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# **The Political Mobilization of the Croatian Diaspora**

Analyzing the impact of the Croatian diaspora on Croatian politics

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## **Introduction**

Diasporas, by nature, disrupt the traditional view of nationhood as being within one place by expanding the nation beyond a territory's borders. The common conception of nationhood, as tied to the nation-state is often thought of as a single, fixed entity (Carter 2005, 61). However, globalization, and diasporas as an example of this, expand the nation beyond the nation-state into wider communities dispersed around the world.

A diaspora can be defined as a group that finds itself outside the territory from which it is “historically rooted” (Carter 2005, 55). Across the world, diasporas engage in different ways with their “homeland,” from holding only cultural or symbolic relations to being active participants in developments of the homeland. The Croatian diaspora is in an unusual in-between, with a historic high engagement during the 1990s, and since then, divided into high and low levels of engagement evident in different sectors of the diaspora itself. This diaspora, estimated to be at around 2.5 million people, is extraordinarily large when compared to the 3.8 million people currently living in Croatia (Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography 2023). Additionally, the Croatian diaspora is tied to Croatia almost exclusively through ethnicity, with a large part of it having never lived in Croatia, and instead being second or third generation Croatians (Bartulac-Blanc 2007, 1). This, coupled with the historical and more recent political involvement of the diaspora in Croatia, makes for an interesting case study into the relationship between the diaspora and the homeland.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss and explore how the Croatian diaspora has engaged with the Croatian homeland over time, particularly how it has been mobilized to achieve different political goals. To do this, I will first give an overview of the history of the Croatian diaspora and their relationship with the homeland from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up to the 1980s.

Second, I will discuss the path to political mobilization of the diaspora through the 1980s before the war of independence. Third, I will cover and analyze the political involvement of the diaspora during the war of independence and the effect of their engagement. Then, I will move to the diaspora involvement after the independence of Croatia, focusing on diaspora suffrage and the effects of their voting on political developments in Croatia. As I analyze this, I will focus on the connection between the Croatian diaspora and the political party Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica (Croatian Democratic Union/HDZ), and population-wise on the Croatian diaspora in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Lastly, I will briefly look at the current state of the Croatian diaspora with respect to their involvement with the Croatian government and politics.

### **What is a diaspora?**

There are a variety of definitions and characteristics that can be assigned to diasporas. The most basic ones describe it as people who have migrated from their homeland and have established themselves as a minority elsewhere (Carter 2005, 55; Djuric 2003, 114; Erdoğan 2021, 1764). Here we can include all different types of people including refugees, guest workers, economic migrants, exile communities, ethnic communities, etc. Diasporas can indeed (as is the case with the Croatian one) be composed of groups from different categories. However, perhaps a more complete description includes additional characteristics unique to diasporas. Adamson and Demetriou offer a rather complete definition that focuses on (1) collective identity and (2) collective power/action.

“A diaspora can be defined as a social collectivity that exists across state borders and that has succeeded over time to (1) sustain a collective national, cultural or religious identity through a sense of internal cohesion and sustained ties with a real or imagined homeland and (2) display an ability to address the collective

interests of members of the social collectivity through a developed internal organizational framework and transnational links.” (Adamson & Demetriou 2007, 497).

Identity, in particular, is a key aspect of any diaspora, as it is the most essential connection to the homeland, granting a continued sense of belonging or remembrance. Djuric discusses how a shared identity also helps separate the diaspora from the host society (Djuric 2003, 114). Similarly, Carter points to identity as being part of the purposely sustained “rift between places of belonging and places of residence” (Carter 2005, 55). Hence, their identity not only unifies the diaspora, but it also ties them to some place other than their place of residence. Another key aspect to note are the institutional aspects of diasporas, either through networks with the homeland or social, political, or economic organizations. It is through these institutions that diasporas are then able to not only maintain a relationship with the homeland but also foster a shared identity and use it to further political action or influence in the host country or homeland (Adamson & Demetriou 2007, 498; Djuric 2003, 114).

The Croatian diaspora perfectly fits into these characteristics, from the shared identity, institutions, and a sustained relationship with the homeland. However, this was not always the case. The Croatian diaspora, as discussed in this paper, shows how diasporas are not static, they react to both changes in the homeland and changes in the host country. In the case of the Croatian diaspora, it was mostly through the effects of changes in the homeland that the diaspora became a political and economic force in the 1990s and then was transformed into what it is today.

## **The origins of the Croatian diaspora**

The Croatian diaspora, as it exists today, is made up of the remnants of different waves of migration, each with its own characteristics and unique experiences. In general, Croatian emigration is divided into three main periods or waves: the first took place at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and ended in the years prior to WWI, the second occurred post-WWII, and the third in the 1960-1970s. While emigration occurred before the end of the 1800s and since the 1970s, these three periods saw mass emigration of people leaving the territory that is now the Republic of Croatia and establishing themselves in distinct areas across the globe.

