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## **BORDERLAND MIMICRY: IMPERIAL LEGACIES, NATIONAL STANDS AND REGIONAL IDENTITY IN CROATIAN ISTRIA AFTER THE NINETIES**

Imperial legacies have a twofold nature: they can be used for supporting ethno-national identification but also for emphasising locally based narratives of hybrid identities and multiple attachments. The main hypothesis is that this twofold nature of imperial legacies emerges in the context of a problematic relation between nationality and citizenship. The hypothesis is examined in the context of the activation of the discourses of imperial legacies at the local level – in Croatian Istria in the 1990s – when they were employed as a counter-narrative to social and cultural homogenization which was propagated by the Croatian government.

Key words: Istria, frontier, political identities, imperial legacies

*Mi identifico con la frontiera*

Fulvio Tomizza<sup>1</sup>

Nation-building processes often exploit discourses of imperial legacies and, not surprisingly, by the nineties onwards it was often the case in South Eastern Europe. Such legacies – the Venetian, the Habsburg and the Ottoman ones – were generally used by the local elites to reinforce the conflicts between different nationalist ideologies, which were pictured like conflicts of civilization. However, imperial legacies also convey narratives of hybrid identities, everyday life coexistence and multiple belonging. It is less acknowledged that these narratives were sometimes activated at the local level to contrast the disrupting effect of nationalist trend of

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<sup>1</sup> “I impersonate the frontier”; the late Fulvio Tomizza was one the most relevant writers in contemporary Istria.

social and cultural homogenization (Richardson 2008; Laven and Baycroft 2008; Driessen 2005; Bufon and Minghi 2000).

According to the foregone, the main hypothesis of this paper is that the twofold nature of imperial legacies, both supporting ethno-national identification and local patterns of territorial identification, emerges in the context of a problematic relation between nationality and citizenship. Such relation can be found in many areas of Europe's "Eastern peripheries" (Schwara 2003; Green 2007) but it is a quite relevant issue in the newly born South Eastern European states. This difficult relation, which is extremely evident in the Croatian region of Istria, includes a number of conflicting approaches to nationality that promote social inclusion or exclusion of state citizens on the base of a scale of ethnicity – basically, being more or less "national" – which is reinforced by territorial, ideological, gender, religious and ethnic divides (Cocco 2007).

In the case of Istria, a multi-ethnic frontier region situated at the periphery of the Croatian state, I believe that the inconsistencies between nationality and citizenship also engender a strong spatial tension between the dimension of national identity – involving ethno-cultural contents – and the one of state identity – involving territorial and institutional elements – which are rarely coincident in areas where the nation-state is a latecomer (Kaplan 1994). While state identity involves membership in a polity and the citizenship that comes from the integration in the juridical system, the spatial dimension of national identity is sometimes emotionally deeper and usually more ambiguous; it includes the "primordial attachment to the land" (Grosby 1995) and a "discursive landscape" (Häkli 1994), which are embedded in the culture of the collective memory of the people: the "territorialized memory" in Smith's words (Smith 1996). As a result, people living in peripheral regions like Istria, where central institutions are weaker and there are influences across political boundaries from neighbouring states, often grow a borderland identity that lives together with the state identity and the national one in a context of ambivalence and hybridism. Then, especially if minorities inhabit this space, the borderland identity can be institutionalized at the sub-state level through calls for regional autonomy (Paasi 1996) that can endanger state efforts to secure ideologically and culturally its borders.

Therefore, in our case the spatial tension between cultural and territorial elements set the stage for a political confrontation that has been seen between the Istrian regionalist movement on the one side and the state promoted Croatian nationalism on the other one. Both opponents of such a national-regional conflict largely exploit the ambivalent nature of imperial legacies for achieving their specific goals.

## **The Imperial Frontier and Its Politics of Identity**

Historically, the area of Central and South Eastern Europe has represented an exceptional stage for a number of cultural and political engagements aimed at two oppositional goals: on the one hand, to separate intermixed social groups and, on the other, to realize some forms of coexistence through the unification of distinct cultural realms, which are generally perceived as adversary. According to Stefano Bianchini, the result of such processes is a social complexity that gives rise to a regional “specificity” (Bianchini 1993:365–366; see also Prevelakis 1997; Todo-rova 1997; Wolff 1994); the latter does not refer to the explosive incompatibility of cultures and their forced cohabitation – cherished by many nationalist ideologies – but rather to the contemporary sense of belonging that every single individual and all groups of the region feel with regard to two separate macro-communities. One is the ethnic group, which expresses the convergence of language, culture and frequently religion as a specificity of a people; the other is the supra-national belonging to large cultural frames, which implies sharing common traditions, life-styles, everyday practices and special relations with the territory. The last community is somehow transversal to the first; it intertwines with the ethnic group in many ways, producing different combinations between the multiple dimensions of identity that delineate the cultural space of the area. Therefore, all reflections on the sense of belonging in South Eastern Europe should consider the multiple dimension of this cultural space where the ethnic dimension is only a convergence of some dimensions of identity, which nevertheless crosscut and spill over the rigid ethnic border.

