

# Croatia's Struggle for Democracy\*

VESNA PUSIĆ

Odsjek za sociologiju

Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu

E-mail: v.pusic@filozof.ffzg.hr

UDK: 321.7(497.5)

Stručni rad

Primljeno: 15. svibnja 1997.

In retrospect everybody believes that what happened was not only inevitable, but also somehow a part of a deliberate plan. One of the few advantages of having actually lived through a historical change that occurred quite recently, is that one has been on both sides of the watershed, and that the vision has not yet been blurred by historical reinterpretations.

Since the break-up of Yugoslavia and Croatia's independence in 1991, its politics has been dominated by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and especially its leader and the country's president Franjo Tuđman. Seen as controversial both at home and abroad, Tuđman inspired intense devotion and at least as strong resentment. He was seen both as guarantor of stability and a warmongering, archaic nationalist and autocrat. There is no doubt that it was Tuđman who held his party together and secured its political victories and its hold on power after its showing at the ballot box became more doubtful. But Tuđman has become seriously ill and his leaving Croatia's political scene is imminent. With him this era in Croatian politics is coming to an end. Regardless of the results of the presidential elections in June of 1997, the country has to prepare for its post-Tuđman era. Although all options are never equally opened, the political development can go in quite different directions. In order to review its options and possible future course, we need to understand the genesis of Croatia's political identity and different factors that influence its choices.

## Forging Independence

Contrary to the claims of almost all Croatian politicians, Croatia came into its independence in 1991 more as a result of being pushed into it, than through a well thought out, defined and widely supported political strategy. Prior to its declaration of independence in June of '91, and subsequent international recognition<sup>1</sup> and admission to the UN<sup>2</sup> in early 1992, it had existed as part of Yugoslavia for almost exactly seventy years. It became part of Yugoslavia after the breakup of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of World War I.<sup>3</sup> With the four years interruption during the World War II between 1941 and 1945, it stayed in Yugoslavia under different political arrangements until 1991.

The closing stage of Yugoslav history was probably started by the death of Josip Broz Tito in May of 1980, although nobody thought of it in those terms at the time. Tito, a Croat and a Moscow trained communist, led the Yugoslav anti-fascist resistance throughout WWII, and was the communist president of the country from 1945 until his death. Although his was a one-party totalitarian regime, Tito was more a shrewd, pragmatic politician than an ideologue, with a developed sensitivity for the potentially explosive ethnic issue, and a factual independence from Moscow unprecedented in the communist world. His combination of pragmatism and iron-fist rule helped him weather many a storm, notably the breakup with Stalin, ducking the Cold War divisions by starting the Non-Aligned Movement, successfully negotiating liberaliza-

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\* Ovaj esej je pripremljen na Georgetown University, School of Foreign Service, Center for German and European Studies, Washington, D. C., gdje je Vesna Pusić u školskoj godini 1996/97 bila E. L. Wiegand Distinguished Visiting Professor of Democratization.

<sup>1</sup> January 15, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> April 1992.

<sup>3</sup> In 1918 it had actually joined with Slovenia and Serbia, the only one who had been on the winning side, to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes which was ruled by a Serbian dynasty. It was only 10 years later that the country was renamed into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

tion of his party and of the country, and constantly re-negotiating the balance of power among different ethnic groups and federal units. But in the end, his major and, in retrospect, fatal failure was the one that he shared with all the communist leaders: he was incapable of relinquishing power and imagining a state without him.

Through the three early party purges he eliminated all the potential competition within his own generation. In the '70s he conducted his last and fatal purge: he eliminated political leaderships throughout the country that were already of the next generation and of a much more liberal and enlightened persuasion. Had they been allowed to stay in power in their respective republics,<sup>4</sup> they would have been capable of reforming their own party and, when the time came, negotiating a peaceful transition. Regardless of whether the old federation would have held together, or new countries would have emerged, they would have been capable of doing it by political rather than violent and military means. As it were, a whole generation of leaders in their 40s was forced to resign and leave politics. This had, more than any other single act, set the scene for the mass tragedy that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia in the '90s.

When Tito died, he left an institutionally formed and developed country, with a personalized political regime<sup>5</sup> and with no successor. It took the potential contenders about six years to realize that here was this country with nobody in power and with no real mechanism for changing that. Slobodan Milošević of Serbia was the first one to pick up the clue and also have the ambition to take over the whole country. The fact that this was happening at the time of general upheaval in Eastern Europe, made it only easier for him. His aggressive and murderous nationalism in Kosovo, witnessed nightly by everybody on national television, and his ruthless resorting to mob rule in replacing the whole leaderships of other federal units who did not support him, triggered off the popular support for the breakup of Yugoslavia. He was poised to take over the country, and not many non-Serbs who could help it would have chosen to accept that. Many Serbs, too, shared that sentiment.

For Croatia, Yugoslavia began to mean Milošević's rule, and it started searching for alternatives. Voting for the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in the first free, multi-party elections in the Spring of 1990, reflected the opinion of the majority of the electorate that it would take Croatian hard-liners to defend the people and the country from Milošević's onslaught. In the event it did not make much of a difference, because the war in Croatia was dictated from Belgrade, rather than controlled from Zagreb, and no political leadership could have changed that crucial fact. However, in the only referendum that ever took place in Croatia on the issue of its statehood, independence was not even an option. It was conducted in early 1991, and of the two options - a federal or a confederate arrangement with the other Yugoslav republics, an overwhelming majority of Croats chose confederation.

The final push for Croatia's independence came from Slovenia. Slovenia had secretly negotiated an agreement with Milošević's government to leave Yugoslavia without too much resistance from the Serbian side. When it became clear that Slovenia was preparing to declare independence, Croatia went with it and declared its own independence on June 25, 1991. Unlike Slovenia, Croatia was not institutionally, legally or organizationally prepared for a smooth transition. It also had no army and no arms to speak of, and it was clear that the Serbian leadership was not letting it go in quite the same easy way as they did Slovenia. But at the same time, with the Slovenes gone, there was no chance for a confederal arrangement, and no way of fighting off total domination by the extreme Serbian nationalism of the Milošević government. In a way, declaring Croatian independence was simply formalizing a *fait accompli*.