This first wave of mass emigration occurred when Croatia was still a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and it consisted of around 600,000 people leaving the territory of Croatia (Ragazzi 2009, 147). At the time, people emigrating did not necessarily describe themselves as Croatian, however, they did originate from the territory that is now Croatia. A factor that distinguishes them from the second wave of emigrants is the reason for emigration. For this first wave, most would be considered economic migrants, people who left the Balkans due to a lack of economic opportunities. In the case of Croatian emigrants from this period, most of them were unskilled workers who ended up settling in North and South America where they worked in mining, factories, and other unskilled labor positions (Winland 2005, 79-80). While many of these migrants initially planned to return, most of them ended up permanently settling abroad (Kovács 2017, 95). About a third of them, however, did eventually make their way back to Croatia in the interwar years, particularly during the Great Depression (Winland 2005, 78). These actions align with this group's designation as economic migrants, as their movement was clearly guided by the availability of economic opportunities. Those who stayed formed some political and economic organizations, perhaps the most renowned being the Croatian Fraternal

Union (CFU) in the USA and Canada, founded in 1904 (Carter 2005, 59). This organization would later play a key role in the organizing of the Croatian diaspora and remains active today.

Following the end of WW1, and with the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Croatia became part of what would later become Yugoslavia under the control of the Serb dynasty. In response to this control by the Serb, Croat groups outside Croatia began uniting into the fascist Ustaše movement. Later, with the support of Mussolini and Nazi Germany, they established the Independent State of Croatia which carried out the mass murder of Serbs, Jews, Roma, communists, and other minority and dissenting groups through WWII (Skrbiš 2007, 223). With the end of WWII, the defeat of the Axis powers, and the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia under Josip Broz (Tito) the remaining members of Ustaše, and other dissenters of Tito's regime, fled Croatia starting the second wave of emigration (Skrbiš 2007, 223). While the reason for emigrating was now political persecution, the places where these Croats ended up were not dissimilar to their earlier counterparts. The USA, Canada, Argentina, Australia, and New Zealand were popular choices for these new diaspora members to move to (Winland 2005, 79-80). However, while earlier emigrants were mostly working class, those from the 1940s and 50s were from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Ragazzi 2009, 3). This, in conjunction with their stronger right-wing (at times far-right) political ideology led to the formation of more politically oriented organizations such as the Croatian National Council which represented Croats internationally (Ragazzi 2009, 3). Similarly, while the earlier wave of emigrants focused their identity formation on traditional Croat cultural practices and traditions, this second wave based their identity on the politics of victimization. Post-WWII Croat emigrants were nationalistic and vehemently anti-communist, anti-Yugoslavia, and anti-Tito (Skrbiš 2007, 224).

Moving into the 1960s, Tito's government began cracking down on nationalistic movements throughout Yugoslavia. An instance of this in Croatia was when Tito's regime cracked down on the "Croat Spring" and purged liberal and nationalist Croatian politicians and scholars. Some of these dissenters abandoned Yugoslavia entirely and joined other political exiles abroad (Winland 2005, 77). However, there was another group of third-wave migrants: guest workers. Following the break with the USSR in 1948 and the slight liberalization of economic policies in Yugoslavia, economic growth slowed down and a lack of jobs became prevalent (Ragazzi 2009, 152). This, combined with the opening of borders in 1964 to the rest of Europe (at least momentarily) allowed workers to move abroad. Guest workers, most of them on work visas, traveled to Western European countries with the initial expectation of returning home (Ragazzi 2009, 4). However, as with the first wave, many of them decided to settle permanently in countries like Germany, Austria, and Sweden (Winland 2005, 79).

The different profiles of each wave of emigration, not only led to each "generation" of Croatian diaspora members having different political leanings, status, and organizations, but it also led to a different and evolving relationship with the homeland. This, of course, also depended on the internal changes within the government such as regime stability, new policies, and political movements. Ragazzi summarizes this by showing the different perceptions and actions the Austria-Hungarian and Yugoslav governments had toward each wave of emigrants. "...The 'old emigration', which was lost and to be 'seduced'... the 'enemy emigration', which was to be fought... the 'labor emigration', which was to be managed" (Ragazzi 2009, 153). The first generation of economic migrants was for the most part ignored by the Austro-Hungarian government, hence lost, but later policies aimed to attract them to ensure the preservation of national identities abroad (Ragazzi 2009, 148-49). When it came to the second wave of



emigrants the government (now Yugoslav under Tito) had a vastly different treatment towards Croatians abroad. Since most of these migrants were political dissenters, they were labeled as enemies of the nation, and contact with them was either very limited or at times hostile (Kovács 2017, 96). This naturally created a rift between the two generations of migrants and further separated their ideologies, making the second wave more anti-Yugoslav and more nationalistic. With the third wave, emigration was not only allowed but also encouraged by the Yugoslav government which wanted to ensure a sustained relationship between guest workers abroad and the homeland. The goals were simple, to have workers generate money abroad to send back home and to alleviate the unemployment crisis in Yugoslavia (Ragazzi 2009, 153). These different policies towards emigrants were in a way mutually reinforcing changes in the homeland affected the organization and political development of the diaspora, and the identity and organizing of the diaspora affected how the homeland wanted to connect with Croatians abroad. This is how, when nationalism and circumstances in Yugoslavia made the idea of independence more probable, (1) the diaspora became more politically interested in the events at home and (2) political elites in Croatia (later to become the Croatian government) began purposefully courting the diaspora for support. This shift into political organization is what allowed for the increased level of involvement of the diaspora in the war for independence.

