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POWER, CORRUPTION AND DISSENT: VARIETIES OF CONTEMPORARY CROATIAN POLITICAL CATHOLICISM

By Vjekoslav Perica

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Introduction

Since 2011, Slavoj Žižek, currently one of the world's most influential philosophers, has argued that the Catholic Church of Croatia is the most extremist nationalist force in the Balkans. In a London lecture that year, Žižek states, “15 years after the 1991-1995 war in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina nationalism in the Balkans did not subside." On the contrary, in some cases, nationalism in the Balkans grew even more extremist. Yet it is no longer Serb but Croat nationalism that seems the most forceful. According to Žižek, its major characteristic is Catholic clericalism. He notes: “The darkest political force in the region, as far as I can see now, is the Croatian Catholic Church. . . It is absolutely, openly pro-Ustasha. Church leaders refuse to distance the Church from this fascist ideology even in a purely symbolic, trivial way . . .”

1 A version of this article was presented at International Conference “Media, Religion and Transitional Justice” at University of Novi Sad, Serbia, 22 May 2015. I would like to thank scholars of religion Zoran Grozdanov and Srdjan Sremac and OPREE Editor-in-chief Paul Mojzes, for reading this article and helping me with invaluable comments and suggestions.

is referring to the native Croat fascists called Ustashas, a genocidal organization installed in 1941 through Axis occupation of Yugoslavia, which was defeated by the communist-led Yugoslav antifascist Partisan resistance movement in 1945.

In several subsequent interviews and lectures, Žižek went on to argue in a similar vein, by noting, among other things: “present-day Croatia is a Catholic clericalist nationalistic state, an exemplary case of the return of dark medieval clericalism to Europe.” In a recent lengthy interview with the German weekly Der Spiegel, Žižek claims that contemporary Croatian Catholicism is not a religion, religious faith, or supernatural belief, but a nationalistic ideology and a political-cultural project. In his words,

our opponent isn't really religion. For example, Živko Kustič, a Croatian Catholic nationalist priest, declared Catholicism to be a symbol of the fact that people are not prepared to renounce their national and cultural legacy -- 'the whole Croatianness.' This statement makes clear that it is no longer an issue of faith and its truth, but rather a political-cultural project. Religion here is just an instrument, an indicator of collective identity. It is about how much public one's own side controls, the amount of hegemony 'our' side exerts. That's why Kustič approvingly quotes an Italian communist who claims, 'I am an atheist Catholic.' That is also why Norwegian mass murderer Anders Breivik, who himself is not very religious, referenced the Christian legacy as a foundation of European identity...

In April 2015, Croatian pro-regime media launched an anti-Žižek campaign. Historian Ivo Banac took a prominent role in it; however, he did not comment on any of Žižek’s theses and showed no familiarity with the Žižek’s opus. Instead, Banac commented: “Žižek is ungrateful to Croatia where he is always received kindly; I hear he is a philosopher but there is not very much evidence supporting it; recently he also poses as an expert for theology and religion in Croatia

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which he is not; at any rate, I would not take his thoughts very seriously . . .”

4 In a similar vein, sociologist Slaven Letica accuses Žižek of being “an unconscious, militant agnostic . . . Lacking morality and ethical principles.” The best response to his provocations, Letica suggests, “is considering it of low importance.”

5 Paradoxically, the otherwise aggressively right-wing nationalist Croatian Church weekly Glas koncila [Voice of the Council], did not join the anti-Žižek drive. On the contrary, in a recent, theological commentary, the author Krešimir Cerovac writes about Žižek favorably. He uses the following quote from Žižek's essay “Against Human Rights,” to attack a resurgent militant atheism in Europe: “In our secular liberal democracies, people who express sincere religious loyalty have been brought down to second class citizens status: their faith is tolerated as a personal choice but once they publicly lobby for something important to them, are being accused of fundamentalism . . .”

The controversy has revived interest in religious nationalism in the postwar Balkans. The debate reaffirms the thesis about the relevance of religious organizations, symbols, myths, and rituals in contemporary Balkan ethnic nationalist movements and opens additional questions regarding their long-lasting impact beyond the war and postwar circumstances. Žižek has also reopened some already elaborated theses about Balkan ethnic nationalist movements transforming religious faiths into a sacred aura over profane ideologies. Moreover, Žižek’s recent emphasis on Croatian clerical nationalism as the “darkest force” of nationalism in the

4 “Žižek je veoma obrazovan i talentiran provokator kojeg treba ignorirati” in Večernji list, 3. April, 2015, p. 4.


region calls for reconsideration of the established perspective on Serbian nationalism as the principal instigator and most forceful factor of the conflict. Possibly, Croatian nationalism is not merely a byproduct of the Serbian nationalist upsurge of the 1980s. An autonomous force, it outgrew the challenger and arguably, even restored a continuity with Croat fascism from World War II. However, Serbian nationalism did initiate the conflict during the 1980s and along with the disintegrating Yugoslav Army, dragged the country into a civil war during the crisis of 1991-1992. In this stage, Croatian nationalism was a reactionary response to the Serbian challenger. As war ended with a Croat victory and consolidation of the new nationalistic (anti-Serb and anti-Yugoslav) Croatia, followed by the NATO bombing of Serbia and Albanian conquest of Kosovo, Serbian nationalism lost much of the initial vigor. The Serbian Orthodox church, which spearheaded Serb nationalistic mobilization, turned inward, lamented over Kosovo as “lost Serbian Jerusalem,” and then turned Russophile. The decline accelerated from the fall of Milosevic in 2001 to the independent statehood of Kosovo in 2008. Since then, the most forceful ethnic nationalism in the region has become Croatian nationalism with the Catholic Church as its backbone and the church-state alliance as the key feature of its national identity.

While Žižek’s thesis seems to be overall correct regarding the nationalistic extremism in the past and present of the brand of Croat nationalism associated with Catholic clericalism, his thesis, however, is not sufficiently thorough and properly placed in a wider social and historical context. It also seems premature to judge and thus implicitly consider complete and homogenous any “cultural projects” initiated by ethnic nationalistic movements, which destroyed the multinational Yugoslavia, and have since labored on reconstruction of nations emerging out of its ruins. Žižek’s “Croat Catholicism” today is a religious nationalistic current within a wider Church in which there are varieties of approaches, perspectives, currents and circles. This
Church has a role in the making of the new Croat nation and this project is unfinished and unarticulated like the other new ethno-confessional identity constructs in the post-Yugoslav space.\footnote{On ethno-confessional identities with particular emphasis on Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Ivan Cvitković, \textit{Konfesija u ratu.} (Sarajevo : Interreligijska služba Oči u oči ; Sarajevo ; Zagreb : Svjetlo riječi, 2004) and \textit{Sociološki pogledi na naciju i religiju.} (Sarajevo : DES, 2005).}