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<sup>4</sup> Republics were in fact the six principal federal units of states within former Yugoslavia. They were Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia. In addition, there were also the two autonomous regions: Vojvodina and Kosovo.

<sup>5</sup> The regime was "personalized" in the sense that it was custom designed for Tito and his rule. He was even mentioned by name in the country's constitution.

There is no doubt that by that time, and especially by the summer of 1991, a vast majority of Croats supported and were prepared to fight for independence. The Army, Yugoslav only in name and Serbian in everything else, started the war for real that summer in Croatia. It had been arming and protecting extremist Serb militias in the country for a while, but that summer it began using fighter planes and rocket launchers in fighting against local villages and police force. It still occasionally attempted to present itself as a mediating force rather than the dominant party in the fighting, and was even referred to in those terms by some EU negotiators who got involved at that time. But on the ground the war was on and the Yugoslav/Serbian Army was waging it. It adds some perspective to the situation to know that the commander of the key garrison of that army in the Croatian town of Knin at that time was Ratko Mladić, later indicted by the Hague Tribunal for war crimes in Bosnia.

All these circumstances made independence practically the only option for Croatia, and gave that option overwhelming popular support. But at the same time it must be said that Croatia was pushed towards its independence, rather than it being the result of a deliberate political leadership with a worked out political strategy. The circumstances also decided on the timing of the process and the harshness of the first years of independence.

### Setting the Scene

The shock was made even greater by the fact that it was preceded by 1989 - easily the most liberal year in Croatian political history. It was the year when the old structures were still in place, but increasingly dominated by moderates reluctant to use power and disregard laws. Opposition groups, political parties and individuals were increasingly vocal and visible, but not yet in government. And the media was totally free, in a way it had never been before, or ever since. The richness, openness, and variety of political life created an atmosphere of positive expectations and optimism, where the only serious problem seemed to be how to fight and avoid Milošević's domination from Belgrade. Even had it wanted to, the Croatian Communist Party<sup>6</sup> was in no position to control the transition. Although it had for decades been more moderate than any of its other East European counterparts outside of Yugoslavia, its identity crisis in the late '80s was more severe than in most of these other cases. It had been repeatedly and very publicly humiliated by Milošević and his cronies in all the federal bodies and institutions, and bullied into taking its first open and unequivocal stand only in January of 1990. At that time it walked out of the Yugoslav League of Communists' Congress in support of the Slovenian delegation. This moment is often viewed as the point of breakup of Yugoslavia. It was only three months before the first free elections were scheduled to take place in Croatia.

The previous December, after a lot of haggling as well as outside and inside pressure, the Croatian communists decided to legalize other political parties and call multi-party elections. Their only serious attempt to use the fact that they were still in power was to pass a majoritarian electoral law, hoping that that would turn their network of grassroots organizations to their advantage. They miscalculated. In the elections of 1990 they were pushed aside by the nationalists of the *Croatian Democratic Union* (HDZ), who won with 41% of the vote. Based on the majoritarian system, this translated into 68% of the seats in Parliament. The communists, now called the *Communist Alliance of Croatia: Party of Democratic Change* (SKH-SDP)<sup>7</sup> were second with 28% of the vote and 15 seats, and a ten party-coalition *The People's Accord* (KNS) won 10% of the votes and 4 seats. This Parliament (Sabor) elected the President of the HDZ Franjo Tuđman as president of Croatia, and in December of 1990 voted on the new Croatian Constitution.

<sup>6</sup> Its official name was the Croatia's League of Communists.

<sup>7</sup> Former communists have subsequently changed their name to the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

The nationalists now had an absolute majority in the Sabor, no previous democratic credentials, and no experience in negotiating with other opposition groups and parties. They used anti-communism and their defeat of the communists as an important source of their political legitimacy, even though many of them, including the president of the country, were former communist party members and officials themselves. The fact that by this time the majority of the population associated the communists with Milošević and his takeover of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia made the strategy additionally effective.

This strategy further destabilized and disoriented their main electoral rival, the SKH-SDP, which in reaction even distanced itself from the ethnic Serbs. At that time, the Serbs made up 12% of the population in Croatia and overwhelmingly voted for the former communists in the first elections. It was a move that pushed a big segment of that electorate towards the extreme nationalist Serbian leaders in Croatia. On the part of the Croatian communists it was a misguided and shortsighted attempt to establish their Croatian credentials.

The first elections already showed the outline of the Croatian political scene. Although there were more than 50 registered political parties<sup>8</sup>, there were three main political positions - the right, the left and the center. This is, of course, a notoriously oversimplified division, but for the time being, it will help to structure the Croatian political spectrum. The dominant party of the right is the HDZ with its populist nationalism and its strong hold on government since the first elections. The left is represented by the former communists, now the *Social Democratic Party* (SDP), which has in the meantime lost and regained some of its political ground. The *Social and Liberal Democrats* (HSLs) personify the center. The strongest and most articulate in the ten party coalition of the first elections, they have since emerged as the largest opposition party both in Parliament and in terms of membership.<sup>9</sup> The common characteristic of these parties is that they all have their revolutionaries and their conservatives, and that since 1991 they have all strongly supported Croatian independence.

An additional force that emerged on the scene at the very beginning, and has only grown in importance ever since, is the Croatian émigré community. Overall politically relatively moderate, it has always included small but passionate and well organized groups of nationalist extremists, some of whom occasionally even reverted to terrorist tactics. It was the extremist circles that decided that Franjo Tuđman and the HDZ were their options. That was reinforced by the fact that in the first televised presentation of his party, Tuđman already implied that Croatia should be interested in some territorial changes, especially in the region of western Herzegovina, a part of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the homeland of key Croat émigré figures. The extreme nationalists among the Croatian émigrés became instrumental in raising funds for Tuđman and the HDZ, although the actual donors were, in many cases, unsuspecting Croats who either simply wanted to help all of the non-communist opposition or facilitate fending off the Milošević threat and achieving independence.