### **The political awakening of the Croatian diaspora**

The political awakening of the diaspora did not occur in a vacuum or as a result of one specific event. It was a reaction to the overall political development and changes in the Balkans, starting with the death of Tito and carrying on to Croatia's declaration of independence. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was formed after WWII under the leadership of Tito. Through repressive and sometimes ineffective policies, Tito sought to prevent the rise of

nationalism and sedition from any of the republics that constituted Yugoslavia (Silver & Little 1996, 28). His goal, to sustain a multiethnic nation, was hindered by his insistence on ignoring and suppressing ethnic grievances which instead led to growing resentment across the different ethnic groups. A great example of this was the repression of the Croat Spring in 1971<sup>1</sup>, the suppression of which increased nationalist Croat sentiments abroad and in Yugoslavia (Winland 2005, 77). Regardless, all of Tito's efforts would come to a halt with his death and the ascension of Slobodan Milošević, first as president of Serbia and eventually, as president of Yugoslavia. Milošević rise to power came along with a rise in nationalistic Serb rhetoric. His blatant attempts at concentrating power and railing up the Serb population broke the old Yugoslav taboo about nationalism and ethnic grievances (Skrbiš 2007, 226). This helped reignite old ethnic conflicts and led to the rise of nationalism across multiple republics in Yugoslavia. Croat elites, for example, fostered the tension between ethnic/nationalist and pro-Yugoslav groups within Croatia, sentiments that were also exported abroad (Silver & Little 1996, 83). By this point, the Croat diaspora had been politically mobilized by Croat political elites and diaspora organizations. The change in domestic politics regarding independence had shifted the diaspora's mindset. As Skrbiš explains, "What had previously appeared as an unresponsive and invisible communist opposition in the homeland was now an increasingly public and vocal agent of political change. The once unimaginable convergence between the homeland and the diasporic vision of the future of Croatia was now suddenly a realistic possibility" (Skrbiš 2007, 226).

Prior to this political mobilization, the Croat diaspora existed in a much more divided state. Geography, class, and ideological differences kept different sectors separated and

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<sup>1</sup> The Croat Spring, which took place in 1971, was a Croatian nationalist and secessionist movement in response to Tito's restrictive policies towards culture, language, and nationalistic expression in Yugoslavia (Winland 2005, 77).

prevented any mass diasporic identity or organization from emerging (Ragazzi 2009, 4). For example, while the “old economic migrants” were primarily working-class and politically center-left, political emigrants tended to be middle or upper-class and right-wing/nationalist leaning. Furthermore, the association of the Croatian diaspora with the political emigrants post-WWII (and specifically the fascist Ustaše) made the diaspora unpopular internationally (Shain & Sherman 1998, 338). This in turn made it harder to organize for independence without majority support from the entire diaspora who in turn feared being seen as Nazi sympathizers themselves. Because of these divisions and the lack of a united political goal, most diaspora organizations focused on preserving the cultural aspects of the Croatian identity (Skrbiš 2007, 225). For example, the magazine Hrvatska Matica Iseljenika would publish diaspora almanacs focused on ethnic dances and folklore in a nonpolitical manner, and different Croatian-language schools were founded across North America (Winland 2005, 80). It wasn’t until tensions in Yugoslavia began rising and the nationalist Croat movement gained momentum that these diaspora organizations shifted to a more political and nationalistic stance.

The growing political conflict in the Balkans reignited diaspora interest in Croatian culture and most importantly caused a noticeable change in community institutions towards a more nationalistic stance (Carter 2005, 57). This would eventually grow into economic and political support for the independence cause, but it began with more subtle changes such as an increase in nationalistic rhetoric in Croatian publications. *The Fraternalist* (also known as the *Zajednicar*), the CFU’s main publication, began pushing content focusing on the importance of the Croat identity through language, religion (which took form by solidifying the relationship with the Catholic Church), culture, and history (Djuric 2003, 116-121). Particularly, history and lore creation became of paramount importance as they helped create not only a unified identity

but also a shared understanding of the reason for the political issues in the Balkans and the need for independence. While previously, *The Fraternalist* tended to be more moderate in its approach to historical events, it began crafting a narrative in which Croatia had been scorned by the other Yugoslav republics (especially the Serbs); this was also accompanied by an attempt to cover up the actions of the Ustaše regime during WW II, trying to separate the Ustaše (and hence Croatia and the diaspora) from the other fascist regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Djuric 2003, 120). This switch in programming and tone continued as the nationalist movement grew in the 1980s and as the diaspora became a more unified force, political elites in Croatia noticed. Franjo Tuđman visited the diaspora in North America in 1987 to foster a stronger relationship with the movement and (of course) began courting the diaspora for financial support (Ragazzi 2009, 4). Tuđman, a historian and a previous military general, was known for his revisionist outlook on the Ustaše regime and had become an important leader for the opposition movement in Croatia (Skrbiš 2007, 227). This made him liked by the second wave, but also by other sectors of the diaspora who for once felt seen and included in the independence movement. Over the next couple of years, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), Tuđman's party, continued to court the diaspora and opened offices in Toronto, Munich, and Canberra (Ragazzi 2009, 5). The HDZ would host a gathering of diaspora representatives in Zagreb before the first multi-party elections (Skrbiš 2007, 230). This move aimed to create the view that the HDZ represented all Croatians, including those abroad, a necessary foundation to build if they wished to have the diaspora's economic support in the years to come.