Regarding specifically Croatian political Catholicism today, its emphatic ethnic nationalist course is novelty, mostly the result of the 1991-1995 war and the nationalistic homogenization under the regime of Franjo Tudjman (1990-1999) and its political successors. Otherwise, the Church of Croatia was never monolithic. Its various factions differed over various issues including church-society and church-state relations, interfaith relations, and the approach to the national emancipation project.\footnote{See Perica, \textit{Balkan Idols}, pp. 3-16, 17-42, 56-73, and 165-185.} In addition, the contemporary clerical nationalistic turn initiated from above, as the episcopate moved close to Tudjman and his Croatian Democratic Union, also provoked opposition from below. In some cases, the new dissent has been more radical than any earlier form of anti-establishment tendency from within the church. In addition, the Croatian Church’s role can be properly understood only in the context of the Balkan conflict observed at least from the 1980s to the present. During this period, the dynamics of ethnic nationalist movements often shifted gear varying from the initially reserved and cautious Church to a militant one and the other way around. However, the contemporary Croatian nationalist movement was not an isolated occurrence but a factor in a dynamic interaction with other nationalist movements among which Serbian nationalism has played a key role.
From a Cautious Challenger to Yugoslav Communism to the Co-Ruler of the Croat Nation

Socialist Yugoslavia (SFRY) was the only Eastern European country in the Cold War era that normalized relations with the Vatican in 1965 and since 1970, maintained diplomatic relations. While progressive clergy inspired by the Second Vatican council welcomed the change and worked on issues such as upgrading interfaith dialogue, ecumenical relations and dialogue with non-believers, the largely conservative nationalist bishops exploited the favorable climate for a gradual advancement into public sphere promoting ethnic nationalism. The regime was forced to tolerate a series of Church-sponsored massive historical anniversaries and jubilees called “Thirteen Centuries of Christianity of the Croat People” (1975-1984). Working cautiously against the communist regime while also competing with the similar strategy of advancement in public sphere and championing ethnic nationalism managed by the Serbian Orthodox Church, Croatian Catholicism entered the pre-war crisis of the 1990s under an unofficial label “the Church of the Croats”, a fully mobilized leader of Croatian nationalist movement. The Croatian national Church, the rival Serbian Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the third largest religion in the post-Yugoslav space, participated as key members of the warring ethnic blocks in the 1991-1995 war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. While Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks came out of the war as traumatized and impoverished losers that would never recover to the level of prosperity and stability they used to enjoy under mature socialism, the three clerical organizations, who allied with leaders of ethnic nationalist parties, became the winners, and thus members of the new privileged governing castes and wealthy elites.

10 Perica, Balkan Idols, chapters 4, 9 and 10.
The Catholic Church in Croatia grew even stronger under the regime of the nationalist historian Franjo Tudjman (1990-1999) and continued the nationalization project in the post-Tudjman era. After Tudjman, the Church did all it could to secure continuous power for the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union founded by Tudjman. During two terms in power of the left-center coalitions (2000-2003 and 2012-2015), several church leaders would label the democratically elected government as “traitorous”, “unpatriotic,” and “against the people.” The Church, which did not tolerate the two leftist terms, openly backed the right wing opposition, including movements that could be best described as coup d’etat attempts. The first coup attempt took place in 2000 and was resolved by the energetic president Stjepan Mesić with discrete help of Vatican diplomacy. The most recent one shook Croatia in May 2015 when a group of war veterans took to the streets of the capital Zagreb challenging the incumbent government, clashed with police, and found shelter in a church. Each putsch involved prominent display of religious symbols, public prayers, and priestly assistance. Although Croatian nationalist ideology insists that Croatia belongs to Western European civilization (thus to differ from Orthodox Serbs and Bosnian Muslims), the post-communist Croatia is more analogous to Central and South American countries of the 1950s and 1970s than to Western Europe. Since 1990, Croatia has never become successfully democratic. The Catholic Church is presumably the most influential anti-liberal social force. It has never accepted democratically elected officials lacking the Church’s approval.

Under Tudjman, Croatia inaugurated a system analogous to “national Catholicism” (Nacionalcatholicismo) as designed by Francisco Franco in Spain from 1939-1975. In a weak

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state with an unfinished nation building process, the Church seems to be the only relatively solid national institution and history, the key substance of national identity. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to consider Croatian national identity solid thanks to the Church and its consecrated myths, cults and liturgies as mechanisms for management of historical controversies and traumas. On the contrary, as the Spanish case shows,

in Spain, a chronically weak state, a divided and largely undemocratic political class, and an increasingly polarized social and political climate impeded the construction of an effective system of national education and the emergence of a consensus on the shape and meaning of the Spanish national past. This in turn contributed to one of the most striking features of modern Spanish political and cultural life--the absence of a strong sense of Spanish, as opposed to local or regional, identity.\textsuperscript{13}

So, the post-Tudjman Croatia resembled Spain following Franco’s death when coup attempts threaten democracy while the “historical amnesia” project faced manipulations with trauma, revision, and controversy. Yet, in at least two crises, such as a military coup attempt in 2000,\textsuperscript{14} and most recently, an anti-government war veterans’ movement, Croatia seems analogous to the Spain of 1936.

In Croatia today, the national Church (and perhaps, the national football/soccer team) are the most popular social institutions that enjoy more legitimacy than the state. The Catholic Church, however, is not just a state within the state; it is a force above the state. The church earned this status above all thanks to the preservation of the ethnic nationalist cause under communism and assistance to the ethnic nationalist party, Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), in its rise to power after the changes of 1989-1990. Since then, the so-called “Church of the Croats” and the HDZ party have virtually co-ruled the nation. The nationalist president Franjo Tudjman


(1990-1999) promoted the Church into national co-founder and the Church consecrated Tudjman’s personality cult as the nation’s “founding father.”

Tudjman’s successor as HDZ president and Prime Minister from 2003-2009, Ivo Sanader, a prominent Catholic layman, received the Church’s backing during his premiership. Sanader was later sentenced for corruption and criminal privatization to 10 years imprisonment and is now in jail but the Church never explicitly condemned his crimes. Although Church leaders have sporadically voiced concern over growing poverty in society, the Church itself has become one of the wealthiest institutions and major beneficiaries of the system popularly referred to as “criminal privatization.”

Church leaders also gladly receive donations and public statements of faith even from some of the most unpopular public figures, for example, from Milan Bandić, the corrupt mayor of Zagreb, or Zdravko Mamić, the arrogant owner of the “Dinamo” Zagreb football team, both of whom publicly pose as faithful Catholics and ardent patriots according to the standards of patriotism inaugurated by the Tudjman and Sanader regimes.

