

TURNING POINT IN CROATIA

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February 1998. was marked in Croatia by two events: a massive anti-government demonstration, inspired by the worsening economic situation and rising number of unemployed, and the 4th convention of the ruling party - HDZ. Both events, each in its own way, showed that Croatia reached a turning point. Both events, again - each in its own way - touched on the issue of human rights in Croatia.

The Civic committee for human rights expressed its opinion about both, supporting the protest gathering in Zagreb and pointing out to some disturbing elements in speeches delivered by dr. Franjo Tuđman (who happens to be not only the leader of the ruling party, but president of the Republic as well) during the convention of the HDZ.

The protest gathering in Zagreb was organized by three trade union associations and some independent trade unions, and supported by a number of smaller political parties and NGO-s, who all together formed a preparatory committee, announcing both the gathering and the place where it was supposed to be held (the main square in Zagreb) more than a month before the date set for it. The main organizers stressed from the very beginning the social character of the rally, accepting the support of the political parties, but trying at the same time to deny or at least to minimize its political connotations. Because of this "task impossible" the political parties more or less abstained from independent actions in the framework of the preparations.

The strongest opposition party, the Social democratic Party (SDP), led by Mr. Ivica Račan, as well as the Independent trade unions association, which is rumored to be in a deal with SDP, was not among the organizers. SDP said that it would not allow itself to be manipulated with and thus stayed away from the protest.

The newly formed Liberal party (LS), led by Mr. Vlado Gotovac (who is promoting the idea of forming an opposition "Movement for the second Republic"), did participate in the preparatory committee practically all the time, but withdrew then its participation on grounds that it was annoyed by the statement of the leader of one of the organizing trade unions (Mr. Niko Gunjina, who was at that time member of the ruling party HDZ) who claimed that only the party led by Mr. Tuđman can solve the social problems in Croatia. LS feared that the planned rally "could amount to something it was not meant to be." Among other parties which supported the rally were the Istria based IDS (Istrian democratic alliance), led by Mr. Ivan Jakovčić, right wing (in some aspects even pro-fascist) Croatian pure party of rights (Mr. Gabelica), as well as left wing Social democratic action of Croatia (Mr. Degen) and Social democratic union (Mrs. Semina Lončar).

A letter was sent to the prime minister explaining the causes for the protest rally and formulating some urgent requests (including a concrete programme to fight the unemployment and revision of the whole privatization process by a nongovernment expert commission), a leaflet was printed with these same requests and the invitation to attend the rally and it was distributed by the trade unions and parties activists among the population of Zagreb, buses were organized to bring protestors from the province and regular press conferences were held by the preparatory committee.

About one week before February 20th (the date set for the rally) the city council of Zagreb decided that the rally can not be held on the main square, citing a regulation, dating back to the times of war, according to which public gatherings (for security reasons) can be held in Zagreb only on a couple of locations, all of them on the outskirts of the town. The trade unions leaders were not impressed by this decision and said that, because of the fact that recently several concerts and party rallies were held on the main square, they do not intend to change the venue planned for their peaceful demonstration.

After that Zagreb police proclaimed that the rally can not be held on the main square, citing as the reason the uninhibited flow of traffic and the security of citizens, and the minister of interior warned that the protestors will not be allowed to reach the main square.

At this point the Civic committee for human rights concluded that the right of all citizens to freely express their opinions in public, as well as to freely held rallies in order to express these opinions, was in jeopardy and issued a press release expressing its understanding for the reasons which led to the idea of organizing the protest rally and supporting in strong terms the right of both the citizens of Zagreb and demonstrators from the province to gather on the main square.

On February 20th in the afternoon about 20.000 to 35.000 demonstrators gathered in the streets leading to the main square, which was, about 2 hours before the time set for the rally, blocked by about 5.000 members of regular and special police, equipped with riot gear. All approaches to Zagreb were blocked too, so that some of the buses carrying demonstrators from the province were not allowed to enter the town, while some were directed to a parking lot on the outskirts (regardless of this, people which were in these buses reached eventually the center of Zagreb). Demonstrators tried in vain on several locations and for a couple of times to break through police cordons. No serious clashes occurred, but in the end a couple of policemen, as well as some demonstrators ended in hospitals. The bulk of the demonstrators were that redirected by trade unions leaders to the nearby Tito s square, where a rather short rally was held. The police did not interfere. Demonstrators shouted: "Tuđman - Saddam", "Tuđman is a thief", "The government is full of thieves". It was for the first time in independent Croatia that not only the government, but president Tuđman as well were branded in this way.

