

SLOBODNA DALMACIJA

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Interview with Zoran Pusić, president of CCHR

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"GENTLEMEN, QUIT OOZING OVER CROATIA"

1. *Newspapers are full of stories and testimonies about Croatian war crimes. With what kind of feeling are Croatian citizens left with now, since until recently they had an idyllic picture of the Homeland war? Was not the attitude towards that war best demonstrated during the Statehood Day when national symbols were not emphasized and it was not excessively celebrated?*

- It is true that newspapers, especially weekly ones, are full of dreadful stories about war crimes that were committed by some members of the Croatian Army. People that knew about these crimes, and everyone who wanted could have known about them for years, are more surprised with the increased interest of media. If TV began to speak about them, impression would be complete. What impression would on citizens who have until last year shouted "We are all Mirko Norac " make a detailed description of eyewitnesses about cold-blooded murders of civilians carried out in the SS death squads style, regardless of age or sex, led only by the ethnicity of the victim committed by duke of alka Croatian Army general Mirko Norac and colonel T. Orešković with their officers and soldiers? What will be reactions to detailed description of brutalities committed by military police in Lora, descriptions of crimes in Paulin Dvor in whose covering up majority of top state administration at the time was involved which is the case with most of other crimes, crimes in Sisak, in Dalmatian Zagora, Pakračka poljana, Medački Džep, bridge on Korana... It is a long list. People are resistant beings and they will find some form of rationalization and amnesia. For the time being, the loudest ones are various originals who find it to absurd to deny these crimes took place. They just say out loud what, I'm afraid, most people think (or thought)- that in war in which the entire ethnic group is stigmatized as an enemy, it is not serious crime to kill citizens of an enemy group. Seven and eleven years have passed since these crimes took place and so far justice has shown only that it is slow...

2. *But is it reachable?*

- No, it s not reachable. However, the mere fact that majority of influential newspapers today publish these testimonies that cannot leave normal person indifferent, is a form of justice and a big step from the time when only a small number of people talked about these crimes publicly, and mostly Feral wrote about them. That is not achievement of justice, it is not a catharsis, maybe it is a beginning of catharsis. And when it comes to the Statehood Day, it is normal that, as time passes, euphoria surrounding the

celebration of this type of event diminishes in size, maybe it's better to say – reaches a point of normalcy. That probably indicates that people do not feel threatened anymore, at least not when it comes to having their own state. Whatever that meant.

3. *After all these stories about Croatian crimes and the role of state politics in them were uncovered, one could have gotten the impression that Croatian forces in the Homeland war have spent more energy in fighting against civilians than armed aggressors and that Croatian citizens should have been in fear of Croatian armed forces. Do you agree?*

- I agree that the Homeland war was monopolized through propaganda and idealized by the right-wing parties, mostly by HDZ, and that this idealization was created for very prosaic reasons such as keeping the power and authority. Also, most media and many intellectuals contributed to creating an atmosphere in which each criticism or presenting facts that would disturb the idealized image of the Homeland war would be accused of being non-patriotic or even traitorous. Once a public opinion is formed, then even politicians that might personally think differently hardly ever go against it. Let's take for example that disgraceful Parliament declaration about the war in Bosnia. Everyone knew, both parliament representatives and citizens who watched them, that it is a farce, that Croatian soldiers were sent there into war against forces of legally chosen government of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that leading Croatian politicians publicly spoke about the need of dividing B-H, that most likely they made secret arrangements with Milošević and that this division would have probably been carried out if it wasn't for the international pressure. And after January 2000, honorable parliament representatives claim that this is "emperor's new cloth", and everyone who cannot see that is accused of the lack of patriotism. Maybe politicians of the governing coalition thought that by doing that they are buying peace from HDZ that is responsible for this aggressive Lilliputian imperialism towards B-H. It comes to mind that well-known Churchill's comment of Munich agreement. Here also, politicians in the government have chosen shame, and they will get stronger, more self-confident, and more militant opponent.

It is similar with war crimes. If you do not have the will or courage to prosecute and sanction them when they happen, they will happen again and your responsibility for them, once you have to face them, will be much greater. Croatian Army is going through this now and the amount of crimes that were kept secret for a long time is defeating. However, I do not agree for the Croatian Army and the Homeland war to be put into the same basket with criminals who committed crimes and politicians who supported them. This was attempted by the ones who are guilty or responsible for crimes - dispersing guilt collectively - in which they almost succeeded. In that case, each mentioning of the war crimes is perceived as an attack on the collective, on nation, as betrayal of the national interest. That primitive but effective rhetoric is not far away from the reaction of the guy who, when the court in Split declared a condemning ruling, shouted: "Is this a

Yugoslavian court which trials Croats and veterans of the Homeland war?" The guy was convicted because of the armed burglary of the bank!