As the Tudjman rule neared conclusion, the authoritarian leader worked together with the Vatican on the state religion project. Four treaties between Croatia and the Vatican signed in 1998, established the Church as a national institution, Tudjman’s co-ruler and tutor of society. Among other privileges, the Church annually receives substantial amount of cash from all taxpayers regardless of their religious (non) affiliation, plus additional payments for restitution of nationalized property, religious schools’ instructors, parishes and monasteries.

The Church also

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17 According to a Croatian government report in November 2014, the Church received from the State over the last 10 years a total of 3 billion in Croatian national currency the *kuna* (HRK) plus additional payments for nationalized property, parishes and instructors of catechism. In the same period all other religious organizations in Croatia received from the state 200 million *kunas*. According to daily newspaper *Večernji list*, 14. Nov. 2014, p. 8.
exercises control over public schools (even including pre-school programs) through appointment of catechism instructors, the military and police forces. For example, according to military personnel’s private testimonies addressed to human rights groups, everyone on active duty, regardless of religious affiliation, is forced to attend patriotic pilgrimages and processions. Furthermore, the Church’s pressure regarding the abortion issue forced five leading national hospitals to start refusing abortion requests due to physicians’ conscience objection (while some of them continued performing abortions in private practice). A Croatian columnist has recently written that Croatia is one of the only two European countries in which women today have less rights and equality than ten years ago. He argues that “the factors responsible for the worsening of women’s position in society are: capitalism, economic crisis and the Catholic Church . . .”  

Similarly, Croatian feminist author, Djurdja Knežević, stated in a recent interview that the Catholic Church of Croatia is probably the most conservative among traditionally conservative Catholic countries, specifically, more conservative than the Church in Ireland. “The influence of the Church on citizens’ worldview and values here is enormous,” Knežević argues, “while at the same time civic values and public opinion are weak. The Croat clergy are hardline conservatives, they find the reformist and well-meaning incumbent pope annoying . . .”  

Incidentally, the influential Croatian conservative Catholic movement “In the Name of Family” (U ime obitelji) has recently lobbied in Ireland trying to unsuccessfully influence the Irish plebiscite on same-sex marriages. Consequently, as the earlier, most conservative Ireland turned progressive, the

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movement “In the Name of Family” succeeded in the 2014 Croatian referendum on this issue seeking a Constitutional amendment in order to ban same-sex marriages.

One of the most striking features of contemporary Croatian nationalism is historical revisionism according to which the pro-Nazi Ustasha losers from the Second World War became victims and subsequent winners. According to the Church, no genocide took place in the pro-Axis Independent State of Croatia (NDH) and no church leader or clergy collaborated with the Ustasha regime. The wartime archbishop of Zagreb, Alojzije Stepinac, imprisoned by the communists was made a martyr. Likewise, 200 military chaplains that served in Ustasha combat units that the communists executed for assisting the Ustasha in war crimes and crimes of genocide are commemorated as victims of communism. Church leaders either deny or relativize the Ustasha genocide, Holocaust, and crimes against Serbs, Jews, and Croat antifascists.  

Meanwhile, ever since the Tudjman era, the semi-official church newspaper *Glas koncila* [Voice of the Council] has published revisionist articles and interviews about the Holocaust while readers’ letters to the editor and sometimes even editorials and columns entail attacks on Jews, freemasons, communists, homosexuals, Serbs, and antifascist Croats. In 2015, the Church officially registered and funded the association “The Triple Myth of Jasenovac” led by a senior Catholic cleric. This association’s mission is to argue that the World War II concentration camp of Jasenovac run by the Croat fascist Ustasha regime where between 100,000 to 250,000 Serbs, Jews, Romani and Croat antifascists were tortured and murdered, is actually a myth, an anti-Croat conspiracy plotted by Serbs, Jews, and communists.

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The Church implies that postwar crimes of communism against Croats have been worse than Ustasha crimes. However, some Catholics are prepared to condemn Ustasha crimes. For example, the historian, Ivo Banac, describes the Ustasha regime as authoritarian, criminal and pro-Nazi but he views the Church in Croatia as an autonomous moral factor that opposed fascism and communism alike. In contrast to Banac, who as a publicly declared Catholic, has at least condemned Ustasha crimes, the official Church has never completely and explicitly condemned Ustashism while on an almost daily basis, they have attacked antifascism and communism as major threats for more than three decades now. This tendency reached a pinnacle at the May 16 commemoration at Bleiburg. This obscure episode behind the Victory in Europe commemorates the Partisan capture of retreating Ustasha and other NDH forces at the Austrian border. Nationalist narrative constructs the Partisan justice and revenge as a myth of heroism, betrayal and suffering of patriotic Croat fighters and innocent civilians. The Church led the Bleiburg tribute and boycotted the government-sponsored commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Second World War’s end that was held at the memorial site of the World War II Ustasha concentration camp Jasenovac. Speaking to a crowd of 50,000 at the Bleiburg field, Cardinal Archbishop of Zagreb Josip Bozanić showed compassion for the victims of antifascist revenge against fascists but no hint of compassion for the victims of Croatian fascism; he spoke about evils of Nazism and fascism in Europe but never labeled the Ustasha regime as evil. For him, the contemporary Croat ethnic nationalism and the rise of the far right in Croatia is invented and exaggerated by the heirs of the communists and should not worry the Church. Its primary concern is, according to Cardinal Bozanić’s repeated statements, the governing left-wing coalition that allegedly conceals the truth about the Bleiburg massacre and the corresponding

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awakening of “a new unpatriotic antifascism” in Croatia, which in the Church’s understanding, is the same as Stalinism and other worst kinds of communism. However, it is worth observing that not only did the new Croat fascism that had growing since 1990 provoked reminiscences of the Partisan antifascism, but also that the Bleiburg myth-making, Croatian nationalism comes strikingly close to the essence of Serbian nationalism, namely, the Kosovo myth. In many respects, the Bleiburg myth is a Croat imitation of the much older Kosovo epic emphasizing collective martyrdom and revising history by turning actual defeats into triumphant moral victories inspiring national rebirth.