Next day the congress of the ruling party convened in Zagreb. President Tuđman delivered an almost 3 hours opening address and an almost 1 hour closing address. On both occasions he touched on the subject of the protest rally in Zagreb, but - even more importantly - he condemned strongly the NGO-s, which

are active in Croatia, branded Croatian citizens who were willing to testify before the Hague tribunal as people who are against Croatia ("what kind of people are they?") and openly expressed territorial pretensions to neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina (the communists were, in his words, guilty for allowing, after World war 2, "Bosnia-Herzegovina to stay outside of Croatian borders" and, by intending to build a highway from Zagreb to Dubrovnik through Bosnia-Herzegovina "Croatia is returning to the territory, where the first Croatian king, Tomislav, was from"). Finally, he described human rights and media freedom as something "peripheral" to Croatia.

Reacting to this, the Civic committee for human rights published an open letter (signed by its president Mr. Zoran Pusić) to citizens of Croatia, warning that such views amount to a direct threat to some of the basic human rights. The Committee emphasized that by denouncing Croatian witnesses in Hague president Tuđman endangered their personal security, by attacking the NGO-s as part of a from abroad financed anti-Croatian activity he demonstrated his inability to understand the way democracy is working, and by declaring human rights and media freedom as something "peripheral" he implicitly confirmed that he has no intention to build a real democracy in Croatia. Although this letter was reported in the written media (either in a very short form - in the daily "Vjesnik", which is very close to the government, or almost completely - in the independent daily "Novi list"), it was not even mentioned in the programmes of the state controlled Croatian television, or those of the Zagreb based private TV "Mreža" which is largely considered to be independent.

The Civic committee for human rights decided to hold a special press conference and stress again how important it is to understand what the leader of the ruling party was speaking about. During this conference, attended among others by reporters of two rather influential local radio stations, it was underlined that Tuđman's rhetoric was in an ominous way similar to the rhetoric of the Serbian leadership preceding the war in former Yugoslavia. It was proclaimed by the Committee that "as we were until now mainly trying to correct the results of human rights abuses, we think it is time to try to stop these abuses to happen again".

The question was raised "what is happening with the Croatian president, if it is throe, as stated the previous evening by one of the vice presidents of HDZ, Mr. Hebrang, that Tuđman's speech, although delivered before more than a thousand delegates and directly broadcasted by TV, can be analyzed only after the authorization and who are these anonymous HDZ people who are practically censoring Mr. Tuđman". It was also said that US diplomats were quite right in criticizing Croatia and Mr. Tuđman, because Croatia was, under American pressure, taking over international obligations (for example in Dayton) and then trying to reinterpret them or not to abide by them. The Committee pointed with growing concern to the fact that ethnic Serbs are leaving Eastern Slavonia. In this context a rally held in Eastern Slavonia recently by a right wing party which was a HDZ ally in last years local elections was sharply condemned (at this rally those in attendance were greeting with fascist salutes and black flags, similar to those of Second world war fascist Ustascha movement, were on display).

This press conference was covered correctly again by "Novi list", but it was never mentioned either by the most circulated daily "Večernji list" (controlled by the government), or by the state controlled Croatian TV.

Despite of negative reactions from abroad and from most of the Croatian political parties, government circles continue to denounce the protest rally in Zagreb as an attempt to destabilize Croatia and to introduce "Albanian situation" in Croatia, stating that the police were not preventing people to express their opinions, but just reinforcing the law. At the same time these circles claimed that president Tuđman's remarks during the HDZ convention were deliberately misinterpreted, in the context of foreign pressure on Croatia.

Nevertheless, analysts believe that both events proved Croatia to have reached a turning point. The dissatisfaction with the HDZ government is growing, while this government (or:regime) is clearly demonstrating (by the use of massive force against peaceful demonstrators and by showing a staggering inability to behave democratically, or to forget its territorial appetite towards Bosnia-Herzegovina) that a fresh wind is needed in Croatia. The opposition should be on the move now.