

# Helsinki bulletin



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NO.166 // JANUARY 2023



Andrej Plenković finds Christmas coin during the Serb National Council Orthodox Christmas reception, Zagreb, 7th January 2023.

Photo: Goran Mehkek/Cropix

## CROATIA: CONSTANT RIVAL

The relations between Serbia and Croatia are crucial for the Western Balkans, above all when it comes to security. The brutal breakup of Yugoslavia left many open questions in the relations between the two countries, especially regarding the interpretation of the events during the war in the 1990s.

Regional relations are one of the main EU accession criteria for the states of the Western Balkans. Relations between Serbia and Croatia are certainly vital when it comes to Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Bilateral relations were established in 1996, with the signing of the Agreement on Normalization of Relations between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republic of Croatia. Another 47 bilateral agreements were signed, including: the Agreement between Serbia and Montenegro and the Republic of Croatia on the protection of the rights of the Serbian and Montenegrin minority in the Republic of Croatia and of the Croatian minority in Serbia and Montenegro, signed in 2004; the Protocol on Cooperation in the Process of European Integration between

the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, signed in 2009; the Agreement on Economic Cooperation between the Government of the Republic of Serbia and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, signed in 2009; the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure of the Republic of Serbia and the Ministry of the Sea, Transport and Infrastructure of the Republic of Croatia on cooperation to improve the efficiency of railway transport, signed in 2018.

In the second half of the nineties, and especially after 2000, relations between the two countries slowly began to improve, especially after both countries opted for EU membership. During that period, numerous high-level visits and progress in all areas were recorded. The breakthrough in relations occurred during the term of office of Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, which then continued during the presidencies of Ivo Josipović and Boris Tadić.

However, with the change of the political administration in Serbia, policy also changed. When the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power in 2012, relations between the two countries deteriorated, and during the last few years, at the political level, they were almost cut off. Diplomatic relations barely exist anymore. Croatia's entry into the EU and NATO put an end to Belgrade's territorial aspirations, but the demonization of Croatia as a state created by Ustashe is emphasized daily in the Serbian media. It is claimed that "the more Croatia is in the European Union (Schengen and eurozone), the more pronounced its Ustasha-philias becomes, which the EU turns a blind eye to".<sup>1</sup>

The Zagreb-Belgrade axis is deteriorating while the Budapest-Belgrade axis is intensifying, which increasingly poses a problem for the EU

1 Slobodan Ikonić, *Christmas Fiasco*, Pečat, 20 January 2023.

as well, due to authoritarianism and the uncritical attitude of both capitals towards Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

However, economic and cultural cooperation have remained intact without interruptions, albeit not stretching beyond what is necessary towards what is objectively possible.

The issue of Serbian minorities in Croatia and Croats in Serbia is always relevant and instead of being a bridge for cooperation, political relations are often determined by it.

However, during 2022, on the occasion of the 15th "Serbian-Croatian relations" scientific meeting, Milorad Pupovac (Independent Democratic Serb Party – SDSS) and Tomislav Žigmanov (Democratic Alliance of Croats in Vojvodina – DSHV) signed the Declaration on the Cooperation of Serbs from Croatia and Croats from Serbia, which, among other things, states the following: "With this Declaration, we encourage the countries in which we live to, instead of renewing conflict, finally turn towards cooperation for the purpose of the prosperity of all their citizens, and thus the development of our two communities".<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the current government has for the first time appointed a minister of human rights for Croatian nationals – Tomislav Žigmanov – is a sign that a change of attitude is in the works. Indicative of the state of relations between Croatia and Serbia is certainly the statement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić that President Vučić "asked us to thaw relations with Croatia a little bit".<sup>3</sup> Before leaving for Zagreb, Dačić said that Serbia would seek better relations in the future "without any belief that we

2 <https://p-portal.net/deklaracija-o-saradnji-srba-iz-hrvatske-i-hrvata-iz-srbije/>.