After the festival of collective national martyrdom at Bleiburg, the Croatian nationalistic movement led by the Church began preparations for a festival of national triumphalism in August 2015. The occasion was the 20th anniversary of the final military operations in the 1991-1995 war in Croatia that resulted in a sweeping Croat military victory over the separatist Serb enclave that was followed by an exodus of some 250,000 Croatian Serbs relocating to Serbia and the Bosnian Serb republic. The historical event was memorialized by the Croat state as the so-called “Day of the Victory and Homeland’s Gratitude” to be celebrated on the 5th of August. While the HDZ-backed president, Kolinda Grabar Kitarović, and the Social Democrat premier, Zoran Milanović, argued over the celebration scenario and other trivial issues in a near bankrupt country, the Church moved on to reaffirm the Tudjman cult, further intimidate the opposition, and pave the way for the comeback of the new HDZ strongman, Tomislav Karamarko, as the new prime minister after the fall 2015 parliamentary elections. On May 24, at the coastal city of Ploče, the aspiring premier, Karamarko, unveiled a bronze statue of Franjo Tudjman. On this


23 See more about this in Perica, Balkan Idols, pp.133-164.
occasion, the local Catholic parish priest spoke about the authoritarian president and Milošević’s partner in crime as a “Croat Moses” and led the chorus chanting “Rise, Franjo, from the grave, Croatia is waiting for you . . .” Concurrently, in Zagreb, war veterans wearing white crosses on black T-shirts continued with street protests, pressuring the leftist government for an increase of veterans’ benefits. Meanwhile, right wing internet portals published lists of purported enemies of the state candidates for purges and lustration policies as soon as the HDZ government got elected. Amidst growing sentiments of hatred and intolerance, representatives of several ethnic minorities in the Croatian national assembly passed the “Declaration on ethnocentrism and intolerance in Croatia.” Among other things, the document declares, “ethnic and other minorities in the Republic of Croatia feeling increasingly insecure amidst growing fear and intolerance appeal for solidarity and help from the government, the EU and associations of civil society.”

The representatives of Italian and Bosniak minorities, who signed the declaration, among others, point out that the Serb and Roma minorities in Croatia are in the most dangerous situation, particularly after the recent call for another campaign of anti-Serb ethnic cleansing that was released by Ruža Tomašić, a Croatian representative in the European parliament.

To summarize the upsurge of nationalist Catholicism in Croatia since the 1970s, the Catholic Church of Croatia has been the main channel and until the ascent of the Tudjman party, was the only institutionalized form of Croat ethno nationalistic mobilization. Consolidated with the ruling Croatian Democratic Union and established as a state religion under Franjo Tudjman’s presidency (1990-1999), Croat national Catholicism has since become a national ideology and cultural project rather than a religious faith, to borrow Žižek’s term. The pressure of this

chauvinist ideology and powerful institution on society has increased under the incumbent left-center coalition seeking its overthrow and a permanent rule for the political successors of Tudjman.

However, not all the clergy and active laity approved of the religious ideology and Church practice that came out of the alliance between the bishops and the Tudjman regime. Actually, the bishops, split roughly in two factions between conservative nationalists and moderates, have not always been in concord on all issues. The largest faction within the episcopate, notably represented by the Cardinal Archbishop Josip Bozanić, could be labeled as “conformists.” Recently, the most prominent figures in the media have been some bolder figures outside the mainstream of the episcopate. For example, on the far right, the most outspoken are the neo-Ustasha hawk Bishop Vlado Kosić of Sisak and nationalistic hardliners such as bishop of Gospić, Mile Bogović, and bishop of Šibenik Ante Ivas. By contrast, among the moderates, the most liberal seems to be the Bishop from Dubrovnik Mato Uzinić known for his ecumenical meetings with Serb Orthodox bishops and a recent campaign against corruption in the Church. Close to him are the moderates such as the Archbishop of Rijeka Ivan Devčić and the newly appointed bishop of Krk Ivica Petanjak. In addition, there are further divisions in the Church, such as notably, autonomous theologians and progressive clerical circles, leftist and progressive Catholics, and radical converts. As argued earlier in this article, the Catholic Church is not monolithic but a rather heterogeneous structure in which there are individuals, groups, and circles that not only differ from the conservative establishment but also dissent or turn radical due to various reasons. The following are several such exemplary cases in contemporary Catholicism in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

**Autonomous Church Circles: Bosnian Franciscans**

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council, Croatian Catholicism engendered the most progressive theological circle in the history of religions of the western Balkans. The Zagreb-based theological circle and publishing house *Krščanska sadašnjost* [Christian Contemporaneity] and the clerical association *Dobri pastir* (The Good Shepherd) from Sarajevo advanced dialogue with the government and with other faiths and voiced criticism of ethnic nationalism and clericalism in the Church. Successors of these progressive Catholics emerged in the 1990s among the Franciscans of the “Silver Bosnia” province, notably faculty members in the Theological College and the *Svjetlo riječi* or “Light of the Word” religious journal in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. These Franciscans with most of the monasteries, parishes and schools in Sarajevo and Central Bosnia, are not to be confused with their brethren in western Herzegovina probably best known for their involvement with the making of the controversial Madonna’s apparitions at Medjugorje in process since the early 1980s. The two monastic communities also differ politically and ideologically. The Franciscans of Bosnia, while undoubtedly patriotic Bosnian Croats advocate of a unified Bosnia-Herzegovina, explicitly condemn Croat nationalist extremism of the Ustasha brand and its contemporary derivate seeking the country’s partition. By contrast, the Franciscans of western Herzegovina allied with the Ustasha in World War II, commemorated the criminal regime afterward as martyrs and heroes for the Greater Croatia project restored during the 1990s in the form of Croat separatism in Herzegovina.

During the wars of the 1990s and afterward, the Bosnian Franciscans fought for a unified Bosnia and Herzegovina. These Croat friars clearly stated that the Muslims have been the

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principal victims of ethnic cleansing and war crimes and condemned the forces that incited the
Croat-Muslim war of 1993-1994 and Serbo-Croat collaboration at the expense of the Muslims.
Some of the Franciscans saved lives of their persecuted Bosniak and Serb neighbors, such as
notably Fra Marko Gelo (1937-2009) from the city of Livno, who is remembered in a
documentary film produced by a human rights group from Vojvodina, Serbia.27 Bosnian
Franciscan intellectuals such as Petar Andjelović, Ivo Marković, Ivan Šarčević, Ivan Bubalo,
Marko Oršolić, Drago Bojić and Petar Jeleč, among others, criticized the international
management of the war and peace in B&H, politicization of religion and sacralization of politics,
ethnic nationalist parties, corruption, and historical revisionism. Fra Petar Anđelović, the
Franciscan leader administering the Silver Bosnia province during the wartime years, 1991-1995,
condemned the ethnic parties’ policy of partition and specifically sent message to Bosnian Croats
in which Franjo Tudjman is described as “false prophet” and his allies from western Herzegovina
as traitorous forces working against interest of the Croat people. Since then, the Tudjman
propaganda and HDZ party have labeled Bosnian Franciscans as traitors of the nation.