In 1990, in an attempt to circumvent Milošević's growing influence and gain legitimacy, the League of Communists of Croatia (SKH) held the country's first multi-party elections (Čular 2000, 32). However, contrary to their expectations and in large part due to the economic support

of the diaspora, which donated around 4 million dollars for HDZ's political campaigns, HDZ won the general election and Tuđman became the official leader of Croatia (Silber & Little 1996, 90; Skrbiš 2007, 231). A year later, under the leadership of Tuđman, Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia (Silber & Little 1996, 28). The path to independence, however, was not an easy one. Following the declaration of independence, the country entered a period of violent conflict from 1990 to 1995, first between the Croatian majority and the Serbian minority and then between Croatia and the Yugoslav army (led by Serbian forces) (Kasapović 2012, 781). As the war began, the diaspora was fully prepared to become actively (directly and indirectly) engaged in securing Croatia's independence. The diaspora had gone from a divided group of diaspora members across the world to a mobilized force under a Croat identity and a clear goal.

### **Diaspora mobilization during the War of Independence**

Throughout the 1990s, the now mobilized and unified diaspora undertook two main courses of action to support the war effort: fundraising, both military and humanitarian, and lobbying. A small fraction of Croatians abroad also took more direct action, such as returning to Croatia to join the armed forces or organizing arms trafficking (Carter 2005, 57). However, aside from these few, most of the diaspora supported the war in less direct ways. Fundraising was not new for the diaspora; they had begun engaging in this practice after Tuđman's initial visit to North America in 1987. A lot of this initial fundraising went to HDZ electoral campaigns. The diaspora in Canada, for example, raised over one million dollars in 1992 for HDZ's electoral campaigns before the 1990 elections (Winland 2005, 83). In 1991, as conflict escalated in the Balkans, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 713 placing Croatia on an arms embargo (Marinić 2020). This pushed the independence movement to engage in illegal arms trafficking, something that required a lot of money. A lot of these resources came from the diaspora, who

were either unconcerned with the specifics of where their money was going (as long as it supported the war) or were supportive of illegal arms trafficking (Skrbiš 2007, 233; Smith 2007, 12). As fundraising transitioned into part of the war effort, it became a patriotic practice for the diaspora and the easiest way of contributing to the war from their home abroad. Diaspora organizations were key in pushing the diaspora for donations, making it mandatory for members and shameful for those who did not participate (Skrbiš 2007, 233). Not all fundraising efforts were directed towards illegal weapons. There were also large donation projects aimed at humanitarian causes such as medicine, clothing, and food (Skrbiš 2007, 233). Funds such as the Croatian Humanitarian Aid Fund and Croatian Action for Life set up by different diaspora organizations raised over \$850,000 for humanitarian relief (Djuric 2003, 124).

The other mechanism used by the diaspora was political lobbying targeted at their host governments. This included holding marches, lobbying politicians directly, signing petitions, and generally utilizing the strength of diaspora organizations collectively. Some of the goals for lobbying were increasing the visibility of the movement, swaying the international public opinion on the conflict, and gaining international support from other states (or getting them to stop supporting Yugoslavia). The biggest rally took place in July 1991 in Washington D.C. with around 35 000 participants, and it included representatives from the Croatian American Association, the Croatian Fraternal Union, the Croatian Catholic Union, the Croatian Academy of America, and the Croatian government itself (Ragazzi 2009, 159). A similar rally took place in Toronto earlier that year with around 15 000 people in attendance (Djuric 2003, 123). The goal of these rallies was not only to gain support but also to show up as a unified force in support of the independence movement. In terms of lobbying specific legislations, the diaspora met with members of the U.S. Congress to discuss the “Nickles Amendment” to prohibit aid to Yugoslavia

(the Yugoslav army), and the “Direct Aid to Democracies Act” to provide aid to Yugoslav Republics (such as Croatia) (Ragazzi 2009, 159). Diaspora organizations were key in harnessing the collective action of their members in a more effective and targeted manner in conjunction with the movement in Croatia.

The overall effect of the diaspora efforts towards the war was significant. As Skrbiš describes it “the Croatian diaspora actively and decisively, yet mostly indirectly... in the name of patriotic responsibility and the right to defend one’s own country, it co-funded the maintenance of the conflict” (Skrbiš 2007, 234). This can be seen in the numbers, as the diaspora raised approximately 25% of the resources for the war effort up to 1993 (Ragazzi 2009, 5). The diaspora was essential to the success of the independence movement, but the war effort did not just affect the actual war, it also impacted the development of the diaspora. It forced the diaspora to let go of internal divisions to present a unified front towards a larger goal. The possibility of the independence of Croatia, paired with direct action from political elites, mobilized a large group of uninvolved migrants into funding a major political movement.