After this suggestion, the idea of “frontier” appears as an useful conceptual tool to interpret the regional “specificity”, to approach the topic of the politics of identity in South Eastern Europe and, more specifically, in former Yugoslavia. The post-communist scenario of former Yugoslavia presents a large differentiation of division lines and fronts of conflict, which have permeated the whole society and that still hold a grip on people’s mind. In this perspective, beyond a simplified reading of the conflicts in the nineties that would reduce everything to a clash between antagonist peoples, a more critical observation points out that a number of strains existed in Yugoslav society and these are still a factor of instability in post-Yugoslav states. For example, from the point of view of everyday life or from the one of local communities, it comes out quite clearly that other conflicting aspects of identity like the territorial ones were sometimes far more relevant for the people than the ethnic one. Accordingly, Noel Malcolm criticizes the approach that searched for original and authentic ethnic roots of the disputes in Kosovo between Serbs and Albanians, in spite of the fact that today many of the Serbs and Albanians living in Kosovo share the same primordial and pre-political convictions

(Malcolm 1998:xxvii). Also Ger Duijzings, writing on the politics of identity in Kosovo (Duijzings 2000:1–2), deconstructs the typical image of a fragmented and ethnically divided society and casts a light on many cultural features still shared across ethnic boundaries, thus proving that ethnic as well as religious barriers are not so much closed to external influences. So, trade, cross-cultural influences, religious exchanges and practices of conversions are all indexes of a considerable “trans-border movement” across social divisions that are today perceived as timeless but in fact reveal a long coexistence of ethnic groups. Therefore, according to Duijzings, instead of two different ethnic societies it would be better to talk of a single frontier society where contacts and cooperation across ethnic and religious boundaries were intermingled with fights and clashes; thus, territorial and cognitive borders could appear and dissolve depending on the political stability of the region.

Actually, the idea of imagining a frontier society is not really a new one and should not be romanticized either; many studies pointed out the alternation of coexistence and conflicts, of cultural symbiosis and religious hostility in the South Eastern European region, which progressively emerged as an ethnically not homogeneous territory, geographically far from the real centers of power and in a prolonged state of warfare (Mandić 1995:34; Janigro 1993:67–68; Zanini 1997:108). In these lands, people had to learn how to deal with the everyday life implications of a semi-permanent religious, cultural and even military confrontation, in a context where the three great religious Mediterranean traditions – the Roman Catholicism, the Eastern Orthodoxy and the Sunni Islam – met and clashed (Banac 1984:59). In other words, the idea of the “frontier”, with special regards to the Balkans, is almost always associated with the threat of the complete destruction of small and isolated communities living side by side in places where cultural homogeneity was traditionally weak and crises were very frequent. A classic example is Bosnia-Herzegovina (Fouad-Allam 1995:88–92).

Wendy Bracewell has explored this topic in her work on piracy in the Adriatic. The author discussed accurately the practices of cooperation and conflicts of the “Uskoks of Senj” that were acting in an area characterized by permanent political instability and continuous military-religious fights (Bracewell 1992). In such conditions, loyalty and allegiances frequently shifted from one side to the other of the imperial and religious border in spite of the attempts of the central authorities to draw accurate borders. The most famous of such attempts is the institutionalization by the Habsburgs of the military frontier (*Vojna krajina – Militärgrenze*) (Rothenberg 1966).

Some of these assumptions over the contestation and the permeability of the borders in frontier areas have strong correspondences in studies on other frontier areas of the world, as the works of Donnan and Wilson have largely shown. It seems that in frontier areas the border engenders a multiplication and a transformation of

the patterns of identity: the national one but also the religious, the linguistic and the gender ones (Donnan and Wilson 1999). Thus, the border would act more as a space of everyday interaction and exchange rather than a permanent division line; like in the Spanish enclave of Melilla, in Morocco (Driessen 1992). This concept has been further developed by Remotti in his essay “against the identity”, which stands for a relational and situational comprehension of the identity divides (Remotti 2001).

So, rather than in ethnic or national terms, the dynamics of conflict in a frontier society have to be led back to the conditions of insecurity and violence that overcome all group divisions, creating a sort of existential instability for everyone; to borrow the expression of the geographer Michel Roux, every frontier society is a: “*véritable périphérie de la périphérie*” (Roux 1992:238) where the everyday fight for survival is made harsher by the continuous antagonism promoted by distant political centers. Consequently, if one looks for ethnicity one can eventually find it and in this way contribute to its construction (Eriksen 1993:21), but nonetheless, it is important to remind that this is only one among possible organizations of group difference through specific combinations of many symbolic dimensions (Giordano 2000:75; Kodilja 1999:239). Therefore, among other types of identity there are territorial identities, and specifically the local and regional ones, which are forms of organization of social difference alternative to the ethnic one but not less relevant.

Moreover, the conditions of existential instability set the stage for practices of mimicry and dissimulation, which represent strategies of self-protection and survival in contexts that show scarcity of resources and strong relations of dominance and subordination (Barnes 1994; Romania 2003; Swidler 1986). Consequently, the facts of lying, changing allegiance and converting can be explained in terms of strategies of preservation based on the necessity to maintain low profile and to show loyalty to the political authority and thus to secure normal existence. In this perspective, among the inhabitants of frontier society there is the awareness that identities are not stable or given once for good, but they reflect somehow the lack of authenticity imposed from the center over its peripheries (Triolo 1998:200; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995); they are often considered as “masks” that can be accepted or contested depending on political conditions (Tausig 1993; Poulton 1995).

