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*Croatian democracy*

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**National Minorities and Croatian Democracy\***

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Summary

The definition of the status of the national minorities in the Republic of Croatia was worked out nationally or in cooperation with the international community. Among other things it resulted in the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities. This Law regulated the national minorities' rights, formally enlarged them, especially after passing the appropriate legislation and adopting the fundamental international documents related to the protection of national minorities: the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. The general political and social situation in today's Croatia does not facilitate the exercise of minority rights.

*Key words:* national minorities, Croatia, minority rights



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*Introduction*

After fifteen years of democracy in Croatia, it is an appropriate moment to analyze and discuss the exercise of the rights of Croatia's national minorities in order to get a broad picture of their practice and the challenges, as well as the future prospects. The regulation and the practical exercise of the

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rights of national minorities became the benchmark of the democratization of the Croatian society. The Republic of Croatia very soon became aware of that fact, and immediately after its recognition enabled the continuation of the exercise of the rights of the existing minorities but also began working on defining a new, more appropriate model of the realization of the minority rights that were to encompass the “new” national minorities.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, the rights of national minorities in Croatia have stood in the way of a more comprehensive democratization of the society. Instead of broadening “the spirit of law” as a guarantee of the exercise of the proclaimed freedoms and rights, the policies marred by intolerance and jingoism towards diversity and certain national minorities were pursued as well as various forms of discrimination. All this escalated the state of war and made peace precarious. The international community soon took notice of the violations of minority rights in Croatia and began applying constant pressure but also offered its help to make certain improvements. The normative regulation and the practical realization of the rights of national minorities became one of the conditions for Croatia’s economic and political integration in the EU and NATO.

It might be said that it was only with the change of the party in power in 2000 that the real political transition in Croatia could commence and gain momentum, when major steps in the protection of the rights of national minorities were made. This led to the creation and the implementation of the minority policy that meant the integration of the national minorities into the Croatian society as well as the preservation of their national identities. The government of the Republic of Croatia formed after the elections of 2003 went a step further in the protection of national minorities’ rights: it entered into coalition agreements with the representatives of national minorities and pledged it would take some concrete measures to continually promote the protection of national minorities and solve the remaining open questions that the national minorities in Croatia are confronted with. Of particular significance was the consistent implementation of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities and the law regulating the education and the official use of the languages and the alphabets of national minorities.

### *National minorities in Croatia*

The last census in Croatia was carried out in 2001. The official results were published one year later. In the decade between 1991 and 2001 the total population of Croatia decreased 7.25% (from 4.784.265 to 4.437.460); the share of the majority Croatian nation in the total population increased for 11.53% (from 78.1 to 89.63), while the share of the national minorities decreased for 50% and is now 7.47% or 331,383 inhabitants.

Table 1: Croatia's population according to ethnicity in 2001

	<b>Total</b>	<b>%</b>
Croatia (total)	4.437.460	100.0
Croats	3.977.171	89.6
National minorities (total)	331.383	7.5
Albanians	15.082	.3
Austrians	247	.0
Bosniacs*	20.755	.5
Bulgarians	331	.0
Czechs	10.510	.2
Germans	2.902	.1
Hungarians	16.595	.4
Italians	19.636	.4
Jews	576	.0
Macedonians	4.270	.1
Montenegrins	4.926	.1
Polacks	567	.0
Roma	9.463	.2
Romanians	475	.0
Russians	906	.0
Ruthenians	2.337	.1
Serbs	201.631	4.5
Slovaks	4.712	.1
Slovenians	13.173	.3
Turks	300	.0
Ukrainians	1.977	.0
Vlachs	12	.0
Others	21.801	.5
Undeclared		
Total	89.130	2.0
Regional affiliation	9.302	.2
Unknown	17.975	.4

\* In the 2001 census 19,677 citizens declared their ethnicity as Muslim.

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics

The results of the 2001 census confirmed the speculations regarding the altered ethnic structure of the Croatian population when compared to 1991. The 2001 census included statistical data for 22 national minorities. The largest national minority are the Serbs with 201,631 people or a 4.54% share in the total Croatian population, followed by the Bosniacs (20,631 or .5%), Italians (19,636 or .4%), Hungarians (16,595 or .4%), Albanians (15,082 or .3%), Slovenians (13,173 or .3%), Czechs (10,510 or .2%), Roma (9,463 or .2%), Montenegrins (4,926 or .1%), Slovaks (4,712 or .1%), Macedonians

(4,270 or .1%), Germans (2,902 or .1%), Ruthenians (2,337 or .1%), Ukrainians (1,977), Russians (906), Jews (576), Polacks (567), Rumanians (475), Bulgarians (331), Turks (300), Austrians (247) and Vlachs (12). Additionally, 19,677 people declared themselves as Muslims.