In addition to raising and channeling funds, they also joined the HDZ in large numbers and gradually came to occupy some of the key positions in the party and in the state. The politics that they brought with them was the right wing, nationalistic politics of the past. Issues that had already moved to the realm of history in the context of Croatian political life, remained stunted and unchanged in the isolation of the émigré communities. Those ideas were now re-

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<sup>8</sup> In fact by 1995 there were 65 registered political parties in Croatia. However, the Croatian Statistical Yearbook for 1995 provides data for only 28 parties which have returned their official questionnaires with information. **Statistical Yearbook Croatia 1995**, Central Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb 1996, p.48

<sup>9</sup> In the 1997 elections for the House counties of parliament and for the municipal assemblies, HSLs suffered significant losses, while SDP gained votes and seats.

imported, revived and made political again. The process had an important influence in shaping the overall political agenda.

These were the main players on the Croatian political scene and they retained their positions and influence throughout the first six years of independence. The 1992 presidential elections only consolidated these positions, and Franjo Tuđman of the HDZ was elected to a 5 year term with 56.7% of the vote. A distant second was the leader of the HSLŠ, Dražen Budiša with 21.9%. The simultaneous elections for the House of Counties (županije) - the newly established second chamber of the parliament, gave the HDZ 43.7% of the vote and 85 seats in the 138 member assembly. Fourteen seats went to the HSLŠ and 11 to the SDP. All the other small parties gained between 3 and 6 seats each.

### Political Heritage

In the last official census in the Spring of 1991, Croatia had a population of 4,784,265 inhabitants, 78.1% (3,736,356) of whom were ethnic Croats, and 12.1% (581,663) ethnic Serbs. The remaining 9.8% either belonged to a variety of different ethnic groups, refused to declare their ethnicity (6.2%) or declared themselves as Yugoslavs (2.2%)<sup>10</sup>. In the five years of intermittent war between 1991 and 1995 the ethnic makeup of the population has changed considerably and it is unlikely that it will ever fully return to the 1991 ratios<sup>11</sup>. It is estimated that in the exodus during the two military operations in western Slavonia and Krajina in 1995, 180,000 ethnic Serbs left the country and became refugees in Serbia or Bosnia-Herzegovina<sup>12</sup>. Some indication may also be the fact that in the October 1995 elections, the number of seats in Parliament reserved for ethnic Serbs had been reduced from 13 to 3.

Although Croatia today may be more ethnically homogeneous than ever before, the complex and sometimes violent ethnic relations in the region and in the country itself played a central part in its political history.

### *Yugoslavism and Pan-Croatianism*

Centuries of Hungarian and Austro-Hungarian domination had created a strong desire for independence and home rule. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, that had been translated into two main political ideas and movements. One envisioned Croatian independence and strength through its unity with other south Slav nations, thus creating the concept of Yugoslavia. It was the Croats who first came up with this idea and started creating institutions, even under the Habsburg rule, with the Yugoslav name<sup>13</sup>. The other political option was that of an independent Croatia, advocated by the founder of the Party of Rights. But even this option viewed neighboring Slavic peoples as simply different variations of Croats in a kind of pan-Croatianism. When Yugoslavia was established at the end of WWI in 1918, it turned out to be quite different from the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal of the enlightened Croatian intellectual patriots. First called the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes and presided over by a Serbian dynasty, it was dominated by Serbia, which was the only one to have an army and one which had just won a war. The Croatian concept of an equal partnership of south Slavic peoples had no military backup.

<sup>10</sup> **Statistical Yearbook** of Croatia 1995, *ibid.*, p.70

<sup>11</sup> I discuss this issue in greater detail in the next section of this article.

<sup>12</sup> This estimate is quoted by the **Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1995**, US Department of State, Washington, D. C. 1996, Croatia, pp. 819-832. **The Country Profile - Croatia 1996-96**, The Economist Intelligence Unit, London 1996, p.27, quotes the figure of 150 000 - 200 000.

<sup>13</sup> The Yugoslav Academy of Sciences and Arts, founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Croatian Catholic bishop Strossmayer in Zagreb, is a case in point.

### *Croatian Peasants' Party*

The most important and dominant political force in Croatia became the *Croatian Peasants' Party* (HSS) and its charismatic and populist leader Stjepan Radić. Radić succeeded in mobilizing a still predominantly rural electorate, advocated greater parliamentary powers, and a "more perfect union", i.e. greater autonomy, or at least a more equal balance of power among different constituent parts of the Kingdom. He was assassinated in the parliament in Belgrade in 1928. Shortly after that the country's name was changed into the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and all party politics was suspended. Radić's party resurfaced once more in a short-lived triumph in the elections of 1939, when it won 93% of the vote in Croatia.

### *The Ustashe and WWII*

The legitimate and widely supported HSS was removed from power when the country was occupied by the German Nazi and Italian fascist forces in 1941. The actual executors were the quisling government formed by the extreme Croatian nationalists and fascists, who came with the occupying armies from Italy, together with most of the leadership, which had lived in exile. They called themselves *Ustashe* and for four years they presided over an entity called the *Independent State of Croatia* (NDH). It was neither independent, because it was totally subordinate to the appointee of the Nazi government in Berlin; nor was it a real state, because it did not control large parts of the territory under its jurisdiction where a parallel authority and army functioned in the resistance; nor, finally, was it Croatia, because almost half of it was annexed by Italy. The NDH was one of the nastier fascist governments of Europe. They proclaimed racial laws, established concentration camps and indulged in gruesome and widespread killings. They focused on exterminating Jews, Serbs, Gypsies and Croats who opposed them. The last popularly elected Croatian leader - head of the HSS was in their concentration camp. *Ustashe* never had mass support in Croatia, they came and left with the occupying Nazi forces, but the brutality of their rule left a deep scar on Croatian political identity.