At the same time, the modern state has to build a governable social and territorial space and needs to precise the parameters of ethnic identity in order to include and exclude people subject to its authority (Verdery 1994:45). In former Yugoslavia, the successor states often acted to simplify the ethnic lines of inclusion and exclusion in order to achieve the necessary consent, thus forcing the complexity of the territory to bring clarity within its structure (Scott 1990; Hall 1994; Schöpflin 2000:35). However, such desire brings about the possibility of

new forms of dissent and instability because the dream of a primordial ethnic identity clashes with the practices of mimicry and dissimulation that characterize the social space, so that it can introduce new forms of inequality.

### **“On the Right Side”: Croatian Nationalism after 1990**

From 1990 to the year 2000, Croatia has undergone a controversial period characterized by a cruel war, harsh social conflicts, the slow growth of a deteriorated economy and the international isolation of the country, due to the bad human rights record (Pavković 1997; Tomac 1993; Goldstein 1999; Tanner 1997; Bilandžić 1999). At the same time, Croatia has consolidated its political independence and its territorial sovereignty under the leadership of the president Franjo Tuđman. The latter has been something more than an authoritarian ruler because his rule deeply shaped the nation-state building process and somehow founded the bases of the national political discourse, understood as the collection of representations and dominant practices (Ballinger 1996).

The instrumental use of the Imperial memories of the Habsburg period of Croatian history is an important part of this political discourse. In these memories, the sense of cultural and historical belonging to the European realm, and more precisely to *Central Europe*, joins the myth of the *antemurale* of Christianity, which describes the Austro-Hungarian Croatia as the military and religious bulwark against the Islamic and Orthodox expansion in the West.

Moreover, the political independence brought about a spatial symbolic re-orientation of the geopolitical balance of the country from Southeast to Northwest, a fact already observed in Slovenia (Paternost 1992). So, during the nineties many pro-European ideas were somehow biased by the anti-Serb and anti-Yugoslav feelings, and were weakened by the Croatian resentment towards the EU, whose lack of recognition for the Croatian sacrifices in defense of Europe (today as in the past) strengthened the isolation trends in the country.

On the other hand, the Austro-Hungarian cultural heritage and the myth of the Christian *antemurale* have been used to officially represent Croatia as a Western European country, intrinsically and deeply connected to the West in every aspect of life. Already in 1981, Tuđman wrote that since Medieval time, there was a national specificity in Croatia that survived and evolved in the political organization of the Habsburg Empire. For him, within the Empire, Croatian

[w]as the only Slavic nation to be recognized as a kingdom, whose king was the Austrian Emperor; thus, the position of Croatia was on a higher level than that of Bohemia, Slovakia or other lands, even though such status meant submission to the Austrian and Hungarian power, the two ruling nations of the Empire (Bilandžić 1999:21).

For Tuđman, Croatia was situated in the heart of Europe, both politically and geographically; this strategic position explains the important role of the country for defending the European continent from its Eastern enemies. In Tuđman's words:

At the time of the Ottoman incursions in the heart of the Christian Europe, the plundered and oppressed Croatia has been recognized as the *antemurale* of Christianity. Today, while defending freedom and democracy, Croatia remains the bulwark of European democracy against all the attempts of restoring a Communist regime (Bellamy 2000:8).

In this perspective, Tuđman believed that the national differences were also marking the boundaries between two separate worlds: on one side, the European and civilized realm where Croatia belongs; on the other one, the barbarian Balkan marshland represented by Serbia. This frontier of civilizations is not only pertinent to the Austro-Hungarian kingdom but its origin can be traced back to the dawn of the Western history, at the ancient time of the clashes between the Mediterranean and Asiatic peoples. According to Tuđman:

The Croats belong to a culture and a civilization, which are different from the ones of the Serbs. The Croats are part of Western Europe, of the Mediterranean tradition. Far long before Shakespeare and Molière our authors were translated into the most important European languages. The Serbs are part of the East. They are an Eastern people, like the Turks and the Albanians. They are part of the Byzantine world (Hayden and Bakic-Hayden 1992).

The Croatian political establishment has frequently portrayed the same Serbo-Croatian war like a righteous reaction to the Serbian invasion of Croatia, in the wake of the ancient and typical struggle between the East and the West. For instance, according to the Croatian art historian Željka Čorak:

This (*the war*) is an attack of the barbarians that came from the darkness to the light of the Mediterranean, until Rome. These barbarians that would like to consider themselves as the heirs of Byzantium or, even worse, real Byzantine people [...] their behavior is eastern and different in the sense of a different ethic (MacDonald 2000:75).

Similarly, for Croatian nationalism the sense of the conflict has never been the same for the two antagonist sides, for the Croats were never depicted as aggressors but always as victims, martyrs of the border, fighters against the Eastern expansionism of the Serbs. Therefore, the Croatian reaction was morally justified and was never put on the same level of the aggressor's actions (MacDonald 2000:74). The Croatian nationalists utilised strategically Catholicism as an instrument of collective redemption and the moral absolution of the Croatian people. So, the conversion of the Croats to Catholicism symbolically signed the passage from the darkness to the light as a metaphor of the eternal fight between the Good (West) and the Evil (East):

After being baptized, the Croats swore on their honor and in the name of S. Peter the apostle that they will never conquer a foreign land or fight a war against a foreign people, but they would live in peace with all good willing men. And they received a special blessing from the Pope: if foreigners would ever attacked the land of the Croats and brought war, then God would fight with the Croats, protecting them, and S. Peter would eventually bring the final victory (Lupić 1999:2).

