

Croatian Extremists On The March

Author: [Goran Vezic](#)

Croatia's social and economic crisis is fueling an ultra-nationalist revival

Just as visitors are drifting back, after years of war in the region scared them away, Croatia's tourist industry now faces a new threat - this time from within. Marinko Liovic, a parliamentary deputy from the former ruling HDZ party and leader of the Disabled Ex-Servicemen from the Croatian Homeland War organisation, has threatened to mobilise disabled activists to block roads and border crossings during the tourist season. He has also threatened to write to foreign ambassadors in Zagreb, warning that their citizens are not welcome as tourists.

At a time when 30,000 businesses are facing bankruptcy and unemployment in this country of 4.5 million people is expected to rise to 500,000, it seems little short of lunacy to jeopardise the 3.5 billion dollars expected from the coming tourist season. But then the Croatian Right, which Liovic represents, is determined to try and regain its dominance by whatever means necessary.

After a spectacular electoral victory for pro-democracy and pro-European forces early this year, a sense of disappointment and dissatisfaction with the pace of change has begun to set in. It was clear from the outset that ten years of Franjo Tudjman's autocratic regime had saddled the new government with a tricky legacy. The trouble is the new ruling coalition has taken rather too long to deal with it.

The ruling coalition is made up of Social Democrats, or reformed communists, but they have opted for a laissez faire attitude to the social and economic crisis in the country. The Croatian government announced that further bankruptcies of around 30,000 companies are imminent. With unemployment already at 360,000 and pensioners numbering a million, the number of those dependant on the state already outnumbers those employed.

In this uncertain atmosphere, right-wingers are hoping to revive their support, but not through the ballot box, where their performance continues to decline. One hundred days after its decisive defeat in parliamentary elections, the former ruling HDZ party saw its vote halved again - to 11 per cent - at a by-election in the capital Zagreb. The extremist Croatian Party of Rights saw its vote sliced from five per cent to only two per cent. Faced with electoral disappointments, there are clear signs that right wing activists are shifting their attention to the streets.

Marinko Liovic's threats to disrupt the tourist season are tied to demands for increased financial aid to veterans of the 1991-1995 war and an end to the "criminalisation of the Homeland War". In other words, the new Croatian government should abandon its constructive co-operation with The Hague Tribunal (ICTY).

Veterans' organisations are seeking to manipulate the fears of the ex-servicemen who resent the reduction of privileges they enjoyed under the previous regime. They see any co-operation with the ICTY as a direct threat.

Of course, the new Croatian government must work with The Hague if it is to overcome the pariah status of Tudjman's regime. Croatia's recent invitation to join NATO's Partnership for Peace shows that such co-operation is paying dividends. Unfortunately, the policy helps to fuel hardline nationalism.

At a recent veterans rally in Split, marchers combined their singing of the Croatian national anthem with fascist salutes and insults directed at President Stipe Mesic and Prime Minister Racan. They also issued a specific warning, "If the Ministries of Defence and Interior are not left alone, or if our wartime generals are

removed, the ruin of Croatia becomes inevitable." The Interior Minister Ivica Pancic recently announced that just under half of the 520 people employed in his ministry are to be laid off as part of budget cuts.

Another area where the government must tread an uneasy line between the wishes of the international community and the easily inflamed sensitivities of many Croats is the issue of the tiny Serb minority and the return of Serbian refugees.

In the village of Viljun 90km from Zagreb, the police had to protect Serbs from attack by Croatian nationalists as they attempted to commemorate victims of the Ustase, Croatia's fascist Second World War regime. One Croatian woman even urinated on the memorial. Nationalist protesters were also accused of occupying former Serb houses, which are earmarked for return under the new government's refugee return programme.

For now, the electorate is still backing the new ruling coalition. But there is little cause for complacency. The government may have triumphed in the recent Zagreb by-election, but voter turnout was only half of that at the parliamentary elections. Most analysts agree that voter fatigue with the third major election in two months was a factor, but the low turnout was also a clear warning that people are dissatisfied with the governing coalition.

An ongoing political dispute between the government and Mesic is not helping matters. The government wishes to curb the power of the Presidency while Mesic wants to hang on to some of the powers his predecessor held over the army, secret services and foreign policy. As Croatia faces economic disaster, the political leadership appears preoccupied with its own power struggle. If the government is not careful, the Right could extend its following beyond the realms of disabled ex-servicemen.

Goran Vezic is a journalist on the Split-based magazine "Feral Tribune".

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