### *Partisans*

The main and most effective resistance to their rule came from the Partisans in Croatia. They represented a broad anti-fascist coalition led by the Communists, that fought against ethnic discrimination, fascism and foreign occupation of the country. They formed provisional state authorities and institutions on Croatian territory under their control, and at the end of WWII these authorities took over the government of the Republic of Croatia within Yugoslavia. The wartime broad coalition was soon abandoned in favor of one-party communist rule. After all, it was the communists who controlled the army and could therefore easily proclaim that it was also them who had won the war.

### *Communists*

Only with hindsight is one capable of fully appreciating the enormity of the ethnic problem after the war. Ethnically based killings by *Ustashe* and Chetnik<sup>14</sup> forces marked large parts of the population, especially in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, where both forces had been operating. It was no small success of the new communist government and especially its unquestioned leader Tito, that all these people were living side by side again, most of them supporting the formation of the ethnically mixed post-war Yugoslavia. But even the shrewdest communist politician can only go so far. Like most other things, the ethnic balance was not main-

<sup>14</sup> *Chetniks* were the Serb extreme nationalist and fascist forces.

tained through freely expressed consent or political will, nor was it strengthened by fair, formalized and legitimate institutions. It was based on one person's charisma and on the ideology of "Brotherhood and Unity", backed up by a strong centralized police force. When these things weakened and dissolved, so did the success of the scheme: there were no legitimate mediating institutions that would be respected by all.

### *The Croatian Spring*

During the 45 years of communist one-part rule in Croatia, there was one short period in the late 60s and early 70s when there was a genuine opportunity for change. It later became known as the *Croatian Spring* because of its similarities with the Prague Spring of Alexander Dubček<sup>15</sup>. Like the Czechoslovak case, it was also a mass response of citizens to political liberalization instigated by a segment of the communist ruling elite. The Croatian political leadership at that time had gone through a general change and was dominated by people 30 years younger than Tito's generation of leaders. Their style and especially their relationship to the revolutionary legitimacy of the wartime leaders was different. In addition to opening up and liberalizing political life, allowing a variety of different political groups and opinions to emerge in public, they also introduced a major structural change in thinking about government.

Contrary to the unbending communist rule that for all practical purposes political legitimacy can only come from "above", i.e. from the supreme leader, they advanced the notion that the nature of the government should have something to do with the political will of the people. The formula used was that citizens should not only participate in carrying out policies, but also have a say in creating them - the concept was definitely that of "legitimacy from below". In their attempt to legitimize in this context their positions in power, they started promoting freedom of expression of Croatian national identity, and a fairer deal for Croatia in Yugoslav economic transactions. Both issues were seen as their common empirical interests by the majority of the Croatian population, and received wide voiceful support.

The enthusiasm of that support was the last straw that convinced the old guard that this was too dangerous to be allowed to continue. The Croatian leadership was accused of nationalism and chauvinism and forced to resign, not only from their positions, but from their party and from public life in general<sup>16</sup>.

Although the Croatian leadership itself was not nationalistic, its last few years in office provided a brief preview of the character of Croatia's future pluralism, where nationalism figured as an important factor. It showed that once it became opened, the Croatian political sense would be dominated by the struggle between those who want to channel the frustrated feelings of Croatian national identity towards building democratic institutions, a modern, functioning economy and an accountable government and those who would use those frustrations, seeing nationalism as the only guarantee of a Croatian state and discarding all other requirements.

### *The Constitution of 1974*

It is ironic that after it had been purged, most of the demands of the Croatian leadership were included in the 1974 amendments to the Yugoslav Constitution. Greater autonomy of the individual federal units was guaranteed and individual republics were given considerably more

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<sup>15</sup> I have written about the Croatian Spring in greater detail in "Korjenci hrvatskog političkog identiteta" (The Roots of Croatian Political Identity), *Erasmus* 15, Zagreb, February 1996, pp.3-8

<sup>16</sup> Accusing Croats of nationalism was part of a standard formula. At approximately the same time the Slovenian and Serbian leaderships were accused of techno-managerism and liberalism respectively, and also purged. That completed the standard pattern used for political disqualification at the time.

say in the running of their own economies. But by that time, there was nobody in power who could utilize these changes and steer development towards a more modern and pluralistic political system, and more liberal or even reformed political practices<sup>17</sup>.

These seven elements represent the crucial components of Croatian political heritage. In addition, Croatia's geographic location, its culture and its history made it identify with Central Europe rather than the Balkans. The level of economic development gave it a comparatively strong economy, and a boisterous managerial elite. All this shaped the political space, options and ways of thinking with which the country entered its pluralism and its independence.

### The War

It is often said that had it not been for the war, Croatia would today be an economically successful consolidated democracy. There is no doubt the war left deep scars and profoundly influenced political development. It started in 1991, continued intensely for the next two years, and then went on intermittently for another three years. Croatia was totally unprepared for the war, and nobody in the country really expected it. What was expected were sporadic conflicts, even armed skirmishes in certain areas, standoffs and heated negotiations between the Yugoslav Army and Croatian authorities. But very few people believed there would be an all out assault by a strong and well-armed army on a country that basically only had a lightly armed police force. When it became imminent, there was nothing much anybody could do. Even after the fighting had started, the Croatian government allowed the Yugoslav Army to evacuate its barracks, taking along all the hardware, believing that that might prevent an all out attack. The war itself had three phases and three distinct characters.

There was the war of 1991-1992 which was fought on Croatian territory. It was a war of aggression of the Yugoslav/Serbian Army against the country and its people. Croatia suffered terrible losses and destruction, had hundreds of thousands of refugees, was defending itself and fighting for survival. There was incredible hardship, but there was almost total unity in this struggle.

Then there was the war of 1993. That was the war in which Croatia lost its political innocence and got its political opposition. The Croatian Army, which had been established in the meantime, fought in Bosnia-Herzegovina against the Moslem Bošnjak population. It was now taking part in some of the same atrocities that have been committed against its own population only a few months earlier, and joining the Serbs' effort to partition that country. Croatia was stunned by this course of events. It had not only suffered loss of life and destruction, but it was now also the aggressor in another country.

