sirmium as well) entered a new stage of development following the jolting defeat of Serbian rebels in Western Slavonia in May and central Croatia in August of 1995. In 1990 and 1991, the Serbian secessionists occupied 22.7% of Croatian territory. Eastern Slavonia accounted for 4.6% of that total (Crkvenčić, Klemenčić, 1993, p. 18). They were aided by the armed Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the rump Yugoslavia (known as chetniks) and the federal Yugoslav Army units. The war against Croatia was waged by sections of the Serbian minority in Croatia, the interventionist forces from Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro with the aim of annexing all the occupied territories and uniting them with Serbia. Balkanologists such as Ivo Banac and Charles Jelavich have branded such politics Serbian nationalism whose aim is to create Greater Serbia (Jelavich, 1990).

The joint war effort of the Serbs from Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro with the support of the Federal Yugoslav Army was a dirty war conquest, which conforms to Carolyn Nordstrom's definition of such

wars (Nordstrom, 1991, 1992). She says that terror-utilizing wars are dirty because the conquerors and the attackers do not go for the political or military victory; their aim is to put down every possible, even presumptive resistance in order to pacify, even enervate the population (see Suarez-Orosco, 1987). "A dirty war", says Nordstrom "does not strive solely at the political and physical destruction of the enemy, but aims at eliminating the very foundations of the enemy culture, the structure of their thinking and everything that defines and identifies the population" (Nordstrom, 1992, p. 28).

In 1991 and 1992 the joint Serbian occupying forces destroyed residential, industrial, cultural and religious facilities which gave rise to the term "scorched land" as a subtype of dirty war. Another form of dirty war and "scorched land" is the exhaustive ethnic cleansing of the occupied territory from non-Serbian population. The most obvious illustration of the dirty war waged by the joint Serbian forces and the Federal Army in Eastern Slavonia is the total destruction of the town of Vukovar. A month ago, the International Criminal Tribunal in Den Haag indicted three high-ranking officers of the former Yugoslav Federal Army for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Vukovar in 1991.

International intervention — UNPA sectors and UNPROFOR

The EU and UN mediation brought about a cease-fire between the Croatian government and the Yugoslav Federal Army which was signed in Sarajevo on 2 January 1992. The UN Security Council then passed the Resolution 740 of 7 February, which envisaged four sectors of UN protected areas (UNPA) on 26.1% (or one fourth) of Croatian territory, occupied by the joint Serbian military forces (Resolution 740, 1992). Security Council passed another resolution, number 743 of 21 February 1992, which envisaged sending UN peacekeeping forces into Croatia (the so called UNPROFOR) with the task of maintaining peace and mediating in the resolution of local conflicts.

According to the 1991 census, Croatia had 4,760,000 inhabitants. The ethnic Serbs' share amounted to 580,762 or 12.2%. According to the same census, before the war there were 546,000 people (273,000 Serbs or 46.6%) in the UNPA zones (Crkvenčić, Klemenčić, 1993). According to the data gathered by UNHCR and the Croatian Bureau for refugees and displaced people, out of 275,000 non-Serbs in the UNPA zones, 247,000 were banished to the territory under the Croatian authority (UNHCR, 1993). Immediately upon the establishment of the UNPA zones in 1992, the Croatian government wanted to integrate the occupied territories (the UNPA zones) and establish the authority of the central Croatian government, while the local Serbs from the UNPA and those from the so called

Republic of Serbian Krajina wanted to legalize secession and unite with the rump Yugoslavia. The International Conference on the Former Yugoslavia tried its hand at fashioning peace and declared that internationally recognized borders of the Republic of Croatia or any other European state cannot be changed by force; they also declared that Serbs in Croatia have the right to cultural and territorial autonomy and to the special status of 11 out of 13 communes where Serbs make absolute majority. Local Serbian secessionists from the UNPA zones did not consent to take part in any talks based on this proposal; instead they demanded the legalization of the secession and advocated the change of borders by force. The Z-4 Group (the four ambassadors of America, Russia, Great Britain, and France together with the Conference on the Former Yugoslavia) came up with "Draft Agreement on the Krajina, Slavonia, Southern Baranja and Western Sirmium" on 18 January 1995 which offered to the local Serbs considerable political, territorial and monetary autonomy (Draft Agreement, 1995). The local Serbian representatives in Knin, the centre of the so called Krajina, did not want to meet with the Z-4 representatives nor accept the proposed "Draft Agreement".