The drop in the size of national minorities in comparison with the 1991 census was registered in the following national minorities: Serbs (65%), Montenegrins (49%), Slovenians (41%), Macedonians (32%), Ruthenians (28%), Hungarians (25%), Ukrainians (20%), Slovaks (15%), Italians (7%). The increase was registered in the number of the Roma (41%), Albanians (25%) and Germans (10%). In the 2001 census, a portion of the Muslims registered in 1991 (43,496 people) declared themselves as Bosniacs. The aggregate number of Bosniacs and Muslims in the 2001 census was 40,529 people, which represents a 7% drop in comparison with the number of Muslims registered in 1991.

The publication of the census results was followed by a discussion about the reasons for the drop in the size of some national minorities. The government of the Republic of Croatia in its 2004 report about the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities mentioned, among others, the following reasons: weakened and broken bonds within the national minorities, their geographical dispersal, urban migration and urbanization, the regional and overseas migration (especially during and after the war of 1991-5), the bigger social mobility due to better education, the mixed marriages which double the population's ethnic component, particularly characteristic for the members of the Serbian national minority from Croatian towns and the areas not affected by the war, the heightened identification with one's professional or social group or regional affiliation, and finally, the consequences of the war of 1991-5.<sup>1</sup>

### *Principles and substance of minority policy in Croatia*

In the field of legal regulation of the position of its national minorities<sup>2</sup> Croatia has reached a high level of the normative requirements for the protection of their rights. In late 2004, the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities was passed, all the relevant international conventions were ratified, an array of pertinent implemental documents was adopted, and three international agreements regulating the bilateral protection of national

<sup>1</sup> See the Report of the Republic of Croatia on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, March 2004, p. 45, <http://www.vlada.hr>.

<sup>2</sup> "A national minority shall be a group of Croatian citizens whose members have been traditionally settled in the territory of the Republic of Croatia, and who have ethnic, linguistic, cultural and/or religious characteristics which are different than those of other citizens and who are guided by the wish for the preservation of those characteristics." The Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette*, no. 155/2002, Article 5.

minorities were signed.<sup>3</sup> In the last four years, the previously precarious position of most national minorities has improved. Since Croatia is on its way to join the European integrations and with all the positive social processes this is going to launch, both the position of all Croatian citizens and the members of the national minorities is going to change for the better.

Despite the postwar and transitional hardships, Croatia managed to design a comprehensive model of the protection of its national minorities at the national, regional and local levels, and bring it into line with the European practice and standards. It should be noted that the model of cultural autonomy promotes the integration of national minorities and not their assimilation into the Croatian society. This model guarantees national minorities the preservation and the promotion of their identity (ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious), either individually or collectively.

According to the adopted model of cultural autonomy, most ethnic rights of national minorities (education, science, libraries, protection of monuments) are enforced through the institutions professionally and administratively responsible for certain areas of social life, which enables the realization of the principle of the integration of national minorities into the Croatian society, but also guarantees the protection of their cultural and ethnic identity. The second aspect of the ethnic rights (information, publishing, cultural amateurism, cultural manifestations) is fostered through the activities of the national minorities' nongovernmental organizations, thus additionally ensuring the protection from assimilation. The model enables and fosters the development of the relationships of the national minorities with the states of their parent nation to facilitate their cultural and linguistic development.

The legal position of national minorities in Croatia is regulated by certain provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the provisions of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities and several other laws. Croatia is among the countries in which the position and the rights of national minorities are regulated by a special law. The first Constitutional Law on the protection of national minorities was passed in 1991, and was later relatively often amended.<sup>4</sup>

The new Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, the passing of which was one of Croatia's commitments required by the EU Stabilization and Accession Agreement, was the conclusion of the creation of a comprehensive normative framework for the exercise of national minority rights. According to the Constitutional Law, Croatia ensures the exercise of special rights and freedoms which the members of its national minorities may enjoy individually or together with other persons belonging to the same

<sup>3</sup> Croatia signed the international agreements on bilateral protection of national minorities with Italy, Hungary, and Serbia and Montenegro.