The shock was sufficient to wake up Croatia's rather complacent opposition, and for the first time it started a vigorous campaign against the government's military involvement in Bosnia. This issue even split the ruling party and forced it to call for a Government of National Unity. The war in Bosnia brought shame to Croatia and deeply divided its electorate. It is an issue that has been postponed by relative instability and a feeling that there is still a potential outside threat. But the more the country goes into its post-war stability, the more there would be a need to face it and deal with it openly.

Finally, there was the war of 1995. It consisted of two major military operations, preceded by a long period of "low intensity conflict" of sporadic, isolated fighting and constant threat. Both operations were undertaken by the Croatian Army on Croatian soil, against the rebel forces of Croatian Serbs who were holding under their control close to one third of Croatia's ter-

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<sup>17</sup> They were all of approximately the same generation. By that time political leaderships were purged in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia, what was left was only the old guard and the result of a negative selection among the younger generation.



ritory. By this time, the situation on the ground had changed considerably. Croatia now had a relatively well trained, comparatively well-equipped, highly motivated army. The Milošević government in Belgrade, which had previously egged-on and supported the extremist Serb leadership in Croatian Krajina, had developed other worries and interests in the meantime. It decided that the Croatian extremist Serbs had outlived their usefulness and withdrew their support. The two military operations took place in spring and summer of 1995 in western Slavonia and Krajina, respectively. The casualties were seen as low by this war's standards<sup>18</sup>, and the result was Croatia's reclaiming most of its occupied territory<sup>19</sup>.

Another result was an exodus of about 180,000 Croatian Serbs who left right before, during and after both operations. This exodus changed Croatia's ethnic makeup<sup>20</sup>, and put on the agenda one of the most difficult and controversial issues for the post-war government. But at the time these two operations were widely seen as Croatia's success and a source of its renewed self-confidence and self-respect.

There was no doubt that the country could not exist much longer with its vital communications cut by the occupied territories. This also created an atmosphere of latent war, which stunted political development and liberalization of public life. "Operation Storm" in early August of 1995 was seen as the end of the war and the vindication of Croatia.

It was, however, seriously marred by the atrocities that started about two weeks after the end of the military action. The looting, arson and killing of the few remaining Serbs committed by bands of soldiers and civilians went on for months almost totally unchecked by the Croatian authorities. The governments' responsibility and reluctance to deal with this outrage tainted this victory. Actually, the government's standing in the opinion polls, at an all time high right after the retaking of Krajina in August started plummeting so rapidly in September, that the already early parliamentary elections announced for November were moved a month ahead to October. The aftermath of this last war operation was a drastic signal that the government in power might not know how to govern in peace.

### Political Identity

All these factors played a part in forming Croatia's current political identity. In fact, the better part of its domestic politics since independence, has been taken up by the struggle among representatives of these different influences in their attempt to dominate Croatian political scene and define its new identity. The changes of 1990 opened up the debate on what is the countries "usable past", what is its main heritage on which it can build its future. It is a process of deliberation and political self-defining that is still under way.

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<sup>18</sup> In the second, much larger operation *Storm*, the casualties during the actual military operation (until August 10, 1995) were reported as being 2 584 dead on the Serbian side and 150 dead on the Croatian side. Quoted from O. Žunec, "Država i pobunjenici: Operacija *Oluja* i njene posljedice" (State and the Rebels: Operation *Storm* and Its Consequences), *Erasmus* 13, Zagreb, October 1995, pp.4-10

There is, of course, to my mind no such thing as "low casualties". I am using this category here because people who have recently been through a war do actually come to evaluate military success also based on the number of casualties. The initial very favorable evaluation of both these operations by most people in Croatia, was also influenced by the fact that the casualties were low in comparison with all the previous experiences with this war.

<sup>19</sup> The only part that was still not under Croatian control was eastern Slavonia. Its peaceful reunification with Croatia is scheduled for July 15, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Nobody is quite certain about the actual numbers of that change, since there has not been a census since 1991. Some estimates say that during the whole war period (1991-95) Croatia's ethnic Serb population had gone from 12% to 5%.

There is no doubt that the war and the political tensions and pressures that immediately preceded it, played an extremely important part in this process. They greatly contributed to the 1990 and all subsequent electoral victories of the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), and to the comparative weakness and resignation of the opposition. It also contributed to the national homogenization and a delayed start of political pluralism.

It was, however, also very significant that the Croatian transition started in 1990 or, at best, in the final months of 1989, without any previous experience of roundtable negotiations or consolidation of the opposition. At the time of transition there was no political group or organization that could claim a history of struggle for democracy. The party that came to power in the first elections was headed and dominated by nationalists. Some of them had been harassed, persecuted and even imprisoned under the old communist regime. It was a demonstration of the totalitarian nature of that regime that it would imprison people for their political sentiments and beliefs, but it did not make these people into democrats. Advocating democratic changes and implementing some democratic institutions, such as the free multi-party elections, helped them come to power, but democracy was not their goal or the focus of their program.

### *The Party in Power*

As all the new regimes of Eastern Europe at that time, they came into office with two slogans on their banners: "Democracy", and "Justice to the Croatian (Polish, Romania, Slovak, Bulgarian) People". But it was really this "historical justice", presiding over Croatia's declaration of independence and statehood that they saw as their true goal, the main source of their political legitimacy - their right to rule. Since their pre-transitional democratic credentials were non-existent, it was not something that they were going to invoke once they came into power. So the "Democracy" part of the winning slogan from 1990, gradually faded into the background and was completely overshadowed by "Statehood". There were severe political attacks on groups, organizations and individuals questioning the democratic nature of the regime and its political behavior. The opponents were labeled anti-Croatian, traitors, international spies, enemies of their country and of the independence.<sup>21</sup> The government and the ruling party identified itself totally with the State, and started claiming that their opponents were the enemies of the state.