The impact of the diaspora, however, did not end with the war effort or the war itself, it continues to be present in Croatian politics. Their actions during the war made the diaspora impossible to ignore and political groups, especially the HDZ, took advantage of this to push for policies in the name of diaspora. The support of independence by the diaspora created a justification for their direct inclusion in Croatian politics, the most direct and relevant was the establishment and sustenance of diaspora voting in Croatia and their representation in Parliament.

## **Croatia's citizenship law and diaspora suffrage**

Towards the end of the war, there was some decline in support from the diaspora. This was in part due to the conflict between Croatia and BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and the revelation about the existence of concentration camps set up by the Croatian forces (Ragazzi 2009, 6). This caused some re-division of diaspora organizations that had previously built a coalition. The end of this conflict, with the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in 1995 was also met with a “de- intensification” of the relationship between Croats abroad and the Croatian state (Skrbiš 2007, 234). The elevated level of engagement that the diaspora had engaged in during the war was gone once Croatia was settled as an independent and recognized nation. However, this does not mean the diaspora stopped participating entirely or that Croatia was no longer interested in the diaspora; instead, the mechanisms of engagement shifted from fundraising and lobbying in their host countries to voting in Croatian elections.

The Croatian 1991 Citizenship Law not only changed the definition of who was Croatian, but it also cemented the commitment to including the diaspora as part of the Croatian nation. The law declared that all previously Croat Republic citizens became citizens of the new Croatian state and eligible voters, regardless of their residency (meaning all those political emigrants were considered citizens again). Those who could prove Croat ethnicity would qualify for citizenship and this was usually determined via old Yugoslav documents or the like (Ragazzi & Balalovska 2011, 7). This law created a two-tier system for naturalization in which it was considerably easier for those with Croat ethnicity to become naturalized regardless of their residency. Because of this, the new law tended to exclude from citizenship those who had been living in Croatia but were from other Yugoslav republics, most of them Serbs (Ragazzi & Balalovska 2011, 8). This solidified the idea that “Croatian-ness” was intrinsically tied to being ethnically Croat which not



only aligned with the nationalist ideals of the independence movement, but it also worked completely for the diaspora which had been solidifying their identity as Croats for the previous decade. In terms of how the diaspora took advantage of this opportunity, it was limited and localized. While the diaspora all over the world (significantly North America and Australia) had been active participants in the war effort, they were not necessarily interested in returning to Croatia or even claiming a new Croatian nationality. What took place instead, was that 90% of those who acquired Croatian nationality after the passing of this law were ethnic Croats from neighboring BiH (Ragazzi 2009, 165). This represents in a way a new era for the diaspora, in which Croats in BiH represent most of those engaged in Croatian politics while the rest of the diaspora retreated into a less active role in the affairs of the homeland. This, as will be described further, is easily seen in the voting patterns of the diaspora and the relationship between Croatia and BiH Croats.

The citizenship law granted diaspora members who claimed (and were granted) Croatian nationality the right to vote in Croatian national elections. While Croatia is not the only country in which the diaspora can vote, this is a highly polarized topic in Croatian national politics. The most common argument for allowing diaspora voting stems from their participation in the war. In this sense, citizenship and voting are presented to the diaspora as a thank-you for their actions during the war and as retribution for the persecution part of the diaspora suffered (Kasapović 2012, 780). This serves as both an acknowledgment of the war efforts of the diaspora and a commitment to their inclusion in the Croatian nation. Alternative pro-diaspora voting arguments include securing the economic involvement of the diaspora and ensuring the HDZ wins national elections. In terms of the first one, the Croatian diaspora generates a significant amount of money that is sent to Croatia, mostly as remittances, and it is estimated that at some point

emigrant contributions made up about a third of the national budget (Kasapović 2012, 781; Laguerre 2013, 94). The right to vote then is justified by the economic contributions made to the homeland, perhaps in an attempt to ensure future economic engagement by presenting suffrage as a token of gratitude or acknowledgment. Another argument in favor (by those it benefits) of diaspora voting, is that it ensures the sustained control of government by the HDZ (Kovács 2017, 100). Ragazzi concurs, claiming that the HDZ can “secure almost without failure up to 10% of seats in parliament through the diasporic constituency” (Ragazzi 2009, 7). This, of course, gives the party a clear motive to enshrine diaspora voting into law.