<sup>4</sup> *Official Gazette*, no. 65/1991, 27/1992, 34/19992 – clean text, 51/2000, 105/2000 – clean text.

minority and, when stipulated by the Constitutional Law or a special law, together with members of other national minorities. These rights include:

- the use of their own language and script, privately, in public and official use;
- education in the language and script they use;
- the use of their signs and symbols;
- cultural autonomy by way of preservation, development and expression of one's own culture and the preservation and protection of one's cultural assets and tradition;
- the right to profess one's religion and to establish religious communities together with other members of that religion;
- access to the media and the performance of activities of public information (receiving and disseminating information) in the language and script they use;
- self-organizing and association for the purpose of exercising mutual interests;
- representation in the representative bodies at the state and local level and in administration and judicial bodies;
- participation of members of national minorities in the public life and in management of local affairs through the councils and through representatives of national minorities;
- protection from any activity which endangers or may endanger their existence, the exercise of rights and freedoms.<sup>5</sup>

Although the model of cultural autonomy and political representation of national minorities in Croatia can structurally get high marks, there are still some problems in its implementation:

- inadequate training and preparedness of some institutions;
- insufficient interest of some bodies of local and regional self-government;
- lack of interest and/or motivation of members of national minorities or their organizations.

Resolving these problems and eliminating prejudices (mostly the consequence of the war) in a portion of the population towards some national minorities are the priorities in advancing the position of national minorities in Croatia.

<sup>5</sup> Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette*, 155/2002, Article 7.

The education of the members of a national minority is carried out in pre-school institutions, primary and secondary schools and other school institutions in the language and script they use, under the conditions and in the manner stipulated by a special law on the education in the language and script of national minorities.<sup>6</sup> School institutions with the education in the language and script of national minority may be established and education may be conducted for a smaller number of pupils than the number stipulated for school institutions with education in the Croatian language and Latin script. The right and obligations of pupils educated in the language and script of national minorities shall be to learn the Croatian language and Latin script according to the determined curriculum, apart from their own language and script, and the curriculum shall, except for the general part contain a part of the content which is related to a specific quality of a national minority (mother tongue, literature, history, geography and cultural opus of a national minority). The education of national minorities is carried out by means of three basic and some special models of schooling. The basic models are (A) education in the minorities language and script; (B) bilingual education; and (C) nurturing their language and culture.

According to the Constitutional Law, the members of national minorities, in line with a special law, may use their language and script in official communication. Also, they may maintain contacts with their parent country and cooperate with the competent institutions of their parent nation in the exercise of their minority rights.<sup>7</sup> For the preservation of their linguistic identity it is especially important to ensure national minorities' access to the public media at the national and local level.

### *Political representation of national minorities in Croatia*

The starting point for analyzing political representation of national minorities is the liberal tradition encompassing various attitudes towards the rights of national minorities. On the one hand are the partisans of the protection of minority rights and the necessity for the preservation of minority identities, as they consider minority rights a legitimate aspect of liberal tradition. In the last two centuries the granting of rights to national minorities has at times been understood as a clear sign of liberal development. On the other hand, there are those who think that a consistent promotion of individual citizens' rights makes the additional protection of national minorities superfluous. Many liberal theorists believe that people's desire for cultural belonging is protected sufficiently enough by general civil rights and that all additional measures for the protection of such rights are unnecessary. They

<sup>6</sup> Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette*, 155/2002, Article 11.

<sup>7</sup> Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette* 155/2002, Article 16.

argue that the system of universal individual rights affirms cultural diversity since everybody has the right of association for satisfying religious or ethnic needs. Freedom of association enables people of different ethnicity to freely adopt lifestyles. Everyone is free to join different associations and to seek new followers on the “cultures market”: the attractive styles and identities survive, the unappealing ones disappear. That is why it is not wise to politically acknowledge or support certain identities or cultural styles, even when they belong to national minorities. According to this liberal argument it is unfair to financially support the life-choices of members of national minorities at the expense of other citizens. Some say that deficient representation may be overcome without guaranteeing representation to national minorities. For example, political parties may become more open by removing the obstacles that stand in the way of members of national minorities becoming party candidates or leaders (Kymlicka, 2003: 193-4).

Contrary to this, many champions of group-specific rights of national minorities insist that they are necessary to ensure the same treatment for all citizens.<sup>8</sup> According to this approach, “accommodation of differences is the essence of genuine equality”. The partisans of “intentional neglect” will reply that individual rights already allow for the accommodation of differences and that genuine equality requires equal rights for all individuals regardless of their religious and ethnic belonging. Liberal democracy today is a form of social order primarily grounded in individual civil rights and thus in fact restricts the scope of the protection of national minorities. Because of this there is no uniform model in today’s liberal democracies as to how to protect national minorities and how to ensure their survival in the ethnically majoritarian environment which is often hostile to all or some national minorities.