3 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/dacic-vucic-trazio-da-odledimo-odnose-sa-hrvatskom/>.

will now change each other's consciousness and opinions".<sup>4</sup>

These statements were followed by the first visit of Minister Ivica Dačić to Zagreb at the invitation of the Serb National Council to their traditional Orthodox Christmas reception, where he also met with Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković. Dačić stated that reviving the constructive dialogue between Belgrade and Zagreb, on an equal basis, "is the only way to resolve the open issues that continue to burden the relations of our two countries".<sup>5</sup> He also stated that the issues should be grouped into three categories: unresolved issues from the past, pursuing common interests and the development of economic relations".<sup>6</sup>

The meeting between President Vučić and Croatian Prime Minister Plenković at the World Economic Forum in Davos (January 2023), as well as their statements of "hope for better relations" are more than a hint when it comes to truly thawing relations.

## THE POLITICS OF HISTORY

The dominance of right-wing nationalist waves on the political scene of both countries impacts any attempt of a critical view of their common history. Unwanted topics in the public discourse of both societies still include their common historical experience (from 1918 to 1991) and addressing their past in regards to the war (from 1991 to 1996).

The revision of history in both countries represents a serious problem in mutual relations. In

preparation for the war, Belgrade mobilized the Serbian people in Jasenovac, as a symbol of the suffering of the Serbs in World War Two, but after the war it was used to defame Croatia, as well as the EU and NATO, because they accepted a "fascist creation" as a member state. There are frequent articles in the Serbian media claiming that "the control of history and the politics of genocide are weapons of war against the Serbian people, the only people who at the turning point between the 20th and 21st century dared to defend themselves against the onslaught of global fascism".<sup>7</sup>

Aleksandar Vulin (in his capacity as Minister of Defense or Minister of the Interior) is at the forefront when it comes to associating Croatia with the Ustashe, along with President Aleksandar Vučić himself, who mentions Croatia every now and then, often unprovoked, like Ivica Dačić and Ana Brnabić.

Vučić reacted particularly violently after he was not allowed to visit Jasenovac, but most of his statements about Croatia were made on Victory and Homeland Thanksgiving Day (5 August), i.e. the anniversary of the military-police operation Storm. Operation Storm is labelled a crime and a genocide, aimed only at expelling ethnic Serbs. Most of the statements refer to the suffering of Serbs in World War Two, and a link is made with operation Storm, which qualifies as a continuation of the genocide. Vučić repeats every now and then that "Croatia was just doing its job, as it had been doing for decades, since 1941. Nothing has changed there".<sup>8</sup>

The Croatian media often refer to Vučić's speech in Glina in 1995 when, among other things, he said: "Glina and Banija will never be Croatia, they have always been and will remain Serbian!"

4 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/ivica-dacic-na-specijalnom-zadatku-hoce-li-srbija-i-hrvatska-popraviti-odnose-posle-bozicnog-prijema-u-zagrebu/>

5 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/dacic-poseta-hrvatska-bozic/32212364.html>

6 Interview with Ivica Dačić, Politika, 15 January 2023.

7 Biljana Đorović, *Srbs are silent while Croatia just does its job*, Pečat, 25 May 2022.

8 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sve-zapaljive-izjave-predsednika-vucica-o-hrvatskoj-vi-svaki-dan-odlikujete-one-koji-su-ubijali-srbe/>.

If the radicals win, you will live in Great Serbia! Cheers!”<sup>9</sup>

Vučić’s response to that reminder only affirms the position he expressed then: “I am proud of everything I am, I cannot say everything, but what they are talking about, there is nothing controversial about it. They killed the Serbs who lived there. Let me remind you, you seem to have forgotten what happened in 1995. Serbs did not kill Croats, but Croats killed Serbs. Serbs did not expel Croats from Glina, but the other way around.”<sup>10</sup>

Every Croatian-Serbian summer is tumultuous because of the anniversary of operation Storm, which is always described in Serbian media reports as a clear genocide and the biggest violation of international law on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>11</sup>

There were also conciliatory statements, such as those that the region rests on peace between the Serbian and Croatian people and that there is no more important, urgent or higher interest. That is why, as Vučić pointed out, the Republic of Serbia will make every effort to preserve peace with Croatia and the Croatian people, to invest in stability, but also in the identity of its own Serbian people.<sup>12</sup>

An important role in profiling the campaign against Croatia as a fascist creation is played by the academic community, especially historians who were also propagandists of the war. In this sense, the historian Vasilije Krestić stands out,

9 <https://direktno.rs/politika/293246/podsecanje-vucic-srbima-u-glina-1995-ovo-nikad-nece-bit-hrvatska-zivecete-u-velikoj-srbiji-video.html>.