In two police-military operations, the Croatian forces liberated and integrated three UNPA zones: West, North and South. Only the UNPA zone East (Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium) remained outside the Croatian authority. According to the 1991 census the population of this region totaled 188.184 people; there were 57,236 Serbs or 30.4% (1991 Census, 1992).

The secessionist policy of ethnic Serbs in Croatia

In early 1990s, the time of the collapse of communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe, the time of the breakup of Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, there occurred a political rift in the ranks of Serbian ethnic community in Croatia. Urban Serbs, mostly rallied round the Social-Democratic party of ex-communists, reconciled themselves to the idea that communism had collapsed and Yugoslavia broke up. The rest of the Serbian population, mostly from rural centres of central and eastern Croatia, did not acquiesce in nor put up with the demise of socialism, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. They claimed that, on the contrary, Yugoslavia did not break up, but that Slovenia, Croatia and other Yugoslav republics seceded. Their politics at the time was part and parcel of Serbian nationalism and populism, epitomized by Serbian president Milošević, who strove by hook or by crook to preserve Yugoslavia as a unitary and strong federation under Belgrade's control.

The response to Milošević's politics and the Serbian nationalist populism was the establishment of new democratic parties in the republics where Milošević had failed to gain control; these parties then directed

their activities against the federal government in Belgrade and channeled their efforts towards gaining national independence. Serbian minority in Croatia and Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, allies of Milošević's pan-Serbian populist movement, turned against the central governments in Zagreb and Sarajevo and organized a militarist secessionist movement. It was led by Serbian Democratic Party from Knin (see Javorović, 1995, and the contrary opinion by B. Jakšić, Stojanović, 1994). At the height of their military conquests, the Serbian secessionists together with the joint Serbian interventionists occupied almost 27% of Croatian territory and over 70% of the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The rift between Croatian authorities and the Serbian minority in the UNPA zones was deep and irreconcilable. The Croatian authorities tried, at any cost, to integrate the UNPA zones while the Serbian secessionists wanted to cut off the UNPA zones from Croatia and bring them under Belgrade's authority. The conflict between Croats and the ethnic Serbs in Croatia conforms to John W. Burton's concept of a deeply rooted conflict (Burton, 1987) or to the notion of high conflicts analyzed by Donald T. Horowitz (Horowitz, 1989). The emergence of deep distrust and the sense of imperilment paved the way for the homogenization of the pan-Serbian nationalist movement in late 1980s in the former Yugoslavia. Thus a fraction of the Serbian minority used violence in their secessionist politics, similar to the manner in which the Serbian minorities in Montenegro, Voivodina and Kosovo did away with their respective governments. In Croatia, the purpose of the use of violence was to destroy, burn and banish the entire non-Serbian population, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina their aim was total genocide and annihilation of Bosnian Muslims (*Helsinki Watch Report*, 1992, 1993).

In the last twenty odd years, the wars between ethnic communities in the states like Sri Lanka, Cyprus, Assam in India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and alike, show that the depth and the implacability of these ethnic conflicts are rooted in the exclusive and strong will to gain sovereignty and the control over the lands which are considered the homeland of the autochthonous population. Horowitz says that ethnic communities and minorities in various states demonstrate extreme propinquity to their mother nation and a strong emotional and collective distance from the people they live with in the same state (Horowitz, 1989, p. 453). Minority ethnic groups develop a sense of imperilment, which instigates collective paranoia by exploiting the extreme distrust of the central government in order to secure military aid or protection of the mother nation's army (see Trigeorgis, 1993, Souter, 1989, *Ethnicity in World Politics*, 1989, Zartman, 1987).

Strategic transformation of Croatia

While the Serbs in the UNPA zones, particularly in the so called Krajina, hoped that they would legalize the new borders changed by force at the Conference on the Former Yugoslavia or in the UN, while they believed that they were able to suppress and prevent any attempt at the reintegration into the Croatian constitutional system, they refused to sit at the negotiating table except in the cases when the negotiations served to promote their secessionist policies. As Zartman says, one ethnic group does not change its strategy while there is still some hope of success, while circumstances are propitious and while they have enough strength to carry out what they have planned (Zartman, 1987, p. 516).