Until recently the prevailing opinion was that liberalism on principle is against the collective legal protection of minorities. After World War Two, liberal theorists argued that all issues of democratic constitution of society and social justice can be settled by developing universal civil and human rights. Besides, it was thought that there had already existed a historical model which indirectly protected the life of culturally heterogeneous groups by ensuring equality of their members before the law: the model of religious tolerance i.e. political separation of the church and the state. According to this model, ethnicity, just like religiosity, should be something people may freely express in their private lives, but it is no concern of the state. It was thought that the “ethnically neutral” state cannot grant special collective rights to national minorities. Lately, however, there have been liberal theorists who convincingly argue that the idea of ethnocultural neutrality is simply a myth (Kymlicka, 1996: 2003). They claim that people are rooted in

<sup>8</sup> The rights to special group representation in political institutions of broader society decrease the possibility that a national or ethnic minority will be ignored in the decisions brought at the national level (Kymlicka, 2003: 57).



their culture and that the respect for someone else's (national) culture is important for his or her sense of dignity and self-respect. A shift in the liberal theory of social justice and the collapse of socialism in eastern Europe, together with ethnic conflicts, have induced international organizations such as NATO, OESS, EU and the Council of Europe, to start promoting the rights of national minorities as a precondition for the integration of East-European democracies. That is why the 1990s saw the creation of international (European) minority law (Mesić, 2003). Of particular significance are the OESS and the Council of Europe documents e.g. the Lund Recommendation on the effective participation of minorities in public life, the European Charter on Regional and Minority Languages and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. It should be noted that "special" rights of national minorities were supposed to ensure equality and equal opportunities for national minorities which, due to a variety of objective circumstances, find themselves at a disadvantage in an environment. Although these rights are mostly defined as individual rights (the rights of the individual), in their exercise nevertheless, their collective character is often confirmed. Their function is not only to protect individuals but also certain minority communities these individuals belong to (Van Dyke, 1985: 14-15, 44-45).

Regarding the representation of political interests Croatia guarantees to members of its national communities the right to representation in the Croatian parliament (Sabor).<sup>9</sup> Also, Croatia guarantees to members of national communities the right to representation in the representative bodies of local self-government units and in the representative bodies of regional self-government units.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia contains a general guarantee of equality of all before the law, without discrimination on the basis of gender, language, religion, political and other conviction, national and social origin, property, birth, education, social status or other characteristics, the law-giver adopted the approach according to which, to ensure equality and parity of the majority people and the national minorities, the normative guarantee of political representation of national minorities in the highest representative body is also needed. Article 15 of the Croatian Constitution explicitly postulates the principle of affirmative action in favour of national minorities. This constitutional stipulation represents a deviation, at least in one constitutional-legal area, from the otherwise overrepresented individual concept of the protection of minorities in Croatian society. Namely, political rights of national minorities formally and legally enable the acceptance of the constitutional-legal concept of minority (political) rights as collective rights of national minorities (Omejec, 2001: 23).

<sup>9</sup> Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette*, 155/2002, Article 19.

<sup>10</sup> Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette*, 155/2002, Article 20.

*Table 2: Results for elections of representatives of national minorities for the Croatian parliament in 2003*

<b>Constituency for minorities</b>	<b>Voters (total)</b>	<b>voted</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Valid ballots</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Votes gained by winning candidate</b>	<b>%</b>
Serbs	222,769	47,610	21.37	46,126	96.88	25,773 *	22.16
Hungarians	10,366	4,204	40.56	4,080	97.05	1,714	42.01
Italians	12,520	6,051	48.33	5,849	96.66	4,669	79.83
Czechs & Slovaks	7,386	3,357	45.45	3,257	97.02	1,277	39.21
Austrians**	8,908	1,933	21.70	1,854	95.91	265	14.29
Albanians***	21,930	4,726	21.55	4,587	97.06	2,711	59.10

\* This constituency elected three representatives of the Serbian minority.

\*\* In this constituency one representative was elected by the members of the Austrian, Bulgarian, German, Polish, Roma, Romanian, Ruthenian, Russian, Turkish, Ukrainian, Vlach, and Jewish national minorities.