As antiwar and human rights activists, these priests sided with the principal victims of
war regardless of their ethnicity and religious affiliation: these included refugees and the forcibly
expelled, the families and survivors of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and the multiplying
numbers of impoverished and jobless, and so on. As supporters of a united Bosnia -Herzegovina,
the Franciscans joined massive street protests in February 2014 demanding revision of the
Dayton Accords that sanctioned partition along ethnic lines brought about by criminal practices
of ethnic cleansing and genocide in the war of 1992-1995. These Catholic Croats earned such

27 “Apostoli dobra”, by Maja Lećenac and Željka Mihaljević, producer Dinko Gruhonjić, available at “Živjeti
confidence from the country’s majority Muslim community and from moderate Orthodox Serbs, secularists, and atheists that after the war, citizens would name Franciscan leaders as candidates for state presidency, but the friars declined due to their order’s regulations prohibiting clerics to execute political offices.

The Bosnian Franciscan theologian, Ivan Bubalo, went public as a radical critic of the international management of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and expanded his criticism on ethnic nationalist parties and clerical elites. In his essays published by the radical Croatian journal *Feral Tribune* in aftermath of the Dayton agreement, Bubalo writes about “Dayton peace as a debacle of our arrogant western civilization.”

Dayton, he claims, “imposes a peace based on injustice, plants seeds for future wars, rewards the aggressor and punishes victims of aggression”; “leads to a permanent territorial partition unless refugees return in significant numbers which is unlikely”; and “unmasks the postmodern western humanitarian interventionism as a fraud for the victims of aggression who naively expect relief and justice from such interventions.” Bubalo testifies, “Here in Sarajevo during the war, we could daily observe all those numerous western humanitarian workers and foreign mediators who walk around seeking not how to help the victims but how to obtain for themselves some kind of their own selfish gains, or how to carry out propaganda and show themselves off in the mass media.” Nevertheless, Bubalo pledges that the Franciscan theological school at Sarajevo will not abandon its mission of contributing to cultural, civilizational and spiritual revitalization of the city.

Bubalo criticizes the Catholic Church for “often functioning by the logic of state or national interest thinking that it thus serves the people or ethnic-national community in which it is rooted.

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although state and national interest and interest of the people are not always congruent.”

“If nation replaces God by becoming the only one and absolute,” Bubalo argues, “then, all human values and criteria are subjugated to the following one supreme principle which is national interest and reason of state.”

Bubalo admits that a Church including Catholicism which should be universal, is often dedicated to the defense and construction of nationhood, as churches in the Balkans usually are, thus becoming alienated from the character and mission Christianity. "Church leaders, in such a church, run the risk of becoming power hungry," Bubalo writes, “because the will for power cannot be put away like an overcoat at the doorstep not even at the gate of a sacred space where life is dedicated to God . . . therefore, the dilemma is either God or Nation for the two cannot go hand in hand as equals; for a Christian, the question of primacy must be clear . . .”

Another Bosnian Franciscan monastic leader, Ivan Šarčević, also voiced the disappointment with the West growing in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1992-1995 war. “In the case of Bosnian peace process,” Šarčević writes, “Europe has made concession to evil”. He continues to argue that, . . . “after the war European politicians who have been in any way associated with the international intervention in the wars in former Yugoslavia and its successor states, have lived in some sort of a corrupt peaceful conscience, in a spiritual despair, in absence of a vision, because they doubted their mission regarding the Bosnian war fearing lest they be blamed for a new colonialism. . .”

Like his brethren, Šarčević blames Serbian nationalism for starting the war and perpetrating genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet he is no less critical

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30 Ibid., p. 325.
31 Ibid., p. 231.
32 Ibid., pp. 230-231.
33 Ivan Šarčević, Zečevi, zmije i munafici. (Sarajevo and Zagreb: Synopsis, 2014), p. 127.
34 Ibid.
of Croatian and Muslim nationalisms, particularly the former, because of the compassion he expresses for the Muslims as the principal victims of war that suffered the gravest losses. According to Šarčević, leaders of Croat ethnic parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina have constantly exercised traitorous and immoral politics. In his view, the leaders of Croat and Serb ethnic parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina are two of a kind: “If, according to Nietzsche, a nihilist is actually a powerful man with no compassion for the weak, nihilists are also leaders of Bosnian ethnic parties, such as the Croat Dragan Ćović and the Serb Milorad Dodik. Their policies follow in the footsteps of Tudjman and Milošević having no compassion for the suffering people and victims of the war . . . Dodik and Ćović play Nietzsche’s Overman who is above justice. Dodik does this in a vulgar and brave way and Ćović imitates him in a more subtle fashion, both using sarcastic and cynical humor and both eventually bring about brutal consequences.”

The Franciscan historian, Petar Jeleč, wrote a doctoral thesis about the Catholic Church in the Independent State of Croatia during World War II. Through interviews, internet portals and his works as a columnist for independent journals, he frequently speaks publicly about historical revisionism in contemporary Croatia. For Jeleč, it is clear that the Ustasha state was founded on crime, the Ustasha leader Ante Pavelić was a traitor to his people, and the Independent Sate of Croatia is an episode from history of the Croats that caused many innocent victims. However, he rejects generalizations about the entire Catholic Church as an accomplice in crime. He argues that many Croat Catholic clergy refused collaboration and some opposed the Ustasha regime. He also points out that the role of the Archbishop Stepinac is hard to re-examine now that the Church has made him a saintly cult beatified in 1998 and thereby making impartial

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36 Ibid., p. 112.
Catholic historians’ work difficult.37 Regarding the Franciscans’ support for a united multiethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina, Jeleč voices disappointment with the Catholic Church that never condemned Croat crimes in the war with Muslims triggered by Croat extremists in an attempt to establish a Croat enclave similar to the Serb republic in Bosnia.38

Ivan Šarčević voices similar views about the Ustasha state. He points out that the Franciscan order issued regulations prohibiting friars membership in the Ustasha movement but some priests disobeyed it, joined the Ustasha, and committed crimes. Regarding the post-communist Croatia, Šarčević is vehemently critical of the influence of the nationalistic right on the official Church. The right-wing propaganda retaliated by accusing the order and in particular the Franciscans in the faculty of the School of Theology in Sarajevo, for collaboration with Titoism through the regime-friendly “Good Shepherd” clerical association. Šarčević explained that Croat Catholics’ participation in the interfaith and Christian-Marxist dialogue was crucial in the quest for ethnic harmony, particularly in the multiethnic and religiously diverse Bosnia-Herzegovina. Šarčević restated Franciscans’ criticism of the Dayton Accords. In his view, it ended the war but did not end or reverse ethnic cleansing and gradually legalized the results of genocide. Thinking of Bosnia’s future in a wider global context, Šarčević affirms Bosnian Franciscans’ sympathy for liberation theology. In a recent interview, Šarčević notes “nationalism and capitalism today devour the heart and soul of the Church . . .”39


