

## VISION IMPAIRED: THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN CROATIA

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The January 2000 elections in Croatia produced an almost tangible (albeit short-lived) feeling of buoyancy reminiscent of the euphoria surrounding independence from Yugoslavia in 1991. The processes that have characterized this recent political shift from the authoritarian and ultranationalist regime of the late Franjo Tudjman and the HDZ, to the present center-left coalition are symptomatic of the political and socio-economic uncertainty that has characterized the fledgling state since 1990.<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1990's ethnonationalism has been the prism through which much commentary and analysis on the former Yugoslavia has been filtered. This comes partly in response to the self-evident realities of ethnic conflict and political rhetoric in the region, but more so, it marks the rush to fashion a new conceptual geography of Eastern Europe. The continual upheaval in the region has produced a large body of literature and commentary primarily focussed on or informed by concerns with (ethnic) nationalism in Croatia. In Croatia, much of the scholarly attention since independence has focussed on the numerous impacts of war (e.g. displacement and trauma, reintegration and minority issues), and on recovery and nation building (e.g. processes of democratization and civil society, political and economic integration into the EU). This paper draws attention to the need for more research into issues of emergent identities in Croatia as well as the politics of representation by focussing on some of the nuanced ways in which Croatians have been (re)negotiating the cultural logics of being and belonging in the face of socio-political changes in the rapidly transforming Croatian state.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Context: Croatian Independence and its Aftermath**

Croatian independence has, as in many post-communist successor states, inevitably created the conditions for radical and often convulsive changes in the social, political and economic fabric of society. Despite having emerged from the shadow of communist rule, Croatia remains saddled with numerous problems, many of which have been exacerbated by a legacy of policy decisions of the late Franjo Tudjman and his ruling party, the HDZ (Uzelak, 1998). These "growing pains" have been characterized by a "democratic

deficit" evidenced in documented cases of, for example, violations of human rights (Karatnycky et al, 1997), the suppression of freedom of the press (Thompson, 1994, Peruško-Æulek, 1999), the expansion (and abuse) of constitutional and presidential powers (Sekuliæ and Šporer, 1997), and Croatia's interventionist (and some even say, imperialist) pro-Herceg-Bosna policy. Major discrepancies have existed between state rhetoric concerning guarantees of civic freedoms and minority rights and the actual development and/or enforcement of existing legislation in these areas.<sup>3</sup>

Ethnonationalism quickly became the dominant rubric through which Croatian identity was configured by the new state (Malešević and Uzelak, 1997; Hayden, 1992). This is epitomized, for example, in the exclusionary criteria of the Law on Croatian Culture and Citizenship (Hayden, 1996): the acceptance of Croatian culture, proficiency in Croatian language and Latin script, and exemptions for Croatian diaspora returnees and their descendants. There are no similar provisions for those who are not members of the Croatian ethnonation (defined as substance rather than citizenship).<sup>4</sup> Cultural policies are generally neoconservative in orientation reflecting state commitment to those cultural activities that are considered to be supportive of national identity and cohesion. Research institutes in Croatia receive government grants to carry out research and offer programs on Croatian cultural heritage and history and state-run television and radio also regularly broadcast programs featuring regional folklore, customs and religious celebrations. The rapid process of language fragmentation (ie. from Serbo-Croatian to Serbian, Croatian or Bosnian) has meant calls for a return to Croatian literary forms (æavakian, kajkavian and štovakian) and regional dialects.

The vision for the new Croatian republic promulgated by the Croatian political leadership has blended ethnonationalist rhetoric with principles of social authoritarianism centered around the discourse of traditional (Catholic) morality and the preservation of the Croatian nation from the dangers of cultural decline. The essence of Croatianess has thus been constructed as ethnically "pure," systematically eliminating references to the complex historical, socio-cultural

and political conditions that have, over the years, marked the physical and conceptual terrain of Croatian identity. Metaphors of nation, Catholicism, family and the "Croatian way" have become the centerpieces of Croatian political and religious programs. Among the desired qualities of the New Croatian are traditional family values, exalting motherhood as a vocation, espousing pro-life values, fiercely attacking gay/lesbian lifestyles and relationships and vilifying feminism (personal communication, Ela Grdinia, Judge, County Court, Zagreb and LEGALINA Project, Zagreb and Maja Mamula, Counsellor, LEGALINA Project).<sup>5</sup> For example, a recent headline (December 20, 1999) in the pro-government newspaper *Vjesnik* laments the continued use of "abortion as a method of birth control." Although contemporary political (and some intellectual) discourses on Croatian identity often valorize Croatian culture and heritage in the interest of promoting a distinctively Croatian national identity, there is also a large body of commentary and research from vocal critics both within and outside the country. Unlike the largely state-owned broadcast media there is a popular, often critical independent and sometimes irreverent press (*Feral Tribune*, *Novi List*, *Globus*, *Slobodna Dalmacija*).