These two components were decisive in shaping the authoritarian character of Croatia's current political regime. By authoritarian, I mean here a regime that does not tolerate limited political pluralism, religious freedom and some social and economic pluralism.<sup>22</sup> There is, however, a strong government control of the media, and practically total control of the electronic media.<sup>23</sup> A predominantly majoritarian electoral system transforms relative electoral majorities into absolute parliamentary majorities and has given total control of the legislature and the executive to the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) for the seven years since the first free elections. The party in power has also launched several assaults on the judiciary in an attempt to put it under its control. On the highest level it has for the most part succeeded. A notable ex-

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<sup>21</sup> One of the early attacks of this kind was the notorious speech of Croatia's president F. Tudman at his party's congress in the Fall of 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Linz, Stepan and Gunther outline the following main characteristics of the authoritarian political regime: 1. Limited political pluralism; 2. Often quite extensive social and economic pluralism; 3. A more autonomous private sector; 4. Religious freedom; 5. Greater above ground cultural activity. In Linz, J., A. Stepan, R. Gunther, **Democratic Transition and Consolidation in Southern Europe, With the Reflections on Latin America and Eastern Europe**; *ibid.*, p.82.)

<sup>23</sup> The only independent electronic media are some local radio stations.

ception is the Constitutional Court of Croatia which has managed to preserve a considerable degree of independence and integrity.

The HDZ increasingly treats Croatia as a party-state, and has repeatedly emphasized that it is broad enough to encompass the entire political spectrum in the country, thus eliminating any need for political opposition. The president of the country, who is also the president of the party, does not distance himself from his party affiliation while in office. On the contrary, he has expressed open disdain for the opposition, calling it "the grazing cattle" in his 1995 speech.<sup>24</sup> Both he personally and his party have shown great arrogance in victory and with their high-handed, autocratic style, managed to alienate a large spectrum of different segments of the population.

Although being in power is a great homogenizing force for a political party, HDZ has started showing cracks and splits in its monolithic structure. In 1993 it split over Croatia's military involvement in Bosnia, when some of the key founding members left and started their own party. After that, for more than two years it had presented a monolithic front to the world. But 1996 was a difficult year for the ruling party. It was the first year of peace.<sup>25</sup> The outside threat, so conducive to the political status quo, has disappeared. It was also the year after the military reintegration of western Slavonia and Krajina. The elation of victory had been greatly subdued by the terror and destruction in these regions that followed in its wake. It is difficult and unconvincing to maintain the rule of law in some parts of the country, while there is lawlessness in others. The government was unable or unwilling to police that area and enforce the law. This experience increased a feeling of insecurity and unpredictability in the average citizens, regardless of their political orientation or preference.

Finally, it was also the year after the 1995 elections. Although there were a lot of accusations of the HDZ rigging the parliamentary elections, tempering with the voters lists and ballots, and bringing in at the last minute their winning votes from the army and the prisons (!) in closely contested constituencies, it were really the Zagreb elections that were the turning point. In the municipal elections for the Zagreb city council the Croatian Democratic Union lost in a big way.<sup>26</sup> It got 30% of the vote to the opposition's 70%. The opposition formed a coalition, elected the president of the city council, and nominated the mayor. But there is a stipulation in the Constitution requiring presidential confirmation of the mayor of Zagreb. President Tudman rejected the opposition's nominee, and HDZ went into a frenzy. They were trying to split the opposition's coalition, find coalition partners themselves, negotiate, put pressure on parties and individuals, but it did not work. Or rather, it did work, but not enough. The opposition was struggling to maintain its unity, and went through four different nominees from its ranks in an attempt to find a compromise without compromising itself in front of its voters. They were all respectable, moderate candidates, and they were all turned down by Tudman. In the end the government used an administrative oversight to impose their own candidate, part of the opposition council members refused to participate in protest, and the city was left in a stale-mate, awaiting the next elections. Officially, this whole affair was called "the Zagreb crisis", implying that it was somehow a complex matter of different interpretations that should be

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<sup>24</sup> Calling the opposition "the grazing cattle" (*stoka sitnog zuba*) was not only unthinkable arrogant, but also notably a rather rural metaphor, a fact not lost on the public at large.

<sup>25</sup> only part still awaiting reintegration is eastern Slavonia. Although of course important, it is a part of the country that is communication-wise quite isolated, on the Croatian eastern boarder with Serbia. The reintegration is both imminent and brokered by one of the few competent international mediators seen in this part of the world throughout the international involvement.

<sup>26</sup> Because of some administrative changes, the elections for the Zagreb city council were the only municipal elections held at that time. These elections were very important not only because Zagreb is the capital of the country, but also because it represents 25% of the entire Croatian population.

negotiated. In fact, it was no crisis at all. HDZ had simply lost the elections and refused to step down. In spite of all the complicated arguments, that much was plain for all to see. A satirical theater in town even put on a show about the "four mayors".

HDZ tried to act as if it had gotten away with it, but actually all of this had taken its toll. In addition to losing support,<sup>27</sup> it has also started showing disaffection and conflict in its own ranks.<sup>28</sup> Two crucial events took place in November of 1996. Almost simultaneously, it was reported that Tudman was seriously ill with cancer, and that the popular Zagreb local Radio 101 will not have its broadcasting license renewed. While the president was away in the hospital, 150 000 people demonstrated in support of Radio 101, thousands more phoned in their support to the Radio, all of which was heard on the air. The case of the Radio was galvanizing and demonstrating the opposition to HDZ, and HDZ came out on different sides: part of the leadership was openly in favor of the Radio, and part supported a Tudman inspired crusade against it. When he came back, he tried to enforce the party discipline and sweep everything under the carpet. But it was out. It did not only make the electorate think, it also made some among the HDZ leadership think. With their political future in mind, they cannot risk being identified with widely unpopular and autocratic political moves, that might have only a short-term perspective.

These events emphasized the fundamental split in Croatian politics today, and more precisely, the growing split within the ruling party: the division between those who would agree to follow the basic democratic procedure, respecting election results and observing elementary democratic rules of the game, and those who would not. The latter group had nothing against the rules while it could win, but in losing, as in Zagreb in '95, it lost its taste for democracy.