Also, I do not agree that it is talked about as Croatian crimes. Crimes were committed by criminals that can be found in every nation.

They would gladly cover their crimes with the Croatian flag or disappear in the collective noun Croats now that these crimes do not bring the promotion to a higher rank but can have some less pleasant consequences. That is true also for all those politicians, journalists, and "sympathizers of HDZ government" who were encouraging, hiding or keeping secret crimes. There existed and still exists different Croatia that does not feed itself with hatred and intolerance, that is not addicted to myths or smeared with delirious talk about ethnic purity. No gentlemen, leave Croatia alone, quit oozing over it, if you bear guilt take a stand in the court, if you bear responsibility and shame, answer to your conscience (and that is much easier).

4. Verdict in the trial against Mirko Norac will most likely be condemning, what will that mean for the Croatian public opinion? Do you believe that at least one such verdict could be a pattern for a more systematic processing of war crimes committed by Croats?

One should ask those intellectuals, priests, and politicians who were rousing mobs in Split last year and giving unreserved support to the figure and actions of Mirko Norac if horrible details of testimonies of Norac's companions are disturbing their sleep. One does not hear that they are ashamed of what they have said, that they do not stand for it any more nor that Norac stopped being their hero.

5. Not only theirs. Your colleague Čičak recently also wrote that Norac was his hero too. What is your comment on that?

One does not discuss other's tastes. Čičak is a grown person and bears responsibility himself for his statements. I have not spoken with him and I do not know what made him give such a statement that both surprised and saddened me. Everybody is innocent until proven guilty but Norac is charged with really hideous crimes that have undoubtedly happened, and very relevant witnesses and eyewitnesses are accusing him. It is sure that Čičak has had better statements than this one.

It is not too hard to comprehend who and how takes advantage of such cases, as the Norac trial, to create an atmosphere of being endangered and to achieve national homogenization according to a well-known recipe. Generals were claimed to be heroes only after the Haag or domestic justice department showed interest in them. Apart from Ademi. And it was Ademi who showed both courage and knowledge by defending Šibenik from overpowering enemy, and he showed modesty and responsibility by not making any fuss when he got his invitation from the Haag and by going there to face very serious accusations, which is suitable for an officer.

By all accounts, it was him who, in written form warned Minister of Defense at that time about crimes committed in Medački Džep.

When just verdicts are concerned in cases of war crimes committed by the Croatian side, unfortunately, a great amount of professional and personal courage are needed. In the sea of many obscure judges running away on a leave or directly from the court room to evade bringing the decision about the verdict (and this is also a small step forward – at least they are ashamed), one properly judged process and condemning verdict for war crimes that have undoubtedly taken place would be very good for staggering Croatian Justice Department.

6. What is your opinion on conflict with Slovenia? Are you one of those who think that this is just senseless rousing of national hysteria?

A conflict between Croatia and Slovenia is the last thing that normal citizens of those two countries need. For irresponsible politicians, that neither side lacks, this is a good opportunity to rouse irrational heat or, if you want, national hysteria with fair chance that something could come out of that. For fishermen on both sides of Piran, problem lies in the fact that there is no fish, and there will be less and less of it and every new fishermen or restriction of fishing area is an existential threat. For majority of Croatian citizens this conflict over «few pounds of fish» can have very unpleasant consequences. For Croatian economy good trading relations with Slovenia are important; almost all roads to the Western Europe go through Slovenia; Slovenians are visiting the Adriatic Coast as tourists, and last but not the least, good relations with one's neighbors is a quality on it's own. Finally, politically pejorative term «Balkan» (that many of our politicians confuse with geographic term; and so some of them, who are being loudest in claims that Croatia is not a part of Balkan, are acting in most «balcanic» way) is used for small countries, mutually in conflict, which cannot solve any of their own problems without the «international arbitration». But, giving up on one part of the state territory, no matter how small it is, would represent the most unpopular measure that should be evaded if possible.

One of the solutions worth considering is giving concession on those few square kilometers in question to Slovenia, for say ten years. The money gained could be compensated to fishermen, Croatia and Slovenia would prove that they can solve their problems independently as two civilized countries, both of the countries should be in EC and this particular problem will cease to exist, as well as fish in that part of the Adriatic sea after ten years of trawling.