In this mythological perspective, one can better understand the importance of the miracle of the Međugorje Virgin, in Herzegovina, and its political and commercial promotion at the international level. The Virgin, which appeared for the first time in front of a group of children in 1981, is since then a world famous destination for Catholic pilgrims and many ordinary tourists. Interestingly enough, Tuđman has been the first one that politically utilized the cult of the Virgin of Međugorje in a peace conference, in May 1993 (MacDonald 2000:77). Thus, the nationalist politics exploited the mythical aspect of the cult, which can be described in terms of a territorial projection of the symbolic fracture between East and West in a frontier region. The Virgin became a sacred mark of the cultural frontier separating the Catholic and universalistic civilization of the Croats and the exclusivist dictatorship of the Serbs.

### **Territory and Regional Identity in Istria**

If the Serbs tended to be identified with the enemy of Croatian nation, the “Istrians” represented something more dubious: they were described by the nationalist voices as the prototype of the unreliable Croats, ethnically impure and politically not trustworthy. Sometimes, the unreliable character of the Istrians was explained by the HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica/Croatian Democratic Union) presenting them as the victims of Serbo-communists, some other times the Istrians were depicted as Serbo-communists themselves. In all cases, the electoral defeats of the HDZ in Istria contributed to reinforce the doubts over this ethnically mixed periphery.<sup>2</sup>

By the nineties, on the other hand, the local public opinion of Istria grew the conviction that the Croatian government was carrying out a strategy to support the marginalization and the isolation of the region. Local media generally contributed to the establishment of this perception, suggesting that the new political center

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<sup>2</sup> According to the 1991 census, made shortly after the Croatian declaration of independence, people in Istria identified themselves as Croats (57,7%), Italians (6,7%) Slovenes (1,6%) and as part of a number of minor nationalities of the former Yugoslavia and Central Europe (17,9%). Interestingly, 16,7% declared themselves as “Istrians”, while in 1981 regional identifications reached only 1,7%. The percentage of people that declared themselves as Croats in 1981 was 72,2%, (77,8% in 1953) almost 14% more than in 1991. Somehow, it looks like as if many of the “new” Istrians of the 1991 used to declare themselves as Croats at the time of Yugoslavia.



treated Istria as a substantially rebel and unreliable province, similarly to the way Slovenia was portrayed in Yugoslavia (Mišćević 2001; Šantić 2001). In this regard, slogans like “Zagreb=Belgrade” that appeared on the walls in Istria did not work for a general pacification and stirred up HDZ nationalist passions, which were also influenced by the leading Yugoslav representations that pictured Istria as a suspect territory, acquired by the former Kingdom of Italy and inhabited by a strong Italian minority. Thus, the idea that Istria was somehow ready to declare its independence, to search the union with Italy or, in the best of the cases, to declare a status that would transform it into a “Luxembourg of the Adriatic”, created real anxiety for the prosperity of Istrian economy compared to the rest of Croatia (Hedl 2000).

Central to the incomprehension between the central government and the Istrian people was, and still is, a rather ambivalent and questionable notion of Istrian identity that can be summed up in the category of “Istria-ness” (*Istrianità* in Italian, *Istrijanstvo* in Croatian). That notion was explained and articulated differently, so that often the values attributed to the concept of “Istria-ness” are not so consistent and sometimes conflict. This is also an evidence of the high degree of subjectivity that permeates the topic, which, through the nineties, gained substantial currency within the political debate (Medica 1993; Ashbrook 2005, 2006; D’Alessio 1998–1999; Ballinger 2003a; Kappus 2004). Among the copious opinions and descriptions of “Istria-ness”, I would quote three non-scholarly definitions that I consider especially representative.

The first one is by the present leader of the IDS (Istarski demokratski sabor/Istrian Democratic Assembly) Ivan Jakovčić, that defined “Istria-ness” as: “Something that maybe is less deep and strong than the national identity but does not exclude other dimensions [...] the multiculturalism and pluri-lingualism of Istria that I experience everyday between Pazin and Poreč, when I know exactly to whom to say: ‘Dobar dan’ or ‘Buon giorno’, to whom to say: ‘Dio’ or ‘Bog’” (Debeljuh et al. 1995). The second belongs to another well known Istrian regionalist politician, Dino Debeljuh who said, with reference to the first census after the independence: “Then I felt that ‘Istria-ness’ was somewhat more authentic than the national belonging. I never thought that with this declaration I would have in some way denied my Croat-ness or any other dimension of my identity” (Debeljuh, Radin and Jakovčić 1995). The third definition has been given by Guido Miglia, one of the famous “voices” of the Italians exiled from Istria (*Esuli*), that after the first large victory of the IDS in 1992 said: “To go back to our genuine spirit, without prevarications or nationalist arrogance, carrying on from the two sides our ‘Istria-ness’ that is the symbol of our brotherhood and that has always been broken by the ones who came from the outside to rule over us; without any understanding, dividing a body that the nature has always united in the small peninsula closed by the same sea” (Dormuth-Tommasini 1993:246).

