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Serbia – Croatia relations: No way forward in sight

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*A rapprochement between Serbia and Croatia might well represent a stimulus for growth and normalisation across the Balkans, in a similar fashion to the French-German leadership in driving European integration back in the 1950s. How far are we from a comprehensive settlement? **Milan Dinic** sets out to discuss.*



The first same-sex partnership in Croatia was between a Croat and a Serb. This one-off occurrence is unfortunately not widely reflected in terms of societal tolerance in either country. From www.radiosarajevo.ba

From a geographic and economic perspective, Serbia and Croatia stand out with the ability to be the driving force of the Balkans. Reaching a comprehensive settlement and a normalisation in their relations might create a basis for a push for the region, in a similar fashion to the way in which the French-German rapprochement helped Western Europe in the 1950s. For that to be achieved, a focus on common economic benefits should take the place of nationalistic short-sightedness. But, is it realistic for that to happen soon?

Recent clashes

Tensions between the two countries have surfaced recently on three occasions: the genocide ruling of the International court of justice (ICJ), the election of the new Croatian president and her inauguration.

Croatia submitted its law suit for genocide to the ICJ in July 1999, just days after the Kosovo war ended. Negotiations for the Croatian suit to be dropped went on for several years (as both sides were aware of the slim legal grounds for such claim), but no agreement was ever reached. Serbia reluctantly filed a countersuit in 2010 when it became obvious that Zagreb was not backing down. Even after that, Serbian officials publicly called for suits to be withdrawn. However, due to internal pressure of nationalistic structures there was not enough will in Zagreb. Eventually, when the court made its decision – dismissing both the Croatian and Serbian suits, emotions rose high. Instead of both countries hanging their heads in shame over the horrifying facts established in the proceedings, a new wave of nationalistic rhetoric rose up. The representatives of the 400,000 Serbs expelled from Croatia voiced outrage for no one being held accountable for their exodus. The Croatian minister of justice stated that the fact that the Serbian judge in the ICJ voted to dismiss Serbia's suit (while the Croat judge stood by the Croatian claims) proved how pointless Belgrade's counter-suit was. Once again, loyalty to national identity was held to be above the law. The Croatian minister of justice went on to say that his country will insist that Serbia prosecutes officials of the Yugoslav National Army; failing which, Croatia would do so.

Tensions rose further when Croats elected their new president. In her first public appearance as President-elect, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović treated Vojvodina, a province in Northern Serbia, [as a neighbouring country](#). Serbian PM Vučić reluctantly commented on the statement saying that it was "a deliberate slip of the tongue" but that he would not demand a formal apology. None was given.

Then came the inauguration of Mrs Kitarović. The Serbian PM surprisingly announced that he would attend the event, which took place on Serbia's National Day – 15th of February – the most important national event in the country. Vučić received criticism for going to Zagreb, and not just because of the Vojvodina statement, but also because the event was attended by – as the leading Croatian daily [“Jutarnji list” put it](#) – “a disputed list of guests” of the HDZ, Kitarović's party. The guest list included Tomislav Merčep, a Croatian paramilitary currently on trial for war crimes, and the controversial singer Marko Perković Thompson, who openly sings anti-Serbian songs and promotes the WW2 pro-nazi Ustasa movement iconography.

Open issues

Croatia and Serbia have a long list of open questions. The two countries cannot even agree on the basic facts in each of these issues.

The countries have completely different understandings of the causes and responsibilities for the war. Due to the fact that the war was fought on Croatia's territory, this issue has a very emotional meaning for the Croatian public.

The two countries do not agree on the number and the ethnicity of the over 2,000 people missing from the war. While Croatia requests for Serbia to clear out their destiny, the Serbian side says there are more Serbs on that list (which Zagreb denies) and that it therefore seeks information about them on behalf of the families.

There is a question of disputed property – both of Serbian/Croatian firms in the other country (Croatia especially points out at the facilities of its petrol firm INA in Serbia, which was first nationalised and later privatised), as well as the property of Serbs who were expelled from Croatia.

There is then the border dispute on the Danube, a small part of which became a matter of argument when the river changed its stream due to natural causes.

And, of course, the question of minority rights. Before the war, according to the 1991 census, there were 97.344 Croats in Serbia, and after the 2011 census there were 57.900 Croats. In Croatia, before the war there were 581.663 Serbs who made up 12.2% of the population. Today, there are 186.633 Serbs in Croatia, who make only 4.36% of the population.

Croatia claims that Croats in Serbia are underprivileged, and that Belgrade is stripping the 17,000-strong Bunjevac minority of their Croatian roots. Representatives of the Croatian minority say that they are under-represented in the institutions in Central Serbia, while in the North the situation seems to be somewhat better. Also, Croats were expelled from parts of Vojvodina ([722 were expelled](#) from the village of Hrtkovci only) and no one has been held accountable for that.