10 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/sve-zapaljive-izjave-predsednika-vucica-o-hrvatskoj-vi-svaki-dan-odlikujete-one-koji-su-ubijali-srbe/>.

11 <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/olujna-zlocin-bez-kazne/1142609/cizmom-gazili-vensov-plan-garancije-atak-1995-hrvatska-povredila-medjunarodno-pravo>.

12 Ibid.

who even now claims that “he has no hope that relations between Serbs and Croats can improve in the near future”. “Because,” as he says, the hatred of the Croats towards the Serbs, towards that “concertation of the Orthodox faith”, came about through a long process. It is deeply rooted. Therefore, the process of clearing their mind will not and cannot be shorter, it cannot and will not happen overnight. Serbs, especially Serbian politicians, not only today but also in the future, have to understand that.<sup>13</sup>

Disputes over the past intensified after the Serbian War Crimes Prosecutor’s Office brought charges against four Croatian pilots, who are accused of having ordered the rocketing of a convoy of refugees on the Petrovac road near Bosanski Petrovac and in Svodna during the Croatian military-police operation Storm in August 1995 near Novi Grad.

The cooperation of the prosecutor’s offices of the two countries had once made significant strides and the results were visible after 2000. A draft agreement on cooperation in the prosecution of war criminals was even drawn up, which was supposed to eliminate politicization and the jurisdiction clash between the courts in Croatia and Serbia, but it was never adopted.

During the last ten years, the Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade has focused only on crimes against Serbs, which Chief Prosecutor Svetlana Stojanović highlighted as a priority in her letter of intent. Distrust among the successor states, when it comes to court trials of war criminals, rests on the fear of political abuse of criminal proceedings, especially abuse of the so-called universal jurisdiction.

The Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts adopted a document on the protection of Croatian

13 <https://www.novosti.rs/drustvo/vesti/1144753/hrvatske-istine-koje-sam-njima-izneo-prof-vasilije-krestic-sest-decenija-rada-polju-nacionalne-istoriografije>.



national interests, in connection with the accession of the states in the region to the EU. In the segment that refers to Serbia, it is stated that Serbia should stop inciting hostility towards Croatia and persecuting Croatian citizens, while renouncing propaganda about Great Serbia. It is emphasized that a demarcation should be made on the Danube and the Croatian cadastral territory and that the Island of Šarengrad under the should be immediately returned sovereignty of Croatia. In addition, the obligations assumed through the signed agreements and arrangements, such as the protection of reciprocal rights of the Croatian minority should be respected, and Croats in Serbia should be provided with free political and cultural organization and action in the same extent to which Croatia enables the Serbian minority to do the same.<sup>14</sup>

The need to define the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Croatia was also emphasized. There is an insistence on the return of data that was taken from the archives after World War Two – the return of the archives of the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), the archives of the JNA on the Ways of the Cross, the camps, the Croatian Spring, etc. Serbia is also expected to give back the documentation taken from the Vukovar hospital, as well as to “reveal all the places where Croats were executed during the aggression against Croatia, and the names of those killed”, while allowing them to be buried with dignity. It is emphasized that Serbia should recognize the Bunjevci as a Croatian ethnic identity.<sup>15</sup>

In Croatia, there were no significant reactions to this Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts (HAZU) document, but Serbian tabloids and the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU)

did react to it. The SANU statement emphasizes that SANU members are “surprised by the primitive tone of hatred” in the HAZU document, and that they will not enter the devalued space of retorts with those who shamelessly use the term “Jasenovac myth”. “But it’s good and useful to know what they think!”<sup>16</sup>

## ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Economic relations between the two countries are better than their political relations, which are still burdened by numerous unresolved issues from the past. Croatia belongs to the group of 20 leading investors in Serbia, with around EUR 900 million invested in various sectors, from trade and services to the manufacturing industry. Over the last few years, positive progress has been made in terms of investment by Serbian companies in the tourism and agriculture sectors in Croatia.<sup>17</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic, which hit the Balkan region hard, slowed down growth in economic relations.