While the decidedly ethnonationalist project of the state (during the 1990's) provides an indispensable backdrop to the examination of identity and nation-building strategies. Here however, I focus neither on the official perspectives of the state's numerous and often self-selected interlocutors nor on its detractors and critics, but rather on Croatians I have worked with who have not been directly linked to political, academic, social justice, media or like institutions and interests. My goal here is to illustrate how identities continue to be socially constituted and contested through the gaps and silences of official (nationalist) discourses.

### **Croatian Politics of Representation on the Ground**

Quite apart from the plethora of measurable macro-level indicators of ethnic attitudes in Croatia typical of political and economic analyses (both inside and outside of Croatia), are the cultural politics of everyday life. For example, identity struggles have been based less on the most heavily cited ethnic and national criteria (i.e. self-identification as a Croat, Serb, etc.) than on a complex combination of factors reflecting the "hypermobility of postmodern capital and ideas" (Mishra, 1996:424). These

include the largely worsening socio-economic conditions, shifts in class boundaries and relations and the changing significance of regionalism and locality as well as the continuing and ubiquitous presence, involvement and scrutiny of numerous external interests (international economic, political and humanitarian agencies, Croatian diasporas, etc.). These, combined with the devastating and disruptive effects of war, have had a tremendous impact on the politics of identity and representation for Croatians in the new state. The examples below illustrate both reactions to elite-directed discursive closure on Croatian identity (e.g. the "good Croatian") and the invocation of various cultural logics in the creation and reaffirmation of a sense of belonging.

### **Croatianess and/or Locality**

What became almost immediately apparent over the course of this research was the centrality of cultural logics, forms and practices to Croatian efforts to make sense of their lives and struggles amidst enormous changes. For example, although nationalism often stimulates the search for identity, it is often contained and mediated through subnational categories such as region and community and in local traditions and experiences. Locality and memory and their contingent socio-cultural manifestations and expressions have always been and continue to be central to Croatian configurations of identity. Being a Trogirani, Dalmatiani or even a "snob from Zagreb" (the latter, a term of derision among Dalmatians), has as much or even greater quotidian significance for Croatians than the often strident nationalist pronouncements of politicians and others. The war in Croatia and the former Yugoslavia has irrevocably changed the demographic characteristics of many communities, especially rural ones, and has inevitably fomented and exacerbated the Serb-Muslim-Croat axis of hate. However, I found that the rhetoric of ethnic homogeneity is not as widely accepted or practiced as Croatian nationalist ideology would suggest. Locally-specific cultural logics, memories and practices continue to inform and mediate responses to often chaotic changes and challenges faced by Croatians. Recent research on the integration of Croatian refugees from Bosnia and Voivodina into communities in Croatia confirms the predominance of regional over nationally-constituted Croatian identities and the problems associated with these efforts (see *Æapo Æmegæ*, 1999, *Grbia*, 1997). The significance of locality as the primary factor in assessing the past, present and the future was clearly evoked in numerous

interviews. The use of ethnicity as a marker was in some cases used to underscore the similarities *between* people who would be, in the language of ethnic nationalism, bitter enemies, i.e. Serb and Croat. For example, while in Knin, I spent some time with a local Croatian and his Serb friend visiting from England who had returned (after fleeing during the war) to visit his few remaining (elderly) Serb relatives. In the time I spent with them, they were busy (re)creating a (familiar) cultural space built on shared experiences, memories and opinions. For example, on one occasion, the better part of several hours was spent discussing their disdain for the "ignorant" and "uncivilized" Bosnian Croats who had resettled in Knin after the war in Bosnia. According to the Croatian: "We can sell them any old garbage and call it wine. They don't know the difference".