All things considered, it did not come as a surprise when in February 2014, the Franciscans of Sarajevo and other friars of the “Silver Bosnia” province, openly backed massive popular protests spreading throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina against the corrupt domestic politicians and the ineffective foreign post-conflict management. The friars of Sarajevo marched together with rebellious students and Bosnians against the corrupt, unjust, and unworkable system. They called for radical social and economic reforms and complete reintegration of the country including the revision of the Dayton Accords. These Catholic friars, along with a few lower Muslim clergy, were the only prominent representatives of the major domestic religious organizations participating in this democratic movement. The protests failed to change the course of the post-conflict misery and social decay but the Franciscans did not give up their struggle for a renewal of the country hit hardest by the Balkan wars of the 1990s. Most recently, in a publication widely red in the whole region, they used humor to promote interethnic and multi-confessional cooperation. The publication is a collection of jokes, anecdotes, and a comic book “The Friars of Bosnia – in Their Own Way.” The author is the priest, writer, and cartoonist, fra Tomislav Brković, who is currently abbot of the Rama monastery in central Bosnia. He notes in an interview: “That’s not a product of my own wit, I just collected stories, listened to the people, after all, we all, regardless of the faith and ethnicity, laugh in our common language and the humor is the universal link that bring us together. In our war-weary Bosnia, we need more humor and laughter in order to fully recover . . .”40

On June 6, 2015, Pope Francis visited Bosnia and Herzegovina. In an interview on the occasion, Fra Drago Bojić, the former Editor-in-Chief of the Light of the Word Franciscan

journal, stated, “Pope Francis represents a better side of Catholicism and Christianity.”

He goes on to note, “Pope Francis calls for interethnic peace and interfaith dialogue in Bosnia and Herzegovina which should be understood as a message to all people to break up with nationalism and hostility toward the others.”

The new Sarajevo Catholic Youth Center “John Paul II” administered by Bosnian Franciscans, hosted the pope’s meeting with several thousand young Catholics. The Wall Street Journal reported that at the center, Pope Francis . . . called on the young people to make peace across ethnic and religious lines." Pope Francis reportedly told the group, “You are the first generation after the war. You have a great vocation. Never build walls, only bridges.”

Bosnian Franciscans welcomed the papal stay in Sarajevo as the nation’s capital where the head of the Vatican paid tribute to the flag of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which ethnic nationalists avoid to do. The friars praised both the state protocol and the emphatically ecumenical character of the papal mission as unambiguous papal support for national unity of Bosnia-Herzegovina. According to some commentaries, Pope Francis demonstrated that he shared the Bosnian Franciscans’ faith in the recovery of Bosnia as a pluralistic society unique in European history and culture as it used to be before the crimes of ethnic cleansing.

In addition, this papal visit coincided with the anticipated Vatican decision renouncing authenticity and sanctity of the Medjugorje movement, which could be interpreted as a blow to the extremist brand of Croat ethnic and religious nationalism that originated in western Herzegovina and influenced both Bosnia and Croatia proper.

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41 Interview with Bojić is published on progressive BH internet portal Tacno.net, on 5 June 2015, available at http://tacno.net/interview/drago-bojic-papa-franjo-predstavlja-bolju-stranu-katolice-crke-i-krscanstva/

42 Ibid.


The progressive Catholic circle “The Cross of Life” began publishing articles critical of the Church on the internet in 2002. The founder and Editor-in-Chief of the “religious internet magazine Cross of Life”, Hrvoje Cirkvenec, brought together a diverse staff of ecumenically-oriented contributors from various Christian churches. The magazine publishes theological essays and news from religious life, political columns and interviews. In a 2013 interview for “The Cross of Life,” Branimir Pofuk, a former Catholic journalist, stated: “while Croatia is not a Catholic nation, the Catholic Church in Croatia is emphatically nationalistic.”

The interview touches upon a number of critical issues regarding contemporary Croatia’s Catholicism as a national institution. Among other things, Pofuk argues: “regardless of the Catholic majority that the census shows in Croatia, a kind of democratic society that most Croatian desire, must not allow obvious attempts to make Croatia a Catholic state. In the Balkans various faiths join forces only against homosexuals but not against war, war criminals and nationalistic extremism. The Catholic church is behind plebiscites such as ‘In the Name of the Family’ to ban abortion and same sex marriages and some other initiatives, by which Church leaders wish to revise the Constitution . . .”

The most vehement criticism from the “Cross of Life” circle targets growing social inequality, insensitivity for the poor, corruption in the Church and political elites. The example of such radical criticism is a 2014 editorial from the prolific columnist Marijan Vogrinec under

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46 Ibid.
the title “Why God doesn’t’ love Croatia?!” He argues that the Croatian national project is failing due to corruption, bad government and a politicized nationalistic Church. While the Church is the most influential national institution, it is no less corrupt than the political parties and other most influential institutions in contemporary Croatia among which Vogrinec considers the national football [soccer] team as especially popular but also one of the most corrupt institutions. Among other things, Vogrinec writes:

It seems that Croatia has never won God’s favor. How is that possible even though the father of the Nation, Dr. Franjo Tudjman (an atheist!), as soon as he came to power renounced secularism and turned the nation over into the hands of the Church established as a state religion?! In addition, he cemented this new clericalism with four treaties with the Vatican (at the expense of the Croat people). Since then, Croatia has hosted the Holy Father three times! Meanwhile the Church has achieved in the public domain whatever Church leaders want: imposing Church’s dogma from pre-school to higher education and even in the intimate sphere of the married couples, families and sexual life? Why does the Creator allow faithful Croatia with its 87% publicly declared Catholics to lose important international football matches? Why does God let the EU and its rulers in Brussels to treat the old European Christian nation of Croatia as a primitive tribe from Africa? It seems that the treaties between Croatia and the Vatican have been signed in order to stab Croatia’s citizens in the back. In the country of 4.3 million and the average salary of 4,000 kunas every employee regardless of religious (non)affiliation has to pay annually 400 kunas to the Catholic church?!47

In a 2014 editorial, the same “Cross of Life” columnist addressed neo-fascist tendencies in Croatia. Under the title, “Reigniting the Indistinguishable Evil: Ustashas Marching Again through the Our Miserable Homeland” (this is a wordplay to the national anthem “Our Pretty Homeland”), Vogrinec writes:

The episcopate and the clergy are not semi-literate folk singers (such as Mr. Perković Thompson) who do not know what the Independent State of Croatia really was. Instead of putting the fire out and explain to the people the history of Croat fascism, some of them lead the re-ignition of evil... Who are those street marchers dressed in black, waving national flags and shouting “For the Homeland – Ready” and “Kill, kill the Serb”? The Ustasha are marching again through Our Miserable Homeland. The founding

father Franjo Tudjman and his émigré right hand man Gojko Susak, made our country so close to the far right politics that nobody can rectify these trends anymore because fascism has become rooted in our culture . . . Today the people in black shirts celebrate the criminal madness of the Independent State of Croatia . . . The same terrorists dynamited 3,000 memorials of Croatia’s World War II antifascist struggle and rebuilt memorials to the worst Ustasha war criminals . . . Tito and the Partisans led by the communists temporarily halted the Ustasha in World War II. Yet, today the Ustasha successors are seeking revenge on the memory and the successors of the Partisan fighters . . .