There are, however, quite a few arguments made by those who oppose diaspora voting. One of said criticisms is that diaspora members do not pay taxes in Croatia (Laguerre 2013, 91; Ragazzi 2009, 164). The point here is that since the diaspora does not live in Croatia and is not paying taxes, they are voting and making decisions that only impact them marginally. Furthermore, since paying taxes can be seen as a civic duty, the diaspora is not fulfilling this duty while engaging in the privileges that nationality/citizenship brings them. Another argument against diaspora voting is that the diaspora is unfairly overrepresented in Parliament. Each diaspora seat (at least up to 2009) was elected by a smaller number of people than a regular parliamentary seat, meaning that every single diaspora vote held more influence than that of a resident of Croatia (Ragazzi 2009, 164). This ties in with the argument that diaspora voting unequivocally benefits the HDZ. Of course, one could argue that the diaspora simply prefers the HDZ’s platform and that is not wrong or undemocratic. One last criticism of diaspora voting is the prevalence of voter fraud. This pertains to the diaspora when it comes to inflation of voters’ lists, double voting/registration, and dead voters appearing on the roster- this last one being most common with voters registered in Croatia with residence in BiH (Bartulac-Blanc 2007, 9). While

managing voting stations and shipping across the globe complicates the organization and management of elections, these breaches of election integrity can also be detrimental to the outcome of elections. One should note that the solution to this last specific set of problems is not necessarily to get rid of diaspora voting. Instead, the solution can be perfecting the election process abroad.

### **The results and intricacies of diaspora voting**

The Croatian electoral system has undergone a myriad of reforms since 1991, perhaps the most relevant changes are the ones that took it from a majoritarian system to a proportional representation system. However, these reforms also addressed diaspora seats and have had significant changes (at least temporarily) in the results of diaspora voting. The 1995 electoral reforms created a separate district, Constituency 11, for diaspora voters (and other Croats abroad) and they were granted twelve seats in Parliament (Kovács 2017, 23). At this time, Croatia operated under a mixed system, but diaspora seats were elected via proportional representation (Kasapović 2012, 784). This meant that the diaspora was represented by the same number of people as any other district in Croatia, regardless of turnout. This led to a clear overrepresentation of the diaspora and calls for reform were promptly presented. In 1999, a new formula was presented in which diaspora seats were calculated by dividing the number of votes in the diaspora constituency by the number of votes needed to obtain one seat in another one of the districts (Bartulac-Blanc 2007, 4). This system called non-fixed quota, created variation in the number of diaspora seats depending on the voter turnout for each election. In 2000, the diaspora received six seats, in 2003 they received four seats, and in 2007 they received five seats (Kasapović 2012, 785). Generally, this favored the opposition parties (non-HDZ) since it minimized the effect of diaspora voting. The latest set of electoral reforms from 2011, however,

overturned the non-fixed quota system and instead settled on three permanent seats representing the diaspora (Kovács 2017, 101). These changes are reflected in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Croatian diaspora voter turnout and seat allocation in parliamentary elections from 1995 to 2020.

Year	Number of Diaspora Voters	Seats for HDZ/Total Number of Seats
1995	-	12/12
1997	-	12/12
2000	126,841	6/6
2003	70,527	4/4
2007	90,482	5/5
2011	21,100	3/3
2015	28,917	1/3*
2016	21,208	2/3
2020	28,768	3/3

\* All three seats were granted to the Patriotic Coalition, of which HDZ was a part, but only one of the seats was taken by an HDZ member.

Sources: State Election Commission of the Republic of Croatia, Laguerre (2013).

Regardless of changes in the number of seats and votes tabulations, the diaspora has remained consistent in who they vote for the HDZ. As seen in the table above, almost all seats that have represented the diaspora since 1995 have been held by members of the HDZ. The notable exceptions, of course, are two seats in 2015 and one seat in 2016. Even so, these seats were instead granted to members of parties that split off from HDZ (State Election Commission of the Republic of Croatia 2015, 2016). This trend persists despite declining turnout since 1995

and a significantly different voting pattern from other constituencies (Kasapović 2012, 787; Laguerre 2003, 90). Something interesting to note is that despite HDZ dominating diaspora seats, members are rarely re-elected- with exceptions from 1995 to 1999, 2003 to 2007, and 2015 to 2016 (State Election Commission of the Republic of Croatia; Laguerre 2013, 87). This means that the diaspora is loyal not to specific politicians but rather to the party itself.

It is not complicated to understand why the diaspora votes for the HDZ. First of all, the HDZ, through Tuđman's visits before the war, was the first political group to make a connection with the diaspora. They also subsequently continued to include the diaspora in their political endeavors through campaigns and advocacy for diaspora voting (Laguerre 2013, 89; Skrbiš 2007, 230). Furthermore, opposition parties tend to not only be against diaspora voting (for the benefits it has brought the HDZ) but also have at times failed to campaign or even present candidates for the diaspora constituency (Bartulac-Blanc 2007, 2). Furthermore, the diaspora's attachment to the HDZ goes beyond this. Franjo Tuđman, in leading Croatia to independence, created an image for the HDZ as the party of independence and of a free Croatia (Laguerre 2013, 89). This perfectly aligns with the diaspora's nationalistic identity and their original reason for mobilization in the 1990s.