According to the data of the Serbian Business Registers Agency, in 2020, 1,039 companies that are majority-owned by Croatian companies and citizens were registered. Data from the Central registry of compulsory social insurance show that Croatian companies in Serbia employ around 10,000 workers. Serbian investments in Croatia (about ten of them) are worth around EUR 50 million. Recently, the situation has been changing for the better, so according to NBS data, direct Serbian investments in the period from 2010 to 2020 amounted to around EUR 109 million. If investments paid from accounts abroad are also

14 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/hazu-objavila-dokument-o-zastiti-hrvatskih-interesa-pri-pregovorima-s-bih-crnom-gorom-i-srbijom-oko-ulaska-u-eu/>.

15 <https://www.danas.rs/svet/region/hazu-objavila-dokument-o-zastiti-hrvatskih-interesa-pri-pregovorima-s-bih-crnom-gorom-i-srbijom-oko-ulaska-u-eu/>.

16 <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/sanu-primitivni-ton-mrznje-u-objavi-hrvatske-akademije-2/>.

17 <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/lat/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/hrvatska> .

included, then total Serbian investments in Croatia amounted to around EUR 350 million.<sup>18</sup>

According to data from the Serbian Chamber of Commerce, trade between Serbia and Croatia has been steadily rising since 2000, and reached its highest volume in 2008, when it exceeded USD 1 billion. During the last few years, it has been at a level between EUR 800 million and EUR 900 million. On the other hand, despite a more or less balanced trade, there is a striking imbalance in the field of investments; it seems, in fact, that the Serbian market is much more open to companies from Croatia than the Croatian market is to businesspeople from Serbia.

Cross-border cooperation is not sufficiently developed, and it could stimulate economic activities, which would affect the economic development of local governments on both sides of the border. Negotiations are ongoing regarding the acceleration of the flow of goods at the Batrovci-Bajakovo border crossings and the continuation of the implementation of the initiative of the two chambers to establish control at the Šid-Tovarnik railway border crossing for goods of plant and animal origin. During the first six months of 2022, mutual foreign trade exchange was 35.4% higher compared to the same period in 2021.<sup>19</sup>

## CULTURAL COOPERATION

In recent years, in addition to the silence and memory erasure that characterizes the polarized relationship between Serbia and Croatia, an anti-nationalist discourse has emerged that reflects two forms of cultural space, which exist in parallel in the context of Serbian-Croatian cultural cooperation. The policy of labeling Serbian and Croatian media in the context of presenting cultural cooperation is multidimensional, which

is a reflection of the complexity of the socio-political and cultural context.

The analysis of Brankica Drašković, assistant professor at the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad, indicates that the dualism between nationalism and anti-nationalism in media discourse indicates the existence, conditionally speaking, of two forms of cultural space that exist in parallel in the context of cultural cooperation between Croatia and Serbia: the spectacularized (majority) and the critical (minority). Both have their own narratives that are reflected in the media. The former is characterized by a fear of the other and an emphasis on differences, hate speech, support for revisionist ideas of politicians, silencing and forgetting the past, while the latter is characterized by acceptance of the other, emphasis on similarities and linguistic understanding, a critical confrontation with the past, resistance to mythologizing and national constructs, as well as a revision of the anti-fascist past.<sup>20</sup>

Objectively, there are no obstacles for further strengthening cultural cooperation, with mutual respect and understanding. However, cooperation on this level does not reflect the needs and potential that it objectively has. The decades-long absence of official cooperation has left profound consequences. Institutional cultural cooperation between Croatia and Serbia is developing slowly, even with the high degree of cooperation between artists (in music, literature, film), which they achieve individually or within the framework of joint projects.