\*\*\* In this constituency one representative was elected by the members of the Albanian, Bosniak, Montenegrin, Macedonian, and Slovenian national minorities.

The Croatian legislation applies the policy of reserved places for members of national minorities in legislative and other bodies of government and local and self-government units. The number of these seats depends on the percentage of a national minority in the total population of Croatia or a local community.<sup>11</sup> Due to the possibility of manipulating the votes of the electoral body made up of the members of national minorities, the question is whether it is justified to apply the principle of affirmative action in the electoral process, having in mind the generally accepted opinion that the principle of affirmative action is normatively justified only for the period necessary to overcome the reasons for its introduction into a country's electoral-legal system in the first place. Is political representation of national minorities in Croatia still required by legally and constitutionally reserving a certain number of seats in the representative bodies for the members of national minorities? There has been no clear answer to this question yet. For the time being most that can be said is that legal intervention, in the form of the legal entitlement of national minorities to political representation in the Croatia

<sup>11</sup> In the protection of minority rights at the national level, the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities envisages two groups of minorities: those that make more than 1.5% of the population and those below that percentage. The Serbian national minority belongs to the first group and is entitled to representation in the Sabor with minimum one and maximum three representatives. The other minorities are entitled to a total of five representatives. The Constitutional Law does not envisage the right of members of national minorities to double suffrage, so it is unlikely that it will be introduced in future elections. The electoral law used for the election of 2003 did not envisage its introduction.

parliament will be needed as long as the Croatian society has not evolved to the point in which there will be no fear of the political marginalization of non-Croats in the representative bodies on all levels of government (Omejec, 2001: 27).

To improve, preserve and protect the position of national minorities in the society, the members of national minorities elect, in the manner and under the conditions stipulated by the Constitutional Law, their representatives for the reason of participation in the public life and management of local affairs through the councils and representatives of national minorities in self-government units. According to this Law, in self-government units in the area of which members of an individual minority participate with at least 1.5% in the total population of the self-government unit, in local self-government units in the area of which more than 200 members of an individual national minority are living, and regional self-government units in the area of which more than 500 members of a national minority are living, members of each of those national minorities may elect the Council of National Minority, and in local self-government units in the area in which at least 100 members of a national minority are living, a minority representative shall be elected for the area of such self-government unit.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the election of minority representatives for whose nomination political parties are authorized, national minorities have no right to nominate their members for the Council of National Minority. According to the Law, the authorized nominators are the associations of national minorities or citizens' associations of the members of a minority.<sup>13</sup>

An important novelty in the Constitutional Law is that the Council of National Minority in a self-government unit has the right to:

- propose to the bodies of a self-government unit the measures for the improvement of the position of a national minority in the state or in an area thereof, including the submission of proposals of general acts which regulate the issues of significance for a national minority to the bodies which adopt them;
- propose candidates for duties in state administrative bodies and bodies of self-government units;
- be informed about each issue which the working bodies of the representative body of a self-government unit will discuss, and which pertains to the position of a national minority;

<sup>12</sup> Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette*, 155/2002, Article 24.

<sup>13</sup> The candidates for minority representatives may be proposed by the associations of citizens and by at least 20 citizens from the area of a municipality, by at least 30 citizens from the area of a town, and by at least 50 citizens from the area of a county.

- provide opinions and proposals with regard to the programmes of radio and television stations at the local and regional level intended for national minorities or programmes which deal with minority issues.<sup>14</sup>

The Law does not envision the possibility of forming minority self-government at the national level, but the coordination of the councils of national minorities may be formed. The coordination of the councils of different minorities in a self-government unit is allowed, as well as the coordination of the councils of a national minority in several local units or at the national level. However, by not allowing for the possibility of forming minority self-government at the national level the possibility for the establishment of the council of national minority as a legal entity has been avoided. Such legal authority would enable this council to legitimately represent national minorities before the bodies of central government.

In those self-government units in which a minority has no right to form a council as its size is under the minimum stipulated by the Law, but there are at least 100 of them, the members of a minority may elect their minority representative. He or she are elected in accordance with the electoral law, in the same way as the councils of national minorities; once elected, the representative has the authority to represent the minority before the bodies of a self-government unit and is obliged to promote the interest of the national minority.<sup>15</sup> The first elections for the Councils and the representatives of national minorities were held in May of 2003<sup>16</sup>, and the by-elections were held in February of 2004. With these elections and the formation of the councils *sui generis*, Croatia entered a new era of the protection of minority rights.