In itself, none of the three definitions appears particularly threatening for national unity or anti-patriotic, nonetheless, the large part of Croatian political class reacted negatively to such statements. Not surprisingly, throughout the nineties the ruling political elite of the HDZ has intensively contrasted the regionalist feelings “made in Istria” and frequently engaged several political battles with the IDS (such as the one around the constitutionality of the “statute of the region”).<sup>3</sup> However, after 2000, even some representatives of the winning center-left coalition – and IDS was part of that coalition – were very critical towards “Istria-ness” and its main cultural and linguistic implication: bilingualism. For instance, the leader of the Social Liberal Party (HSLP), Dražen Budiša, was quite harsh and said: “We should not and we cannot tolerate the de-Croatianisation of Istria. Istria has to go back to normality and all together we have to say: stop it!”<sup>4</sup> In this perspective, the hidden fear was that the politics of de-militarization and bilingualism would implicitly prepare the assignment of Istria to Italy (Šantić 1995), even if there were also dissident voices against such assumptions, like that of Nela Rubić, who judged positively linguistic plurality in Istria.<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, the researches carried out by Boris Banovac show that the category of “Istria-ness” reveals a special attachment to the place, to the local reality, and does not imply identification with the state or the nation as a whole, that however is not denied (Banovac 1998). On the same wavelength are Petar Janko (1997) and Fulvio Šuran (1993) that maintain the existence of a well developed regional identity as territorial belonging and local patriotism, which are not hostile to national identity or any other coexistent process of identification because every single dimension of identity could grow or disappear from time to time depending on a number of causes.

Nevertheless, there are different opinions on this topic and some important voices criticized the unacceptable weakness of the national dimension of identity within the “Istria-ness”. Especially Petar Strčić and Nevio Šetić openly attacked the idea of “Istria-ness” as regional belonging and territorial identification because of political exploitation of the concept made by the IDS, the regionalist party of Istria. In their opinion, even though a feeling of “Istria-ness” exists for specific historical reasons, this dimension should not be politically relevant and in no case subordinate to the national one. According to Strčić, the politicization of “Istria-ness” would only be the result of a long term and deeply rooted strategy of the local elite to secure economic and political privileges through regional control of media and the overwhelming power of the local ruling party (Strčić 1966–1969; 1991).

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<sup>3</sup> Articles 8 and 11 of the statute, stating “multi-lingualism” of Istria and “recognising the value of Istria-ness” were reported to the Constitutional Court of Croatia, which declared them not admissible.

<sup>4</sup> *Feral Tribune*, June 19, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *Feral Tribune*, June 16, 2001.

Differently, Šetić underlines the ethnic affinities between Istrian Croats and other Croats, explaining the persistence of regional frames in terms of the historically damaging influence of the Italian bourgeoisie and of the Yugoslav ideologies that suffocated the national dimension in Istria (Šetić 1995). Also, criticisms against the Istrian regionalist populism are maintained by Anđelko Milardović (1995) and coloured with anti-colonial rhetoric by Duško Večerina (2001).

However, from a political perspective, the regional identification in Istria does not necessarily exclude the Croatian national identity and gives raise to a well defined electoral behaviour that is generally oriented towards quite abstract expectations of autonomy, pacifism and “Europeanisation”. The 1998 investigation into electoral behaviour in Istria, carried out by Neven Šantić somehow proves the foregone (Šantić 2001). 813 voters from Istria have been questioned on the ideal institutional condition for the region Istria and on some political ideas:

Table 1: Percentage of agreement on some political ideas

<i>Do you agree with:</i>	Yes	No	I don't know	Not answering
The idea of Istria as a Trans-border region?	54%	14,88%	28,89%	2,23%
The idea of a de-militarisation of Istria?	45,02%	24,48%	29,27%	1,23%
The idea of a participation of Istria at the council of the Euro-region?	69,99%	8%	21,03%	0,98%

Source: Šantić 2001.

Table 2: Percentage of agreement on institutional perspectives for Istria

<i>The ideal institutional condition for Istria</i>	Frequency	%
A region in Croatia	559	68,76%
Regional autonomy in Croatia	157	19,31%
Federal unit in Croatia	33	4,06%
Other	18	2,21%
Not answering	46	5,66%
Total	813	100%

Source: Šantić 2001.

In other words, it seems that the support given to the IDS depends on the electorate's will of preservation and protection of the specific social, cultural and economic features of the border region. From this point of view, the progressive values of the Western democracy are opposed to the military hostility and the violent ethnic

politics of the former Yugoslavia, which are perceived as detrimental to the local context of hybridism. Here, the myth of the imperial frontier acts as a powerful imaginary tool for the Istrian consciousness, reinforcing the conviction that Istria is a unique place for its bright past of the imperial crossroad. And, for this reason, it is nowadays endangered by the growing nationalist passions often imported from the outside. Here are some opinions I selected from the interviews I had with local political leaders and exponents of the cultural milieu during my fieldwork in Istria.<sup>6</sup> They are trying to explain why Istria is so “special” and “unique”:

[...] because here is the only place where Germans, Latins and Slavs have met... only here! From Klagenfurt to Trieste, from Udine to Rijeka ... here you have the encounter! (43, 2000, Buje).

[...] because these are mixed lands and Italians and Croats lived side by side in the same villages, Slovenes and Croats, Slovenes, Croats and Italians ... then also Austrians, very much since the last century. And you can find now someone called Kramsteter that is a Deputy Mayor in Buje, a Luttemberger in Opatija, Obersner in Rijeka... half-Italians, half-Croats, even Austrians... absolutely (62, 2000, Rovinj).

[...] you cannot come every thirty-forty years, changing the shape of the state and accusing the people of being like this or like that without knowing how things were before. There is a nice definition for Istria: “Every present ruler is the liberator and the former one the oppressor” (75, 2001, Pula).