The military and the political defeat of the Serbian secessionists in western and central Croatia in May and August of 1995 strengthened the security of Croatia and its influence in the entire Balkan region including the last occupied part of Croatia, Eastern Slavonia. The central government fortified its defense lines, demonstrated a high level of military efficiency and secured American support and alliance. Bosnian Croats also achieved enviable results in cooperation with the Bosnian-Muslim Army. In collusion with other factors, this forced Bosnian Serbs to accept the Dayton accords. Serbia has been economically, politically and internationally crushed and isolated by sanctions. A new war in Bosnia or Eastern Slavonia would trigger off a new wave of refugees into Montenegro and Serbia. All this has completely altered the position of Eastern Slavonia as compared to its position when it was only a part of the so called Krajina which no longer exists. This has brought about a total blockade and a stalemate in the realization of the plans of the Serbian secessionist minority in Eastern Slavonia. The hope in the legalization of the alteration of Croatian borders by force and war and the unification with Serbia and Montenegro evaporated. Zartman says that in ethnic conflicts the loss of hope in the realization of the aims, the stalemates and the blockades of political and military moves is the main reason which renders ethnic groups ready for dialogue and compromise (Zartman, 1987).

Negotiations between Croatian authorities and local Serbs from Eastern Slavonia

In his report of 25 August 1995, soon after the sobering military defeat of the rebel Serbs in central Croatia, Boutros Ghali, UN Secretary General, mentions how his envoy Yasushi Akashi talked with Croatian officials, Serbian president Milošević and the representatives of local Serbs from Erdut (capital of Eastern Slavonia) and that all three parties agreed on the resumption of the talks at the multilateral basis (UN Report, 1995). On that occasion, the Croatian and the Belgrade diplomacies

clashed over Eastern Slavonia. The Croatian side did not want to allow the issue of the reintegration of Eastern Slavonia to be addressed after the global agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina had been signed and after the sanctions for the rump Yugoslavia had been lifted. Local Serbian authorities from Erdut as well as Milošević could then postpone and boycott the negotiations *ad infinitum* and Croatian diplomacy would be powerless. At that time, particularly at the beginning of September, special American envoy and mediator in the talks about Bosnia and Herzegovina, Richard Holbrooke, was preparing the draft of the agreement for the meeting of foreign secretaries of Croatia, Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in Geneva on 8 September. Croatian diplomacy, in cooperation with Richard Holbrooke, prepared the section of the text about the reintegration of Eastern Slavonia into the Croatian constitutional system. The underlying idea was that, on the basis of the Security Council Resolution 981 which defines the territory of Eastern Slavonia as part of the Republic of Croatia, the process of smoothing out the differences and paving the way for the comprehensive normalization of the relations between Croatia and Yugoslavia and their mutual recognition should begin. At the meeting of foreign ministers in Geneva, Yugoslav Foreign Minister turned down that proposal saying that the problem of Bosnia and Herzegovina is the priority and should be addressed first and that the question of Eastern Slavonia could wait.

The issue of Eastern Slavonia was not discussed in Geneva. The members of the international mediating team and foreign ministers of Bosnia, Croatia and Yugoslavia gave a joint statement in which they pointed out that the co-chairmen of the Peace Conference were determined to find a solution for Eastern Slavonia within the comprehensive peace accord which was to be their chief task upon returning to Croatia the following week. Indeed, Thorvald Stoltenberg, the co-chairman of the Conference on the Former Yugoslavia and the American ambassador in Croatia Peter Galbraith rushed to Eastern Slavonia in order to make all the necessary preparations for the negotiations with the government in Zagreb.