Another notable aspect of diaspora voting is who votes within the diaspora. Unsurprisingly, considering those who requested citizenship and from other factors covered shortly, over 70% of diaspora voters reside in BiH (Bartulac-Blanc 2007, 3). Likewise, most of the diaspora representatives are from BiH (Laguerre 2013, 87). There are a few possible reasons why voting is concentrated in this neighboring country. One of them is simply the closeness between Croatia and BiH, making it easier to fund and run elections for diaspora voters there (Kasapović 2012, 29). Another significant factor is that the Croat diaspora in BiH is financially

dependent on Croatia for services including the “Croatian component of the armed forces of BiH, the administrations in the communes and cantons with a Croatian majority, the schooling, pension and health care system” (Laguerre 2013, 89). Since the HDZ is the main party that supports and actively champions diaspora voting, electing their members is a way for the diaspora in BiH to ensure continuous funding. Another explanation is that the HDZ has recognized the importance of the diaspora in BiH and has implemented measures to ensure there are as many voters as possible. Since diaspora seats were at some point calculated based on the number of voters, it was in the interest of HDZ (who expects to benefit from diaspora voting either way) to increase the number of voters in an attempt to increase diaspora seats in parliament (Bartulac-Blanc 2007, 4). As part of this effort, HDZ established a “sister- party” in BiH which basically works as an arm of the HDZ and is the same ideologically and organizationally (Kasapović 2012, 787). This increases their presence in BiH and helps them to be the strongest party for the diaspora to consider.

In addition, the Croatian government- which oversees diaspora elections in BiH and has for most of the time since independence been controlled by the HDZ- has taken direct action to make voting easier in BiH. This has included increasing the availability of polling locations, for example in 2003 there were 30 polling stations in 15 “strategic sites” in BiH compared to the six polling locations in Serbia and Montenegro combined (Laguerre 2013, 88-90). More voting stations make it easier for people to vote, increasing voter turnout. Ragazzi proposes an additional reason for maintaining a stronger connection with the diaspora in BiH, and that is that through the funding that Croatia provides to Croats in BiH, the country has maintained de facto control over these areas (Ragazzi 2009, 7-8). Notably, the regions with a higher concentration of ethnic Croats in BiH are the regions Croatia “gave up” with the signing of the Dayton Peace

Agreement. Regardless of the specific reason, the HDZ has undoubtedly been the sole beneficiary of the diaspora voting. The question now turns to whether this has had any significant effect on Croatian politics.

### **The effects of diaspora voting**

Consisting of around 10% of the total electorate (Kasapović 2012, 778), the Croatian diaspora has had a visible impact on the results of parliamentary elections and the governments that formed from these results on several occasions. Unsurprisingly, considering the political preferences of the diaspora, voters (particularly in BiH) have come to the aid of the HDZ to secure their control of government and we can see this political mobilization on the electoral results of 2000, 2005, 2007, and 2010.

The election of 2000 was significant because of two main factors, one was the death of Tuđman in December of the previous year and the other was the complete implementation of proportional representation voting (Nikić & Čular 2022, 569). This and a growing dissatisfaction towards the HDZ hinted at their upcoming defeat and triggered the highest turnout ever experienced by the diaspora with over 100,000 voters (State Election Commission of the Republic of Croatia 2000). Regardless of this attempt, HDZ still lost the majority for the first time in independent Croatia's history, with the opposition coalition taking the government (Nikić & Čular 2022, 569). However, diaspora votes still influenced the strength of the majority gained by the opposition, going from 50.7% without diaspora votes to 47% due to HDZ diaspora seats (Ragazzi & Balalovska 2011, 10). Additionally, this mobilization by diaspora voters still signified that diaspora voters in BiH were committed to helping the HDZ when needed. A similar higher turnout was seen in 2007 when HDZ control of the government was tenuous (Kasapović 2012, 788). Since this election took place during the "no-fixed quota" era of seat

allocation for the diaspora, the higher turnout converted into five seats granted to the HDZ (State Election Commission of the Republic of Croatia 2007). These additional seats were enough to tilt the scales on the HDZ favor and led from a presumed SDP (main opposition party) led coalition to an HDZ-controlled coalition (Ragazzi 2009, 145).

This increased participation has also occurred in presidential elections, including attempts to defeat Stjepan Mesić and Ivo Josipović (2010) in presidential runoff elections (Kasapović 2012, 788), both unsuccessful. Even without a major turnout or gaining the ultimate goal (the success of the HDZ) diaspora voting can influence the way elections develop. For example, in the 2005 presidential elections, diaspora voting allowed the HDZ candidate to advance to the second round of voting (Ragazzi & Balalovska 2011, 10). With this, we can see that while the diaspora does not make a major part of the electorate, in conjunction with the HDZ, it has been able to harness voters and create political mobilization when needed to uplift the HDZ in several critical elections. It signals BiH Croats' commitment to participating in Croatian politics and to securing the funding they need to carry on functioning as they have. The results also explain why the HDZ is committed to staying in good relations with the diaspora and ensuring they retain voting rights in Croatia despite decreasing turnout over the past two decades.