### *The Parties in Opposition*

It is often said that it is the ruling party which works most effectively for Croatia's opposition, because it was the HDZ arrogance and failures, rather than their own alternative policies and effective strategies that kept the opposition going through the war years. It voiced its first really opposing view to the government in 1993 over Croatia's military involvement in Bosnia. It has often been accused by the HDZ that it wants to win the elections and take over the government, but until recently that "accusation" was quite unjustified. Only since the '95 elections has the opposition started showing signs that it actually wanted to win and to govern the country. Its three major representatives are Croatian Social and Liberal Party (HSLs), Social-Democratic Party (SDP) and Croatian Peasants' Party (HSS). Three additional smaller parties and potential coalition partners are the right-wing nationalist Croatian Party of Rights, liberal regional Istrian Democratic Assembly and centrist and urban Croatian People's Party.<sup>29</sup>

For the 1997 parliamentary elections to the less important House of Counties, it has formed two main coalitions: one between Croatian Social and Liberal Party (HSLs) and Croatian Peasants' Party (HSS), and the other between Social-Democratic Party (SDP), Croatian People's Party (HNS) and Croatian Independent Democrats (HND). In the more important Hou-

<sup>27</sup> In the World Value Survey that I conducted in Croatia in December of 1995 on the Croatian representative sample, 38.9% of the respondents said they would vote for HDZ. In the Croatian political weekly *Tjednik* of March 15, 1997, the **highest** reported estimates are 30%.

<sup>28</sup> Only in the first three months of 1997 there were at least seven separate incidence of splits, desertions and resignations of prominent members or groups within the HDZ, reported in the national press.

<sup>29</sup> Makeup of the Parliament (House of Representatives) after the '95 elections: HDZ 75 seats; HSLs 13 s.; SDP 9 s.; HSP 4 s.; Novi Sabor 95 (coalition of 5 parties) 18 s.: HSS 10 s., IDS 4 s., HNS 2 s., HKDU 1 s., SBHS 1s.; SNS (Serbian People's Party) 2 s., ASH (Social Democratic Action of Croatia) 1 s., Independents 6s.

se of Representatives the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) has a solid over- 50% majority with a mandate until 1999.

The main problem for the opposition is unity - the need for the major parties to show the capacity to unite in their political action. That is exacerbated by the fact that the electoral system is heavily majoritarian, and has recently been made even more so. It has been demonstrated in the last elections that the voters

a) want a change - 70% of them in Zagreb voted against HDZ, and for different opposition parties;

b) favor party coalitions - 18,26% of them voted for Novi Sabor 95 - a coalition of five smaller parties. It got more votes than any individual opposition party, although the two major opposition parties were not part of the coalition.

Another serious problem for the opposition is access to the electorate, because of the government's heavy control of the media.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of its shortcomings and the fact that it has not yet been in the position to run the country, the opposition did manage to acquire some governing experience and produce results. The Liberals (HSLs), the Istrians (IDS) and the Social-Democrats (SDP) all won majorities in a number of city and county elections, and have had their mayors, local government chairpersons and county presidents in different parts of the country throughout the years of the independence. In the county assemblies they sometimes had majorities, but more often shared power with other opposition parties, or with the government party. In the four largest cities in the country the opposition had won the municipal elections in the past and had its mayors.<sup>31</sup> In spite of its often frustrating and uneven battle with HDZ, it has not been completely shut out and cut off from governing. Although it was systematically outvoted and outmaneuvered on the national level, it has been building its political base regionally and locally. That resulted in the fact that, especially in the case of the two largest opposition parties - HSLs and SDP, the local and regional party organizations are quite often more articulate and determined in their political actions than the national party leadership.

In Spring of 1997 the opposition lost the elections for the House of Counties - the less important house of Parliament, to the ruling HDZ. But on the local level, it won in **all** but one of the larger cities and towns, which account for well over one half of the population of the entire country. The biggest gain was won by the Social Democratic Party. Although this aspect of the election results went almost totally unreported by the government controlled media, it practically means that the opposition has taken over the running of the municipal government throughout the country. It sometimes even seems that on the national level, opposition parties themselves are not fully aware of the importance of these election results. They clearly spell out the political strategy and direction the opposition should take in their action - starting with grass-root mobilization and tangible, local results.

The poets, intellectuals, dissidents, political enthusiasts and businessmen of the early days might have all not yet turned into seasoned politicians, but they have all been learning the

<sup>30</sup> The MEDIA situation:

1. TV - totally state, i.e. HDZ controlled
2. One independent local radio station in Zagreb - Radio 101; some other independent local radio stations outside Zagreb with very weak transmitters covering very small areas
3. One independent daily newspaper, national, but also strongly regional - Novi list
4. 4 to 5 independent national political weeklies

<sup>31</sup> I am here including Zagreb where the opposition won a 2/3 majority in the '95 elections. It elected its President of the city council, but was denied its mayor in the earlier mentioned HDZ's maneuver to maintain its hold on power. The other three cities are Split, Rijeka and Osijek.

ropes of politics. Gone is the megalomania which counted on landslide victories without electoral strategies, and thought it was enough to be "Us" to get the votes. The opposition has learned to value the famous "gray" of democracy: the importance of political procedure, legality, strategy, compromise, respecting the norms and enforcing the ground rules of democratic behavior. More or less excluded from the national government, it has been building on its experience with local and regional authority.

Most importantly, the main opposition parties are dominated by moderates, favoring political change through negotiation and prepared to share power. It means that, unless there is a major violation of the political process or even its suspension by the ruling HDZ, the necessary change does not need to come through mass mobilization, upheavals and breakdown of the institutional continuity. The existing political opposition is capable of negotiating the basic rules with the moderate segment of the HDZ, and leading the country through its second transition to democracy. In the authoritarian atmosphere of current Croatian politics, it is also reassuring that the opposition enters the contest for power after having experienced political defeat and having worked in parliament as a minority.