In a November 2014 commentary entitled “Nation and Faith under Boots of the Church of the Croats,” the author attacks Cardinal Josip Bozanić for supporting the war veterans and their street politics of intimidation and ultimatum. Vogrines writes, ”the Archbishop of Zagreb, by his call for prayers and solidarity with the rebellious war veterans, has again manifested his infection with the virus of the political right. For a quarter of century now the same virus had done much harm to the Church. . . The Archbishop and the clergy do now show by their homilies that our homeland is falling apart amidst a moral and economic crisis . . .”

During the May 2015 political crisis in Croatia, a group of rightist war veterans took to the streets demanding resignation of the leftist government, where they then threatened to use explosive gas, battled the intervening police and eventually found refuge in a parish church near the seat of government. At the time, the “Cross of Life” writer Marijan Vogrinec was, again, the loudest critical public voice. In a column for the “Cross of Life” and several independent internet publications, he made it clear that these self-proclaimed patriots were, in Vogrinec’s words, “cowards and terrorists plotting coup d’ etat and pushing the country into a civil war.”


According to Vogrinec, the president of the Republic Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, with the Catholic Church highest hierarchy and the chief of the nationalist HDZ party Tomislav Karamarko, joined forces with the anti-government war veterans in order to “further aggravate social tensions, national discord and intolerance, hoping for an opportunity to assume messianic roles in the crisis. Yet, it has become clear to a growing number of citizens of Croatia that these forces operate against national interest and interest of each individual citizen by tolerating and even encouraging the most vulgar, barbaric and militant disrespect for the key national and state institutions, including assault of the Constitutional order and undermining of collective security and individual rights of each citizen in Our Miserable Country.”

Although the “Cross of Life” is visible among internet magazines in Croatia and its columnists are influential in the progressive public, the Church’s policy is to ignore and marginalize them rather than arguing with or persecuting this opposition. However, while top Church authorities ignore the “Cross of Life” Croatia’s Catholic right, some Catholic youth circles respond with threats and counterattacks. According to rightist internet portals, the “Cross of Life” is written by “secularist, anti-Croat, laymen and seminarians on the margin of the Catholic public, individuals excommunicated from the Society of Catholic journalists . . . The Cross of Life advocates anti-Catholicism, same-sex marriages, anti-nationalism and secularism . . . .”

Radical Converts: Zdravko Tomac and Drago Pilsel

Contrary to the triumphalist post-Cold War western media according to which ex-communist societies of Eastern Europe saw a remarkable religious revival prompted by a long-

51 Ibid.
52 See internet sites katolik.hr, and hrvatski-fokus.hr, 20 Oct. 2010.
time suppressed popular thirst for the spiritual and supernatural, most of post-communist mass conversions have been motivated by trivial earthly needs such as opportunism, careerism, and redistribution of power and property. In Tudjman’s Croatia, crowds of ex-communists including Tudjman himself, flocked to churches and cathedrals, received sacraments and adopted theological terms as politically correct features of new citizenship and political jargon. Some prominent figures earned celebrity status as radical outspoken converts-missionaries and activists, including Zdravko Tomac, who converted from communist atheism and Yugoslav patriotism to Croat ethnic nationalism and national Catholicism, and Drago Pilsel, who did precisely the opposite, by transforming from a practicing Croat Catholic and an Ustasha into a leftist, anti-fascist and human rights advocate.

Zdravko Tomac began his political career as the associate of one of most rigid Croat communists, Jakov Blažević, best known for being Chief State Prosecutor in the 1946 trial of Archbishop Stepinac. In the late 1980s, Tomac joined a reformist faction in the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Croatia and became a trusted aide to the national communist party chief, Ivica Račan, who called for the first multiparty elections and delivered Croatia into the hands of Tudjman, HDZ, and the Church. During war years, Tudjman entrusted Tomac with a key cabinet post in the so-called “national unity” multiparty government with Franjo Gregurić as Prime Minister. During this period, Tomac grew into a hardline nationalist, supporting policies such as partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina and restrictions on human rights activism and freedom of speech in alleged defense of national homogenization and Tudjman’s personality cult. In the 1997 Croatian presidential election, Tudjman asked Tomac to pose as their challenger from the list of the Social Democrats, i.e. former communists. Tomac was by then nationalistic enough to finish as a runner-up to Tudjman, with 21 percent of the vote.
2003, he formally announced his breakup with the Social Democrats. Subsequently, he has become active as a Catholic convert and missionary. He toured churches and parishes testifying about mystical experiences, visions, and communication with God. In his numerous books and interviews, he writes about various conspiracies against the Croats that he detected and unmasked. In the February 2009 issue of the Franciscan journal “Light of the World” published in Sarajevo, Ivan Šarčević analyzes Tomac’s conversion and mystical experiences to conclude: “Tomac did not convert to a religion; he substituted one political ideology for another—the previous communist atheistic quasi religion he replaced by the atheistic worship of Croat Catholicism as a nationalized religion and politics in a religious garb; his atheism did not change as he transformed from a communist into an anticommunist.” It is noteworthy that even though Tomac further radicalized his anticommunism getting very close to the Croatian far right, no Croat rightist or neo-Ustasha group backed or appropriated him while some continuously distrusted his intentions.

Drago Pilsel is an Argentina-born writer and Catholic lay theologian from an émigré Ustasha family. His father served as personal security guard to the Ustasha poglavnik (Führer) Ante Pavelić in World War II and his postwar Argentinian exile. Raised and trained as a young Ustasha militant, Pilsel joined the Croat volunteer troops in the war of 1991-1995, got disappointed with the Tudjman regime and the morally bankrupt Church leaders and eventually became Croatia’s most famous convert from fascism to antifascism. The first time he visited Croatia was in 1989 as a member of the Franciscan order. He studied mechanical engineering, literature, political science, and theology and has worked as a journalist since 1979. He holds a M.A. in Christian theology from the Evangelical Theological School in Osijek, Croatia. One of

the best summaries of Drago Pilsel’s case comes from the pen of Croatia’s leading contemporary literary figure Miljenko Jergović:

In 1991 Drago Pilsel came from Argentina with his brother to fight and die for Croatia, the country about which he actually knew nothing except for the émigré myth. Several months later, his brother went missing in a senseless naval operation. Search and rescue missions never found his body. Nevertheless, Pilsel and his brother have fulfilled the duty for which they were raised and trained in Argentina. Pilsel’s native land was actually the country of military dictatorships in which a segment of the Croat people lived since the end of the World War II. In Buenos Aires, they did not meet Borges and Gombrowicz but Ante Pavelić. In his name they went to fight in Croatia. In the summer of 1995 during the final battles for liberation of the country from the Serb separatist movement, Drago Pilsel witnessed Croatia’s army war crimes against civilians. He realized that it was easier to die for Croatia than to step on the corpses of murdered elderly peasants. In order to understand who and why murdered these victims in the name of Croatia, Drago Pilsel had to get to know Croatia better. That’s what Pilsel has been doing for twenty years now. His life and his fate are among the greatest Croatian adventures in our time. By re-examining his own soul, Pilsel also examines, in a puritan and original manner what it means to be a Croat and Christian. While others reset their conscience and revise their past to fit the changing circumstances, Drago Pilsel fights intellectual and moral battles with his own self. Pilsel made his biography public in order to change himself and society in which he lives. We would not learn that he used to throw rocks at a synagogue and attempted to set ablaze a crowded movie theater showing a Yugoslav movie, had he not written that it was wrong to stone synagogues and set movie theaters on fire . . .Today some careerist Ustashas accuse him of being an Ustasha, a fascist. What they actually hate most about him today, is that he became an antifascist, anti-clerical, a leftist and defender of human rights, particularly for ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. . .

In 2013, Pilsel published an autobiographical book under the title “An Argentine Novel.” In this book, Pilsel examines his ideological, professional and emotional transformation from an ardent Croat Ustasha fascist, anti-Semite and far right militant into a leftist, human rights activist, writer and Christian ecumenical theologian. In addition to the autobiographical material, Pilsel set out to debunk old and new Croat nationalistic myths. Countering the myth that depicts the Ustasha führer Pavelić as a national hero, Pilsel describes him as a cold-blooded murderer and a coward.


He criticizes the clerical mythmaking about Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac. Contrary to the mythical narrative prepared for the canonization, Pilsel portrays Stepinac as an anti-ecumenical priest, clerical nationalist, and opportunistic church leader who failed to use his full authority to condemn Ustasha collaboration with the Axis occupation of Croatia and genocide perpetrated by the Pavelić regime. For Pilsel, the Bleiburg myth, which today Croatia commemorates as de facto a national holiday, was in reality intentional Ustasha sacrifice of the Croat refugees. Pilsel argues that Pavelić abandoned his people and the Ustasha retreating troops, by refusing to surrender and used these civilians as a human shield. Pilsel also demystifies the new Croatia’s Homeland War myth. He writes a detailed testimony about Croatian troops’ plunder and execution of elderly Serb civilians at the end of the war in Croatia. As a Christian theologian, he urges Croatians to seek true “liberation from hatred and the burden of the difficult past.”

As an ecumenical advocate, Pilsel tours the Balkans in a belief that interfaith and ethnic reconciliation should come from below. It begins with progressive Catholics’ dissent and moral critique of the opportunistic and corrupt clerical elites in the so-called “Church of the Croats”. His ecumenical mission reaches out to Serbs, Muslims, and Jews. Thus, amidst rightists’ attacks on public inscriptions written in Cyrillic letters, Pilsel confronts the attackers defending the right of Croatia’s Serbs to use the Cyrillic script. He also shows understanding for the Serbian Orthodox Church’s rejection of Cardinal Stepinac as a saintly cult. In an interview with a

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Montenegrin daily newspaper, he calls himself a traitor to the Ustasha cause and states that the thorough liberation from the burden of fascism will be important for the Croats’ mental health.57

Conclusion

Two decades after the major Balkan war in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina 1991-1995, the dynamic of feuding ethnic nationalisms has shifted from the initially strongest Serbian to the currently dominant Croatian nationalism. The two strongest nationalisms of the (post)Yugoslav region are comparable to each other in many respects including the ethno-confessional nationalistic ideology amalgamated with religion and crucial roles for the churches as national institutions allied with nationalistic parties. The relative advantage for Croatian Catholicism is the outcome of several factors such as the following:

First, the decline of Serbian nationalism after the defeat of Serb separatism in Croatia (1995), the fall of Milošević (2000), and the loss of Kosovo (2008).

Second, the alliance between the Catholic Church in Croatia and the regime of Franjo Tudjman (1990-1999) under which the Church was made the de facto state religion and vital national institution authorized with arbitrating what is patriotic and what is not. In short, the Church not only became a part of the new power structure but its most powerful institution. At least since the 20th century, no other Balkan or European national church has acquired such amount of power, wealth and influence comparable to present-day Croatian Catholicism.

Third, since the demise of Tudjman, there has been a continuous mobilization of right-wing nationalist and conservative forces. This heterogeneous movement acknowledged the Church as its supreme authority. The mobilization advanced over historical controversies and various largely invented or exaggerated threats to the faith and nation such as unrepentant communists, nationally unfit Croats, homosexuals, Serbs, Jews, freemasons, etc.

Consequently, the conflict continues within Croatia, also destabilizing the neighboring countries, particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. To make things worse, because the new national ideologies, systems, institutions, and regimes that have been established in the region through the 1991-1995 war draw legitimacy from the interethnic, religious, and ideological conflict, hatred and an extended state of siege mentality in postwar societies, changes for the better are not feasible without the change in the established structures of power, including the national majority religions.

However, Croatian clerical nationalism as the most rigid among the carriers of the bad tendencies is not homogenous as either “church”, or political movement or cultural project; a gradual change for the better may eventually come. In the Catholic Church, there are various factions, autonomous, moderate or reform-minded, and others dissenting or departing from the mainstream in various ways including radical options. The episcopal elite includes right wing militants, centrist opportunists, and moderately progressive bishops. Although the former two groups now seem more influential than the third faction, for the reasons that world Catholicism is currently under a reform-minded papacy and Croatia is an EU and NATO member, the moderates and opportunists may under outside pressures shift the course to isolate the extremists and alter the strategy of the extended conflict. In addition, there are autonomous progressive clerical circles such as Bosnian Franciscans. There are also radical critics of corruption and
religious nationalism on the Catholic left such as the notable Croatian internet portal “Cross of Life.” Their radicalism (like the example of the radical converts) is the response in kind to the rise of Croatian nationalistic far right in the Church and society as well as the Church leaders’ approval of nationalistic extremism. In spite of the current Church-backed shift to the nationalistic far right in Croatia, the rise of another Tudjman is improbable because of the EU framework. Besides, the country is hard to homogenize and mobilize for conflict as it used to be possible in the early 1990s. Accordingly, it is questionable for how long this strong Croatian nationalism can retain the current level of mobilization. In all likelihood, Croatian nationalism will lose momentum and decline except in case of a recovery and comeback of Serbian nationalism that would primarily focus on Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.