For almost a month, Galbraith and Stoltenberg did their best to find a possible common ground for the negotiations. The stance of Belgrade and the Serbian representatives from Erdut remained firm; they still believed they could achieve the legalization of the secession, while the Croatian side demanded that they agree to the reintegration of Eastern Slavonia. Hrvoje Šarinić, head of the Croatian negotiating team set the deadline for 30 November, the day when the UN mandate in that region expires and pointed out that the Croatian government would not prolong their mandate unless a satisfactory settlement was reached. Trying to preserve maximum neutrality regarding the principal protagonists, as has been recommended in the studies on the mediation in negotiations (Stephens, 1988, p. 53), the international negotiators emphasized three principles: first, borders cannot be changed by force; second, maximum respect for human rights and rights of ethnic groups is demanded, and third, UN

forces in that region must provide the means for reconciling these two aims. However, it should be said that the principal protagonists were perfectly aware of what Kreisberg (Kreisberg, 1982) had pointed out: where great powers are mediators, they look after and promote their own interests more than the interests of the protagonists in the conflict. Besides, it is not unimportant whether the great powers can recompense the relative loss of one side in the negotiating process. Also, they can arm-twist the conflicting parties towards a compromise through the "carrot and stick" policy.

Buttonholed by the mentioned factors and events, the Serbs from Eastern Slavonia held talks with the Croatian negotiating team on 3 October and, with the mediation of Peter Galbraith and Thorvald Stoltenberg, they accepted "The Basic Principles of the Agreement on Eastern Slavonia". The agreement stipulates that the temporary government be handed over to the UN administration, that the region be demilitarized, human rights protected and the refugees able to return to their homes. At the end of the UN administration, free local elections will be held.

Very soon a question arose as to when these basic principles were to be transformed into a concrete agreement. That "The Basic Principles..." were short-lived and accepted in bad faith became obvious when the arranged meeting in Zagreb and Osijek did not take place. The one in Zagreb was canceled due to the falling out over the venue of the meeting while Serbian representative did not show up for the meeting in Osijek.

At that time (on 20 October), Chris Guness, UN spokesman in Zagreb, said that the situation in Eastern Sector is extremely tense, that the local Serbs were expecting a Croatian attack, that they were fortifying their defense lines along the entire operational zone of the Russian UN battalion in that sector. Despite the apprehension of local Serbs, he added, for the time being no movements of Croatian army in the direction of Eastern Slavonia had been observed.

In early November the talks among presidents of Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina about Bosnia and Herzegovina commenced, with the participation of international, mostly American mediators. As had been expected, the status of Eastern Slavonia was immediately put on the agenda. In Dayton, a draft of the agreement between the Croatian government and the local Serbs from Erdut was written. The Serbs had to come clean after 4 November. The paper was based on the agreement of the Croatian and the Yugoslav delegation. The premise of the accord was spelled out by Nicholas Burns, State Department's spokesman. He said that the basis of the draft was the normalization of the relations between Croatia and Yugoslavia which includes mutual recognition.

Serbian representatives turned down the first draft of the Dayton accord and pushed their counter-proposal with 11 points. Milan Milanović asked for a three-year transitional administration as opposed to one year

in the Dayton paper. He also said that the Serbian side insisted on a referendum on which the present population would decide on the fate of Eastern Slavonia. The international mediators, and especially Americans, saw in this a sign of intransigence and inflexibility. After several days, probably once again under Milošević's pressure a new round of draft preparation began. First Thorvald Stoltenberg, and then Peter Galbraith came up with a new version of the draft. The Serbs were thus cornered and had no chance of being saved through someone's good offices. After the accord was forced down their throats, local Serbian representatives from Eastern Slavonia signed in Erdut on 12 November the document entitled "Basic Agreement on the Region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Slavonia" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, 1995). In the afternoon of the same day, "Basic Agreement" was signed in Zagreb by Hrvoje Šarinić.

For the Serbs any option of extricating themselves from the stalemate or the blockade would suffice to reject the basic agreement between Zagreb and Erdut. If the accord about the normalization of the relations were not signed in Paris, this would represent an opportunity to undermine the implementation of the accord.

Thus Zartman's theory was corroborated: a stalemate or a blockade is decisive for the negotiations aimed at solving profound and implacable conflicts. The document states that the local Serbian leaders would hand over the government to the transitional UN administration whose task is to demilitarize the region, ensure the protection of people and human rights, enable the return of the refugees and organize local elections at the end of their mandate.