There is a historical fact about a Venetian ship coming back from the Holy Land that was attacked by the pirates, in Dalmatia. The Doge, who was on board, was killed and his body massacred. Tuđman, in 1993 has organized a commission of historians for deciding the day of the newly established Croatian Navy [...] and the one of the massacre of the Doge was the date he chose! The day of the Navy is the day of the criminals! He chose a neighbouring country, Italy, and an anti-Italian date, because for him Venice was Italy. Also, he organized an international commission aimed at demonstrating that Marco Polo was a Croat: international because there was one British historian, who even did not agree with the thesis but as the others were positive on it, from that day Marco Polo became “Marko Polo”. And now this is the name of a train and of a ferry [...] But the truth is that Venice has also protected the coastal cities from the attacks of these pirates, but the official history in Croatia is silent on it, especially in schoolbooks. Istria has never identified itself with such culture also because of the constant influence of foreign media, especially Italian, that have given a different view of things. We wanted to be closer to Europe (79, 2001, Opatija).

[...] Istria has a specific historical experience, it has always been a separate administrative reality, from Venice onwards. States pass by but Istria remains, in spite of external changes (31, 2000, Pula).

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<sup>6</sup> The age of informants, the year and the place of the interviews are reported within brackets. Interviews were held in Croatian or Italian, translations are mine.

Within the imperial narrative, a prominent place is occupied by the Austro-Hungarian period, which often emerges in the collective memory as the “golden period” for Istria, somewhat resembling the Habsburg nostalgia in Trieste (Ballinger 2003b). Here, there is a striking difference from the Croatian nationalist approach, where the memory of Austria reinforced the ethnic and religious identity on the base of the historical collective sacrifice that saved the Western world. In the case of Istria, the legacy of Austria is mainly interpreted in terms of social tolerance, administrative efficiency and institutional independence for the Istrian county. The same origin of the organism of the “Diet”, the regional assembly that gives the name to the IDS goes back to the Austrian times. Here are again some opinions I collected in the field over this specific topic:

This representation, I think comes from the times of the Austrian empire, first of all. When Istria, Trieste and Rijeka were part of the same Austrian maritime littoral. Because Venice has a strong influence but only on the coast. At that time, Istria without Rijeka had its regional assembly, its “Diet” in Vienna. And these administrative borders between Muggia and Trieste, until Preluka, just before Rijeka, they go back to Austria, they are still the borders of Istria: everybody knows it and agrees upon it (57, 2001, Pazin).

In Istria, after Austria, some have had some bad experiences with Italy, many with Yugoslavia. The political change is always seen as a very dangerous thing (43, 2000, Buje).

The Austro-Hungarian Empire has really been a golden period: the nationalities were cooperating and promoted a better life quality in general. Here in Pazin there were two cultural elites, two schools, and two reading societies: Vienna financed the Croatian school and Rome the Italian one (68, 2001, Pazin).

Well, at the time when Austria ruled, we must confess, and now people agree, that the situation was far better. A few years ago there were people alive, who still remembered Austria and they said that there was an impressive order, impossible to imagine today, that everything was working properly... However, I think that this is also a myth, a myth that Croatia uses against Italy, against Venice, saying that we were Austrians, we were fighting on the same side (79, 2001, Opatija).

[...] a unity that maybe never existed politically but it is mostly cultural and economic. But at the time of the Austro-Hungarian empire such unity existed and it was probably the best period, recalled by many of us with nostalgia (36, 2000, Pula).

As we were speaking [refers to a discussion with the grandfather, E. C.], I asked him: “When it was better? Under Italian sovereignty, now...”. And you know what this old man told me? – “It was better under Austria”. “How come?”, I say. And he says: “Let me explain: when the train arrived in Pazin, at the time of Austria, the driver of the train used to come out and say: Pisino, Vortenburg<sup>7</sup> (sic!), Pazin. Now,

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<sup>7</sup> This is actually Mitterburg.

who says it anymore? We, in this place, since that time we keep on saying it in three languages! That was Austria” (41, 2000, Koper).

The “Yugo-nostalgia” exists exactly as an “Austro-nostalgia”, in the sense that people say that it was better before and that, for example, “With Austria this would have never happened!”, “The Austrians! They would have never allowed it!” Referring to... I don’t know... the new name given by the Croatian state to a street, a place or similar things. This is because bureaucracy was better and everyone has his stories about small villages having their rights recognized by the Empire. Small places that became administrative centers during the Austrian Empire and nurture pride about that period (36, 2001, Poreč).

### **Good Citizens or Bad Croats?**

It is my belief that the conflict between regionalism and nationalism in Croatia after 1990 has been fuelled by the political use of ethnicity at the state level, which aimed at reaching integral political consent through cultural homogenization. At the central level, the rule of the first President Franjo Tuđman inspired an original political discourse (also known as “Tuđmanism”) that was imbued with anti-communist feelings and historical revisionism (Mac Donald 2000). In the meanwhile, as Alex Bellamy notices, Tuđman’s deep conviction was that national sovereignty could be obtained only through national unity (Bellamy 2000). Thus, throughout the nineties, the peculiar blend of patriotism, authoritarian rule and ethnic exclusivist practices expressed a deep bond between the HDZ and the Croatian State, which were sometimes hard to disentangle (Uzelak 1998).