One of the novelties of the Constitutional Law is the establishment of the Council for national minorities. One of the competences of the Council is the distribution of the funds allotted from the state budget for the programs of national minorities. The Council has the right to propose to the bodies of state authorities to discuss certain issues of significance for a national minority, particularly regarding the implementation of the Constitutional Law and special laws regulating minority rights and freedoms. The Council also has the right to give opinions and proposals about the programs of public radio and television stations and the undertaking of economic, social and other

<sup>14</sup> Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, *Official Gazette*, 155/2002., Article 31.

<sup>15</sup> The government stipulated that national minorities have the right to form their councils in 16 counties and 262 units of local self-government, and that they have the right to elect a representative in all the counties and 40 towns.

<sup>16</sup> The first elections for the councils and representatives of national minorities were beset by problems and the voter turnout was relatively modest. Nevertheless a number of councils and representatives of national minorities were elected facilitating the exercise of the rights of national minorities at the local and national levels. In February 2004, the by-elections for the councils and representatives of national minorities were held.

measures in the areas traditionally or in a significant number inhabited by members of national minorities in order to preserve their existence in those areas.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the Council has the right to request and acquire from the bodies of state authorities and bodies of local and regional self-government the data and reports. It can also invite and request the presence of representatives of bodies of state authorities and bodies of local and regional self-governments whose competence includes the issues from the scope of activities of the Council. It is also stipulated that the Council shall cooperate with the competent bodies of international organizations and institutions which deal with the issues of national minorities as well as with the competent bodies of parent countries of members of national minorities living in Croatia.

### *Exercise of the rights of national minorities in Croatia*

Generally, the position of national minorities in Croatia has improved in the last four years due to the political, administrative and social changes. Also, in the new legal and political conditions the national minorities have a bigger responsibility for their position. In that respect, besides improving the relevant legislation and implementing the laws regulating the position of national minorities – the tasks of the bodies of central government and the bodies of local and district self-government – it is necessary to define the common grounds for social action of minority organizations in strengthening the position of national minorities in the future. These should, above all, include the activities linked to fortifying social organization and self-organization of the members of national minorities in NGOs, as well as their more active participation in the work of the bodies of government at the national, regional and local level. The joint activities of the associations of national minorities are important, as are their cooperation and the cooperation with the NGOs for the protection of human rights and the promotion of democracy and civil society. In Croatia it is necessary, more than previously, to target activities at the public and the majority people with the purpose of challenging the existing stereotypes about national minorities (or some national minorities).

These joint activities of the national minorities' NGOs in building the political culture and raising the level of tolerance may greatly contribute to the eradication of prejudices. All the sensitive questions of living in a multiethnic and multicultural society should be discussed without nationalist pas-

<sup>17</sup> The government appoints the Council members. Seven members are appointed by the government based on the proposal of the councils of national minorities. Five members are appointed from the ranks of eminent cultural, scientific, professional and religious experts, following the proposal of minority associations, religious communities, legal persons and members of national minorities. The Council's members are also the representatives of national minorities in the Croatian parliament.

sions and euphoria. This requires an educational reform and the incorporation of the principles of multiculturalism and interculturalism into all aspects of school activities. Summing up the implementation of the rights of national minorities in Croatia, it should be pointed out that the cultural autonomy rights are most fully exercised by the members of those national minorities (due to their good organization) that enjoyed these rights before Croatia's independence. The members of the peoples of the former Yugoslavia who had used to live in Croatia at the moment of its international recognition became the members of national minorities and are still at the organizational stage of the comprehensive exercise of their minority rights.

Today's political and social situation in Croatia does not facilitate the exercise of minority rights. The consequences of the war and a very complex economic and social situation have aggravated the exercise of the rights of national minorities, and the relevant discussions cannot be as substantial as they could be in some well-ordered state. The biggest problems related to certain national minorities are the return of refugees and the resolution of their status (the Serbian national minority), the social problems and the problems of integration (the Roma national minority). It should be expected, however, that with Croatia's membership in the European integrations and the benefits it brings, it will soon become clear that national minorities are Croatia's advantage and not a burden. By creating the grounds for the realization of the rights of national minorities, Croatia has made giant steps in enhancing its international stature. Through its national minorities Croatia can improve its links and cooperation with some influential states in its surroundings, not only culturally but economically as well. These states can help Croatia in different areas, particularly on its way to the European Union and NATO.

*Translated from Croatian by Božica Jakovlev*

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