In the future, the overall solution of the relations between the central government in Zagreb and the Serbian minority in Eastern Slavonia is to be only a part of the general normalization of the relations between Zagreb and Belgrade which includes their mutual recognition. This is in line with the stance of the international community not to tolerate and recognize any border changes by force and that the process of the disintegration of a state should be distinguished from secession. Cases of the breakup of vast empires have been known throughout the history (for example, Russian, Austrian, Ottoman, British and Spanish empires). This also happened to the former Yugoslav federation. The breakup might have been a democratic process had there not been the bitter and merciless will to create on the territory of the former state, by means of violence and the minorities, a new and big Serbian state that would surpass the power and prestige of the former Yugoslavia. The Soviet Union went through the same process much more peacefully, thanks to the people like Gorbachev and Yeltsin, who knew that the period of dictatorships and violence had come to an end.

References

- Boulding, E. Keneth (1963), *Conflict and Defense — A General Theory*, Harper and Row, New York
- Burton, John W. (1987), *Resolving Deep-Rooted Conflict*. Boston: University Press of America
- Crkvenčić, I. and M. Klemenčić (1993), *Agresija na Hrvatsku: Geopolitičke i demografske činjenice*, Zagreb: Državni zavod za statistiku
- Draft Agreement on the Krajina, Slavonija, Southern Baranja and Western Sirmium*. (1995), Zagreb: Ministarstvo vanjskih poslova Republike Hrvatske
- "Ethnicity in the World Politics" (1989), *The World Quarterly*, II(4) October
- Helsinki Watch Report (1992, 1993), *War Crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, New York: Human Rights Watch
- Horowitz, Donald L. (1989), "Making Moderation Pay: The Comparative Politics of Ethnic Conflict Management", in J. P. Montville (Ed.), *Conflict and Peacemaking in Multiethnic Societies* Lexington: Lexington Books
- Jakšić, B., and S. Stojanović (Eds.) (1994), *Raspad Jugoslavije*, Beograd: Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju
- Javorović, B. (1995), *Velikosrpska naježda i obrana Hrvatske*, Zagreb: Defimi
- Jelavich, Charles (1990), *South Slav Nationalism*, Ohio: Ohio State University Press
- Kreisburg, Louis (1982), *Social Conflicts*, New York: Prentice Hall
- Basic Agreement on the Region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Sirmium* (1995), Zagreb: Ministarstvo vanjskih poslova RH
- Leroćić, Zvonko (1984), *Nacija*, Globus, Zagreb
- Nordstrom, Carolyn (1991), "The Backyard Front", in: C. Nordstrom and J. Martin (Eds.), *Essays in Socio-Political Violence: Domination, Resistance and Terror*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Nordstrom, Carolyn, (1992), "The Dirty War: Civilian Experience of Conflict in Mozambique and Sri Lanka" in: Kumar Rupesinghe (Ed.), *Internal Conflict and Governance*, New York: Martin Press
- Popis stanovništva 1991*. (1992), Zagreb: Državni zavod za statistiku Republike Hrvatske

Report of the Secretary-General to Security Council (25 August 1995), New York: UN Security Council/UN Security Council

Resolution of UN Security Council No. 740 (7 February 1992), New York

Smith, D. Anthony (1986), *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Basil Blackwell Ltd., Oxford

Souter, David (1989), "The Cyprus Conundrum: The Challenge of the Intercommunal Talks", *Third World Quarterly*, 11(2), April: 76—92

Stephens, J. B. (1988), "Acceptance of Mediation Initiative: A Preliminary Framework", in: C.R. Mitchell, and K. Webb (Eds.), *New Approaches to International Mediation*, New York: Greenwood Press

Suarez-Orozco, M. (1987), "The Treatment of Children in the Dirty War: Ideology, State, Terrorism, and the Abuse of Children in Argentina", in: N. Scheper-Hughes (Eds.), *Child Survival*, Boston: D. Reidel Publishing

Trigeorgis, L. and M. Hadjipavlu-Trigeorgis, (1993), "Cyprus: An Evolutionary Approach to Conflict Resolution", *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 37(2), 340—360

UNHCR (1993), *Information Notes on former Yugoslavia*, Zagreb: UNHCR

Zartman, I.W. (1989). "Negotiations and Prenegotiations in Ethnic Conflict: The Beginning, The Middle, and the Ends", in: J.V. Montville (Ed.), *Conflict and Peace Making in Multiethnic Societies*, Lexington: Lexington Books

Translated by
Božica Jakovlev