This sentiment is clearly reflected in Croatian opinions and attitudes concerning intraethnic relations in Croatia. For example, some of the most negative comments I encountered concerned *not* Serbs and Bosnian Muslims but Bosnian Croats from Herzegovina and (overseas) diaspora Croats, the two groups most valorized by the Tujman government and by Croatian nationalist elites for their ethnic "purity" and patriotic fervor. Croats, for example, have generally responded negatively to the huge influx of Herzegovinian Croats into Croatia and to what is widely regarded as their corrupting influence on Croatian politics and the economy. Herzegovinian Croats have been a major presence in Croatia since the war, not just as refugees (from Bosnia and Herzegovina) but as new members of the political and business elite. But while complaints about taxation subsidies and corruption among them abound, most emphasize the deep cultural divide that exists between them. The Croatian overseas diaspora also invites a certain degree of scorn and disdain from homeland Croats. What comes through in the responses of Croatian nationals I have interviewed is resentment and ambivalence toward the diaspora for a variety of reasons. These include the purported retention by diasporic Croats of a vulgarized and romanticized ethnic culture and obsolete political ideals, their exploitation of investment opportunities of questionable benefit to homeland Croats and meddling in Croatian internal political affairs (Winland, 1998).<sup>6</sup> One informant asked: "Are these returnees the best and the brightest that diaspora has to offer?"

### The "Good Croatian"

Since 1991, discourses on identity in Croatia have often invoked the highly charged question: What is a "good Croatian?" While several key indicators have been proffered (e.g. patriotism, (Catholic) religiosity), the bulk of Croatian opinions I have recorded point to a preoccupation with those characteristics that may label one as a "bad" Croatian. For example, Croats who are not solidly behind efforts to reimagine the new Croatian state in ways that valorize selected elements of the Croatian past and present have been variously referred to by some as "unpatriotic," "unCroatian," "Yugonostalgic," "Yugo-zombies" or as "enemies of the state" (the latter two characteristically have been directed at vocal critics like Slavenka Drakulić and Dubravka Ugrešić by official or elite circles). In response to my queries concerning views on state efforts to shape post-independence Croatian identity, most either directly or indirectly mentioned the issue (of the "good Croatian") and treated it either dismissively (as inconsequential in their day to day lives) or as a source of concern. For those who did not subscribe to these visions of the new ("good") Croatian, they felt that, at some level, others may and this sometimes affected how they dealt with people (acquaintances, employers, coworkers, etc.). This was most often expressed as having to think about the consequences of publicly condemning nationalist discourses, for example, the possibility of being overlooked for promotions at work. It is, however, important to note that the Croats who commented on this facet of Croatian identity politics pointed out that there is a distinction between the nationalist discourses and images promoted by the government and a more general, less political and arbitrary sense of patriotism and pride. Most had been deeply and personally affected by the war and stated that they felt a strong sense of pride in being Croatian quite distinct from nation-building rhetorical strategies. The state has thus expended a great deal of effort to provide fixed parameters for the discourse of Croatian national identity. At the level of interpersonal communication however, the effects of this effort were manifested in a certain level of suspicion, caution or ambivalence for many who have rejected, been uncomfortable espousing these forms of self-representation, or who were concerned about the consequences of being viewed or labeled a "bad Croatian." My current research focuses on the impact of the recent social and political changes on the emergence of new discursive spaces and forms.

## Conclusion

Although Croatian nation-building efforts have provided the conditions (through ideologically-driven discourses and policy measures) for the creation of a Croatian national prototype, these efforts continue to have mixed results. Ambivalence, disdain, resentment, patriotism, optimism and pessimism, as well as confusion are among the sentiments and emotions that characterize Croats' day to day reactions to the discursive strategies of nationalist elites. Thus, while critics like Dubravka Ugrešić (1998) acerbically denounce the political and cultural perversions of the new Croatian regime and its elites (examples are plentiful, such as the fetishization of President Tuđman and a lucrative industry in kitschy Croatia), it is not clear that the success of strategies that have been unleashed in the name of Croatian nationalism and statehood are as ubiquitous as has been suggested (or feared). While it is true that Croats have been inundated with nationalist ideology, many are still inherently suspicious of or ambivalent towards state-driven messages and measures (through political, media, institutional and other channels), an attitude cultivated during the socialist era of Yugoslavia and reinforced during the past the years under the HDZ. While it is rare to find a Croatian *without* strong political convictions or opinions, I have found few that expressed their views using the exclusivist and nationalist rhetoric of the state. Most are concerned with the ways in which the war and changes since independence continue to affect their day-to-day lives. For example, many I spoke to are concerned about corruption, the collapse of the banking system, an unemployment rate (officially) hovering at 30%, the decline in the quality of health care and the high cost of living.<sup>7</sup>