### **The Croatian diaspora today**

Since the end of the war in 1995, the Croatian diaspora has reduced their engagement with homeland politics considerably. Even in voting, perhaps the most direct way for the diaspora to participate in the politics of the homeland today, there has been a continuous decrease in diaspora participation (see Table 1 above). Most of the existing political participation comes from those in neighboring Balkan states, especially BiH. Now, with a new "era" of Croatian emigration, mostly economic migrants, this lack of interest in Croatia's politics



continues (Winland 2005, 83). The Croatian diaspora, it seems, has switched from political participation to economic contributions only. These contributions, however, are no longer lobbying or campaign donations but remittances to family members. It is estimated that remittances made up to 6.4% of Croatia's GDP as of 2020 (Erdoğan 2021, 1766).

This new era of emigration starting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and possibly facilitated by the admittance of Croatia into the European Union in 2013, has caused a considerable spike in the Croat diaspora population, with around 350 000 people having left Croatia since the mid-2010s (Trkanjec 2021). Whereas the diaspora still contributes economically to Croatia, the Croatian government has switched tactics to attract diaspora members to come back to Croatia instead. The "I Choose Croatia" policy introduced in 2021 aims to attract diaspora members back to Croatia with economic incentives up to the equivalent of \$18,000 US for starting a business (Government of the Republic of Croatia 2021). While diaspora participation continues in the form of voting, the momentum and level of participation seen in the 1990s is long gone and it is unlikely to return.

## **Conclusion**

The Croatian diaspora as it was formed over the 20<sup>th</sup> century consisted mostly of separate groups which, while they did form cultural and civil organizations, did not act as one group together. Part of this division was due to the context in which each wave of emigration happened and the subsequent relation between each wave and the government. Because of this, diaspora organizations focused on cultural and local programming, remaining mostly non-political (except for those founded by political exiles- as their entire being abroad was due to political reasons) (Djuric 2003, 120). However, as the conditions in the Balkans changed and the idea of a free, independent Croatia was more than just an unattainable dream, the diaspora began uniting under

this one shared purpose. This switch, however, did not occur on its own. As Ragazzi suggests, diaspora organizations not diasporas on their own are the ones involved in international politics (Ragazzi 2009, 8). Indeed, it was these civic, social, and political organizations, in conjunction with Croat political elites, that were at the forefront of this change in the diaspora's mindset and organization. The Croatian diaspora which funded and lobbied for an independent Croatia was the result of the efforts of political actors who united separate groups under one shared identity and purpose. In doing this, not only did they create a fundraising base for the war, and quite a productive one, but they also fostered a nationalistic rhetoric based on the historic oppression of Croatia and the idea of "Croatian-ness" as a unique but shared identity.

It was this identity formation and the effort placed on uniting the diaspora that allowed for the harnessing of collective action of the entire diaspora in support of independence. However, once independence was won in the 1990s, the diaspora no longer had a concrete goal under which to unite. This might have been one of the causes for the decrease in participation, they had reached their goal and there was no secondary goal instead. Few were interested in returning to Croatia as most economic migrants had chosen at some earlier date to permanently settle abroad (Skrbiš 2007, 230). The diaspora, in general, retreated into what they had been doing before the war, focusing on maintaining cultural and ethnic traditions and building economic relations between themselves and the homeland (Skrbiš 2007, 234). The government of the newly formed Croatia, however, chose to connect the diaspora to the state formally by offering nationality/citizenship to diaspora members. Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina were heavily interested in this and have now become the most active group within the diaspora.

Political engagement from the diaspora now is in the form of voting, and indeed it is the Croats in BiH that make up most of this group. The HDZ has formed a mutually reinforcing

relationship with the diaspora in BiH, mobilizing voters for parliamentary and presidential elections to give them more electoral support. They do this not only by reinforcing their commitment to the diaspora but also by continuing to provide funding for diaspora communities in BiH (Laguerre 2013, 89). All of this, of course, is surrounded by the uniting characteristic of being ethnically Croat.

The Croatian diaspora is not unique in terms of nationalist tendencies, ethnic identity focus, participation in homeland conflicts, or even having the right to vote. It does present an interesting study into diaspora and homeland relations that this paper aimed to explore. This relationship between the Croat diaspora and the rulers of the land now known as Croatia has not been straightforward. What this paper has hopefully shown, however, is how the diaspora was politically mobilized for two specific political goals, first the independence of Croatia and second sustaining the political success of the HDZ. Political elites accomplished this by crafting a shared identity that united the diaspora and the homeland; this identity not only being ethnically Croat-focused but also one emphasizing nationalistic support for an independent Croatia. After the war, this was continued by the HDZ which utilized the same rhetoric plus economic incentives to retain diaspora support. Through this, the diaspora has become an intrinsic part of Croatian politics, and this is unlikely to change anytime soon. This has opened Croatia to exist beyond its borders as a “transnational understanding of the “Croatian nation” has become part of the unquestioned, commonly shared assumption of Croatian political life” (Ragazzi 2011, 15). The influence of the diaspora might be small at times, and it might continue to dwindle over time if the current trends continue. But it would be unwise to completely ignore the effects that it has had in Croatian politics, both by their own hands and by the opportunities it grants to other political actors.

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