In this perspective, independence and national sovereignty represented the real common good and this belief is reflected in the big project of national reconciliation [pomirba] among all the Croats in the world. For the purpose to reconcile definitely communists and anti-communists, Tuđman often declared to be the president of all the Croats, meaning that every extreme position of Croatian politics has to fall within his realm (Kearns 1996). Accordingly, the role of the HDZ was conceived to defend and guarantee the unity of the nation as a prerequisite for the state sovereignty and independence. Then, all positions expressed in the Croatian political tradition were unified in the common fight for Croatian sovereignty because, in any case, the HDZ would have pursued the national interest and should not have been subject to criticism. Consequently, even after the achievement of independence and sovereignty, these goals remained the only substantial interest of the HDZ (Bellamy 2000:6).

However, the process of reconciliation and homogenization of Croatian society was not an easy task and the “Tuđmanism” brought about many problems of social discrimination and potential deterioration of the young Croatian democracy (Co-

hen 1997; Grdešić 1999). The HDZ extended largely its influence on the political scene and labeled every form of opposition like national treason or dangerous act for the State's stability (Goldstein 1999:258–260). The use of ethnicity as an index of political loyalty introduced implicitly a scale of purity so that a stronger or a weaker "Croat-ness" influenced directly the relation of citizenship and promoted a process of social fragmentation among the citizens of the new Croatian state, who partly became objects of politics of ethnic suspect: a strategy that the HDZ considered a necessary safety measure against subjects potentially hostile to the national cause (Ashbrook 2005:329). On the contrary, a proved ethnic and cultural integrity was appreciated like a prerequisite for political "normality", that is to say for the complete acceptance of the power structure presided by Tuđman and for the consequent inclusion in the institutional apparatus. Therefore, the relation of citizenship, which linked the Croatian citizens to their State, was essentially compromised by ethnicity; the latter was not only functional to consent but served as a political tool to delegitimize all possible political adversaries, pictured as "bad Croats".

An example of such ethnic distortion of the citizenship bond is given by the role played by the "Herzegovinians", citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina of Croatian ethnicity, in the political and economic life of Croatia (Thompson 1999:269). They were known both for their fervent nationalism, frequently intermingled with religious arguments, and for the involvement of their "lobby" in many illicit activities. In the nineties, many Herzegovinians joined massively the local HDZ and for Tuđman they were indeed the best Croats, that is to say an example of patriotism for all the others in spite of their being Bosnian-Herzegovinian and not Croatian citizens (Bellamy 2000:13; Tanner 1997:285–286). Once, during a rally in the city of Mostar, in present day Bosnia-Herzegovina, Tuđman clearly illustrated the concept by saying that: "You Herzegovinians are the model for all the others in Croatia under many points of view" (Lovrić 1997), connecting implicitly their alleged "Croat-ness", their pure ethnicity, to the loyalty to the HDZ, once again pictured as the metaphor for the nation.

Therefore, in order to legitimize the function of "Croat-ness" for the achievement of their political goal, Tuđman and his party fellows usually referred to the "righteous" nature of the "Homeland war" and of their "state building project". However, the ethnic politics that privileged the "Great Croats" of the diasporas also increased a sense of insecurity, which had a territorial projection. In other words, the state sponsored nationalist discourse eventually strengthened the regional differentiation that emerged in the public sphere after the work of some local elites, already in the eighties. In Istria, literary works such as *La miglior vita* by Fulvio Tomizza (1981) and *Riva i druzi. Ili, caco su nassa dizza* by Milan Rakovac (1981) introduced to the public sphere themes like the many linguistic varieties of the region and the dialects as everyday means of expression of Istria;

the sufferance brought by external powers and their struggle for an ideological purpose; frequent human mobility, border changes and the hybrid identity of the Istrians.

Certainly, during the nineties, all over Central and Eastern Europe, the ambitions of minority groups stirred up the majority's consciousness and increased the general atmosphere of suspicion. A quite widespread fear was that the call for protection of collective cultural or linguistic rights would have represented a first step towards secession or annexation of the territory by a neighbouring state (Schöpflin 1994:129). Conversely, the lack of cultural rights could have irritated the minority group and eventually could have enhanced the possibilities of radical factions. This process has been significantly defined as "balkanization" (Bugajski 1994), that is to say the degeneration of mutual trust between a majority and minority group, which would eventually turn calls for cultural protection and local self-government into secession movements. In spite of a more stable geopolitical context and a significant enlargement of the EU in the region, such processes are far from being stopped. On the contrary, they keep on putting forward challenges well beyond the Central and Eastern European realm.

In our case, the advocates of Croatian nationalism wanted to solve the discrepancies between citizenship and nationality through a process of progressive cultural homogenization of the state territory. In this perspective, a major role has been played by the representation of the Serbo-Croatian war (1991–1995) not only and legitimately as a "Homeland war" [Domovinski rat], but also as a "righteous" war: a war against an Eastern barbarian aggressor in defense of European values and affiliations. Here, intellectual and politicians publicly used and often manipulated the stories of the old struggle between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman one, the memories of the military border [Vojna krajina] and the chronicles of the Venetian almost colonial domination of the Adriatic. As a result, the national reconciliation process [pomirba] worked out viciously and being Croatian coincided with being nationally (ethnic) Croat and eventually HDZ sympathizer. In addition, the practices of privatization and the privileges often granted by the State to the members of the "loyalist" Croatian diasporas – the "good Croats" – cast a doubt on the equality of treatment of Croatian citizens (Petričić 2000).