### *Civil Society*

Finally, there is the civil society. In the post-communist years it has been de-glamorized throughout Eastern Europe, and became increasingly known by the pedestrian name of the non-government organizations. For different reasons, in Croatia it was almost non-existent in its defiant, dissident sense of the communist era, and started developing as an area of independent political and cultural life only after the changes. Since 1991 hundreds of small organizations and groups sprung up, mostly dealing with human rights, conflict resolution, refugees, minority rights, women's issues and community participation. There are also some theater and arts projects, as well as small independent think-tanks and public opinion research agencies.

In some cases civil society type of activity developed in unexpected quarters that, because of specific circumstances, became politicized way beyond all reasonable expectations. A case in point are the soccer fans' organizations. Their members and activist come from segments of society not traditionally associated with political activism, especially not the kind that promotes political freedoms and human rights. Indeed, they started out by being very supportive of the new government and the party in power. However, with its arrogant and senselessly aggressive behavior HDZ managed to alienate this group of its supporters and turn them into vigorous and tirelessly campaigning opponents. This broadened the base of the civil society type of activity.

But most visible and most influential of all in this area have been the independent media. Although not very numerous, they have been extremely prominent in Croatia's struggle for democracy. The two most famous examples are the political-satirical weekly *Feral Tribune* and the *Radio 101*. They have both been politically totally independent, without being tabloid. They have also both had a measure of success in their serious run-ins with the government.

In Spring of 1996 the State Prosecutor of Croatia charged the editor and a journalist of *Feral Tribune* with libel against president of the Republic. The main quoted incidence of the alleged libel was the statement that president Tudman was an avowed follower of general Francisco Franco's political ideas and concepts. The journalists decided to defend themselves in court by arguing that their statements were not libel because they were true. They used quotes from Tudman's interviews and speeches to support their argument. After only two sessions the court ruled in favor of the journalists and acquitted them on all charges. It was only one of many instances where *Feral Tribune* had to fight in court to protect the freedom of speech, but it was the first time that it had been sued in the name of the president of the country.

The popular local Zagreb *Radio 101* was going to have its broadcasting license and right to frequency terminated. Announced about two weeks before it was scheduled to take effect, the decision provoked mass demonstrations in the capital and support for the radio across political and party lines. Eventually, the frequency and the license were extended.

Both these examples demonstrated to a broad national audience that it was possible to speak out and survive. Even more importantly, with some public support, it was even possible to defend that right in the existing institutions and through the legal process. The mass demonstrations and debates surrounding these two cases provided the experience of intense political participation for a much wider segment of the population than would otherwise been the case. It was an experience in political and civic activism.

### **Political Strategies for the Future**

In 1997 Croatia is at a crossroads. It has still not managed to change its first post-communist government, and therefore political change through elections is still a rather abstract concept for most of the electorate. However, the party in power is facing major turmoil and change, splits and dissent, including quite possibly disintegration. The president of the party and the country, a major integrating force within the HDZ, is seriously ill and poised to leave the political scene. Regardless of the presidential election results, the post-Tudman era is approaching fast. The opposition parties are still disunited, facing serious organizational and financial problems, but they are also in power in all the cities and they are showing a will to govern. The governing of the country is in effect already divided: the opposition is in power on the municipal and local level, while the HDZ controls the national government.

Under these circumstances there are three possible strategies of political development and types of outcome:

#### **1. The Negotiated Transition Strategy**

President Tudman's departure will trigger off major changes in his party. It will disintegrate as a broad movement embodying a wide spectrum of political options, and gradually re-invent itself as a true political party. The moderates and more pragmatic politicians will gain an upper hand within HDZ, which has internally been dominated by a minority of hard-liners and extremists. Under a more moderate and future-oriented leadership it will enter into negotiations with major opposition parties and forces, setting down basic rules of democratic behavior and ways of enforcing them. Without causing any kind of institutional discontinuity, this type of broad and basic agreement will enable the country to move from its current authoritarian form of government onto the path of democratic change and consolidation.

This strategy assumes that there is a political will within the ruling party to deal with their own extremists, either by marginalizing them or even pushing them out altogether. It also assumes a political situation on the ground which requires some form of power-sharing. There are currently indications of both these developments. The arrests in early 1997 of two warlords and suspected Mafiosi from the Croat dominated western Herzegovina, for example, signaled the strengthening of a different climate within HDZ. HDZ has a majority in the main house of Sabor until 1999, while the opposition won in all the cities in the country. This clean divide in the control of the local and national government between the ruling party and the opposition points towards power-sharing.

#### **2. The Muddling Through Strategy**

This strategy applies in case the moderate wing within the ruling party proves to be too weak or too indecisive to take control of and restructure its own party. The factions in the party still remain prominent, but neither can gain an upper hand. There are attempts at manipula-

ting and marginalizing the opposition local governments, no structured negotiations with the opposition, and no formalized power-sharing. However, different factions from both sides negotiate behind the scene. This extends the HDZ tenure in government, while at the same time seriously eroding the government's legitimacy and encouraging dissent in the ruling party. The muddling through strategy could work only as a very temporary stage, but it would significantly influence the defining of the major players, and postpone the country's democratic transition.

### 3. The Coup

Suspending basic democratic institutions and imposing a military-style government is an option that has already been explored by analysts in Croatia. Its likelihood would dramatically increase with a victory of the HDZ hard-liners and their taking control of the party while still in power. It would mean further politicizing of the army and the police force, and suppressing of all attempts to make these newly created institutions into neutral forces in the service of the state. Since the hard-line faction, made up primarily of people not from the country itself, could not win elections on its own, this strategy would involve their continued domination through suspending the elections and assuming overtly dictatorial powers. Quite probably it would also involve renewed military operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Considering the current constellation on the political scene, as well as the developments within the ruling party, the most likely outcome for the coming phase in Croatia's political development is a combination of the first and the second type of strategy. A *muddling through* stage will be followed by more serious negotiations and future-oriented political transition to stability. In the Croatian context stability can only mean democratic consolidation, and it will be driven as much by the business community as it will by the current political opposition. The wait for this second stage, however, will depend on the opposition's capability to unite and provide leadership.