The following observations made over the course of my fieldwork perhaps further underscores the need for research that focuses on identity as lived experience. The images I recall most from the train and bus trips I took between Zagreb in the north and Split on the southern Dalmatian coast, were of the odd look of villages that had been under Serb control from 1991 to 1995 in what was called the Republic of Serb Krajina. The widespread looting and burning of, first, Croatian (1991) and then Serb property (when in 1995, the 200,000 strong Croatian army captured Serb-held Krajina territory in "Operation Oluja" (Storm)), left a strange patchwork of destruction. Houses, some burned or demolished, stood alongside others that were unblemished,

occupied and well maintained. These images invariably speak to a recent past of coexistence or, at the very least, mutual tolerance, reflecting histories, memories and locally specific logics that have been deeply shaken but can not be erased by the rhetoric of ethnic or national homogeneity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Virtually all the recent attention has focussed on the national level political fallout of the election, assorted exposés and scandals and the disintegration of the ruling HDZ (which, according to Hrvoje Sarinic, a close ally of Tudjman, resembles "a pile of snow melting on the ground").

<sup>2</sup>The research on which this paper is based was conducted during three field trips to Croatia beginning in the spring of 1997.

<sup>3</sup>For example, during Tudjman's regime, the government retained controlling interest (or influence) in several daily newspapers (e.g. *Vjesnik*), some weeklies and the country's only news agency, HINA. The most recent scandal in Croatia concerns the discovery of discussions between Tudjman and his domestic advisor, Iviæ Pašaliæ involving control over Veæernji List, one of Croatia's largest dailies. The state-owned

Croatian Radio and Television Enterprise (HRT) controls the only television source (HTV) with nation-wide coverage. Croatian media critics continually complain that political party interests influence the awarding of both radio and television licenses. Journalists who take a critical stance are threatened with legal action (Peruško-Æulek, 1999). In the area of minority rights, the government's record has lagged behind officially stated goals and achievements.

<sup>4</sup>The return of Serb refugees to Croatia remains an explosive issue, particularly in the regions of Krajina and Eastern Slavonia

<sup>5</sup>Feminist critics of government policies have pointed to a general increase in the vulnerability of women to domestic or other forms of abuse (not directly influenced by the war) in post-communist Croatia. See Slobodanka Bundalo "Images of Women in Croatian Daily Newspapers" Women's Informational and Documentation Centre, Croatia, 1997; Silva Meñariæ "Women in Croatia and Slovenia: a Case of Delayed Modernization" in Marilyn Rueschmeyer (ed.) *Women in the Politics of Post-communist Eastern Europe* (New York: M.E. Sharpe Inc. 1994) 153-170.

<sup>6</sup>For example, in an interview with the independent newspaper, the *Feral Tribune*, in April 1997, a prominent Croatian sociologist referred to the Herzegovinian Croats as "Croatia's New Serbs" referring to the vilification of these newcomers by Croatian nationals. Herzegovinian Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, are allowed to hold Croatian passports and identification, vote in Croatian elections, have Croatian license plates, fly the Croatian flag and use Croatian currency (kuna). Many attribute their meteoric political and economic rise in Croatia to the influence of hard-line Herzegovinians in key positions in President Tudjman's government. One example of the influence of the now powerful Herzegovinian lobby in Croatia comes from the daily televised weather report, which displays a regional map demarcating each of the former Yugoslav republics with distinctive borders and colours, all with the exception of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Although the official Bosnia-Herzegovinian border (with Croatia) is displayed, western and northern sections of Bosnia are shaded in the same colour as the Republic of Croatia.

<sup>7</sup>A recurring theme in newspaper and television coverage since the January 2000 elections concerns the apportioning of blame for the decline in the standard of living on the HDZ and their

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allies, many of whom are seen as largely responsible for engaging in or condoning corruption and war-profiteering. Government leaders and politicians endlessly point fingers at each other over their alleged corruption during the Tadjman regime.