At the same time, the supporters of regionalism in Istria – the "bad Croats" – have reacted to such a homogenizing project pursuing a different and somehow opposite strategy, that can be described in terms of a clear separation between nationality and citizenship. According to this, the regionalism aims, on the one hand, at considering nationality as a private and non-political choice; on the other one, at establishing a strict connection between the individual affiliation to the regional frontier territory and the possession of citizenship rights. In other words, for many Istrians while one's nationality could change, there would be a permanent pattern of identification, namely the local identification with the terri-



tory. This identification, synthesized by the concept of “Istria-ness” [istrijanstvo] would mean the multi-ethnic and multi-national sense of belonging to the territory of a frontier region, beyond state borders – as it is specified in the statute of the regional administrative body.

The nature of such borderland identity, even though quite diverse in its contents as everyone gives a different version of it, reveals a clear function though: the personal search for protection and even physical survival during a dangerous transition process that was taking place in an area where state identity is frequently subject to changes and nationality is often a matter of discrimination. So, a mimetic identification has been carried out on very subjective bases, but neither with an ethno-national group nor with a state. I am aware that diverse, noteworthy and sometimes contrasting scholarly interpretations of Istria-ness have been produced in the last years. According to some of them, like that by Pamela Ballinger, Istria-ness would portray a paradoxical authentic hybridity (Ballinger 2003a:245–265), which would nonetheless convey symbols and narratives produced by nation states. As a result, behind the rhetoric of coexistence, the “authentic” Istrian regional identity would provide with cultural foundation a territorial divide between Istria and the Balkan “otherness”, thus suggesting some asymmetries of “civilization” and enacting a type of “orientalism” (Bakic-Hayden 1992; Baskar 2002). Others, such as John E. Ashbrook, take a sort of rational choice perspective and suggest the economic factor played the main role in the nineties, as people voted the IDS to try to remedy the economic problems of the region, even envisaging a Western intervention vis-à-vis the growing monopoly of the state (Ashbrook 2005:330–332). I am not saying these analyses are missing the point while discussing Istria-ness, but I still think they tend to underestimate the everyday life experience of a frontier region, where the same idea of rational actor and state-building is filtered by the “struggle” for survival, mimicry and ambivalent games.

In fact, in my opinion, it is the “territory” of the region itself, which provides the base for solving the vicious conflict between nationality and citizenship, transforming eventually the Istrians into “good citizens”. A territory, which the regionalist narratives, largely playing upon romantic interpretations of imperial legacies, depict as a historical unity, which Venetian commercial power and the Habsburg efficient public administration forged with local cosmopolitanism and tolerance. A micro-world that the national and cultural antagonisms constantly threaten and therefore, it must be protected: independently from exclusivist practices towards the Balkan neighbours or instrumental decision to maximize the economic benefits. These aspects are also part of the story but are probably less crucial than one could possibly expect.

Even today, I would not be surprised if many people in Istria would rather consider nationality as subjective strategy to achieve social empowerment at the

local level than a matter of political loyalty to a state. Appealing to the frequent sovereignty changes that the region underwent in recent history, the inhabitants of Istria would be probably ready to support all practices of citizenship that promote their social and economic safety, independently from nationality but not necessarily against it.

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## POGRANIČNA MIMIKRIJA: CARSKA NASLJEĐA, NACIONALNA STAJALIŠTA I REGIONALNI IDENTITET U HRVATSKOJ ISTRI NAKON 1990-IH

### SAŽETAK

Carska nasljeđa imaju dvostruku prirodu: mogu se iskoristiti za podupiranje etno-nacionalne identifikacije, ali i za naglašavanje lokalno utemeljenih narativa o hibridnim identitetima i višestrukim pripadnostima. Temeljna je pretpostavka da ta dvostruka priroda carskih nasljeđa nastaje u kontekstu problematičnih odnosa između koncepcija nacionalnosti i državljanstva. Hipoteza je ispitana u kontekstu aktiviranja diskursa carskog nasljeđa na lokalnoj razini – u hrvatskoj Istri 1990-ih – kada su iskorišteni kao protu-priče društvenoj i kulturnoj homogenizaciji, koju je propagirala hrvatska vlada. Pristalice regionalizma u Istri reagirali su na projekt državnog homogeniziranja provodeći drukčiju i unekoliko suprotnu strategiju, koja se može opisati u terminima jasnog razdvajanja između nacionalnosti i državljanstva. Njihov je regionalizam ciljao, s jedne strane, na promatranje nacionalnosti kao privatnog a ne političkog izbora, a, s druge strane, na uspostavljanje precizne veze između pojedinačne pripadnosti regionalnom pograničnom teritoriju i pravu na državljanstvo. Drugim riječima, za mnoge Istrane nečija se nacionalnost mogla promijeniti, ali je postojao nepromjenjiv obrazac identifikacije s lokalnim područjem. Ta identifikacija, koju sintetizira pojam "istrijanstvo" [*Istria-ness*], podrazumijeva multietnički i multinacionalni osjećaj pripadnosti pograničnoj regiji onkraj državnih granica. Priroda toga pograničnog identiteta, iako prilično različita u svom sadržaju jer mu svi pridaju različita tumačenja, ipak otkriva svoju jasnu funkciju: osobnu potragu za zaštitom, pa čak i fizičkim opstankom u opasnom procesu tranzicije koja se odvijala na području gdje se državni identitet često mijenjao i nacionalnost je često bila predmetom diskriminacije. Dakle, mimetička je identifikacija provedena na vrlo subjektivnoj osnovi, ali niti s etno-nacionalnom skupinom niti s državom.

Ključne riječi: Istra, granica, politički identiteti, carska nasljeđa