On the other hand, Zagreb has failed to implement the 1995 [Erdut Agreement](#) guaranteeing rights to the Serbs in Eastern Croatia, and abolished the autonomous districts of Glina and Knin. Serbs in Croatia have problems recovering property left when fleeing the war. They face obstructions in using their language and Cyrillic writing, and incidents occur almost on a monthly basis. An incident that sparked outrage was the 2013 campaign by Croatian hard-line nationalists, backed by HDZ, to ban signs in Cyrillic in municipalities where Serbs make 33% of the population, as sanctioned by Croatian laws. These events were followed by numerous incidents across Serb-inhabited places in Croatia, where signs in Serbian were taken down and destroyed by angry mobs. A petition for a referendum to decide on whether signs in Cyrillic writing should be banned in Croatia was [signed by more than 650,000 people](#). Croatian government dismissed the calls for such a referendum as undemocratic and unconstitutional – much to its own drop in popularity. The debate got much wider and became a matter of proving Croatian patriotism. Cyrillic signs were put on highways this February, but out of two has already been stolen, Croatian media report.

What way forward?

Taking into account the above-mentioned issues, finding a way forward is likely to represent a puzzle for years to come. There are some marked differences in the two countries' approaches to each other, that ought to be taken into consideration.

While Croatia is a topic of little importance in political debates in Belgrade, the opposite scenario does not hold true in Zagreb. During the recent presidential elections in Croatia, the accusations of pro-Serbian sympathies have played a quite significant factor in ousting president Josipović – representing a direct assault on his Croatian patriotism.

There is also a difference when it comes to facing responsibilities for the wars of the 1990s. Serbia – mostly thanks to great international pressure – has now extradited all of its accused citizens to the ICTY. The most widely shared view within Serbian public opinion, however, is that Serbs are the victims rather than the side mostly to blame for the wars. According to the [Analysis of the Prosecution of War Crimes in Serbia 2004-2013](#), the Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor filed 150 law suits against individuals in Serbia, and by the end of 2013 there were 65 people sentenced and 32 acquitted, and other trials are ongoing. The debate on war crimes committed by Serbs is a very open one and highly present in the public. In Croatia the situation is somewhat different, with war crime proceedings being often very politicised – as could be noticed in the cases of Branimir Glavaš, former major general and co-founder of the HDZ party, and Janko Bobetko, Chief of the general staff of the armed forces. There is still an issue of “secret lists” of Serbs wanted by Croatian authorities for war crimes, preventing many to return under fear of being arrested. Also, there has not been a single conviction for war crimes in [operation “Storm”](#), which saw 250,000 Serbs expelled and 2,000 people killed.

Turning to the economy may prove difficult as well, as the Croatian market seems to be very difficult to enter into. According to August 2014 information from the Serbian chamber of commerce, Croatian investment in Serbia totals €500m, while Serbian investment in Croatia amounts to only €40m. While Croatian investors were able to buy top Serbian brands (“Štark”, “Frikom”, “Dijamant”) Serbian companies often faced problems when attempting to invest in Croatia: the Serbian “Danube group” did not

succeed in buying the “Karlovačka mlekarana” dairy farm; the holding company “Delta” failed in several attempts to acquire land in Zagreb from the company “Zagrebčanka”.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, neither Serbia nor Croatia have so far managed to propose a sound approach to start rebuilding relations. It seems that Croatia’s elite, while failing to provide a strong economic platform for the dire problems their country is facing, is focused on exploiting the anti-Serbian sentiment as the main engine of social-political and national integration. Politicians in Belgrade, on the other hand, are trying to escape the nationalistic image portrayed in the 90’s by repeating the mantra of “good neighbourly relations” and “cooperation in the region” – but with no real plan to back these words up.

Serbia’s position is made more difficult by Croatia being already in the EU. Croatian officials have already pointed at several issues (most of which were mentioned in this article) that are likely to be used in attempts to block Serbia’s EU bid. The biggest responsibility on making progress is therefore on Serbia. It should pave a new way forward supported by a clear strategy of what it wants in its relations with Croatia. Serbia also needs to rethink its approach towards the EU, by seeing the Union as a means and not as the goal itself.

The prevailing stereotypes of a one-sided interpretation of the war in Yugoslavia need to be abandoned. Each country must endeavour to punish those responsible for war crimes and issue apologies. The focus should be on establishing strong economic cooperation through projects of common interest like the Chinese “New Silk Road”, the EU’s Danube strategy, and initiatives addressing energy supply problems.

However, national identity remains an important issue throughout the Balkans. Burying the problem under a carpet of NGO projects hasn’t so far been successful in bringing people together. Serbia’s political and intellectual elite should stop repeating superficial interpretations of past injustices, and instead devote themselves to helping to create a sustainable and functional model for the country’s development, thus forming a healthy basis for regional cooperation. Croatia, on the other hand, should move away from a confrontational view of history based solely on the wars of the 1990s.

War is over and should not be fought any longer. It has however become apparent that animosities in the two countries are still deeply rooted, a view which is most often perpetrated by the elites. To break out of this deadlock the only possible answer is economic synergy. A cooperation based on mutual understanding and economic integration is the only sustainable way forward.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe, nor of the London School of Economics.

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