The Ministers of Culture of Serbia and Croatia Vladan Vukosavljević and Nina Obuljen Koržinek met in Zagreb in 2019, when they discussed organizing conferences about Jasenovac in Belgrade, Zagreb and Jasenovac, where historians from both sides would review the facts about that camp. As a good example of cooperation, the exchange of hosting theater performances was highlighted, as well as the

18 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/476152/Pogledi/Asimetrija-ekonomskih-odnosa-izmedu-Srbije-i-Hrvatske>.

19 <https://www.ekapija.com/news/3817508/jaca-privredna-saradnja-srbije-i-hrvatske-razmena-uvecana-za-354>.

20 <https://www.readcube.com/articles/10.19090%2Fgff.2018.2.103-117>.

establishment of literary and cultural ties within the framework of the exchange of writers, and the possible exchange of selected exhibitions of contemporary art was also discussed.<sup>21</sup>

One of the topics of the meeting was the return of cultural assets from Serbia to Croatia, which has been a stumbling block in cultural cooperation for years. During the war in the 1990s, tens of thousands of items that are considered cultural assets disappeared or were taken out of Croatia, and most of them ended up in Serbia. It was established that the long-term process of returning cultural assets is nearing its end. From Serbia to Croatia from 2001 to 2018, a total of 29,885 movable cultural assets were returned to museums, churches, monasteries and archives, while the remaining larger units for return refer to the treasures of the Krk and Šibenik monasteries.<sup>22</sup>

The Friedrich Ebert Foundation and the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory of the University of Belgrade organized a discussion entitled "Serbian-Croatian dialogue: Can books cross the border?" Among other things, it was pointed out that the two countries are not in the same political context, because Croatia is a member of the

EU, which, in the opinion of the writer Gojko Božović, prevents a greater presence of Serbian literature in it, hindering a greater diffusion of books. On the other hand, he points out, the production of feature television series works very well in the Serbia-Croatia relationship, "actors from there come here, and ours are present there, so that form of subculture also exists. And in publishing, it seems that this situation will remain until Serbia enters the European Union".<sup>23</sup>

On behalf of the Sandorf publishing house (Croatia), Ivan Sršen warned that "nowadays, market competition is quite pronounced, all of us as private publishers struggle to show whose product is better and more necessary, instead of highlighting culture, appreciation, equality and art. At a time when the paradigm is changing, it is very difficult to compare how things used to be in Yugoslavia to how they are now".<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that Serbia's budget for culture is insufficient. Last year (2022), it was 0.72 percent, while this year (2023) 0.66 percent of the total budget of the Republic of Serbia was allocated for culture. The Croatian government allocates 1.37 percent of its total budget for the same purpose.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving overall relations and cooperation in all significant areas between Croatia and Serbia is in the interest of both countries and the stability of the entire region. As the leading economies in the region, they should devote themselves to developing positive relations as neighboring countries and strengthening cooperation, which can give impetus to the entire region.

Overcoming the past is the key to establishing normal communication. That is why it is necessary to form a bilateral commission that would lead to a common narrative in a comprehensive and historically accurate way.

The media, especially those in Serbia, should stop politicizing the past and creating a toxic atmosphere that negatively affects younger generations in particular, as well as their viewpoints.

A culture of connection is necessary, bearing in mind the cultural and historical interweaving of the two nations. It can bring out the best for both societies. In this sense, cultural cooperation can most effectively contribute to the restoration of equal and mutually respectful relations.

21 <https://www.danas.rs/kultura/vukosavljevic-u-zagrebu-o-kulturnoj-saradnji-srbije-i-hrvatske/>.

22 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29736104.html>.

23 <https://nova.rs/kultura/saradnja-srbije-i-hrvatske-na-raznim-poljima-ali-u-izdavastvu-ne/>.

24 Ibid.