

The End of the Tudjman Era

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Croatia turns its back on the Tudjman era as voters choose one of the late president's fiercest critics to take his place.

The new President of Croatia, Stipe Mesic, has achieved the unlikely feat of rising to the pinnacle of power in two different states.

Ranked an outsider at the beginning of the Croatian presidential race, Mesic stormed home on Monday with a resounding 13 per cent lead over his second round-rival, Drazen Budisa.

For a brief period in 1991, he was president of the now defunct Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

He has inherited the Croatian presidency from Franjo Tudjman - who ruled the country from its creation in 1990 until his death late last year. But Mesic promises to be a very different head of state to his predecessor.

This 65-year-old politician, with his cropped hair and grey beard, can attribute his electoral success to two things: of all the candidates he least resembled Tudjman and throughout the campaign he attacked the so-called "Herzegovinian lobby" of privileged cronies surrounding the late president.

This Herzegovinian lobby comprises a group of influential people with origins in Herzegovina, the predominantly Croat region of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For years this group implemented Tudjman's orders, receiving financial rewards and social privileges as reward. To the bitter end, Tudjman held onto the idea of dividing Bosnia and annexing Herzegovina.

Mesic was born on December 24, 1934, in a Slavonian town of Orahovica, some 200 kilometers east of Zagreb. He entered the faculty of law at Zagreb University, and began his political career while studying there, becoming a prominent student leader. After graduating, Mesic went on to become mayor of Orahovica.

In 1971, Mesic took part in the "Croatian spring" - a dissident movement viewed by the Yugoslav authorities, under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito, as a revival of Croatian nationalism and Ustashism, the notorious fascist movement which allied with the Nazi German government during the Second World War.

Mesic was arrested and imprisoned for one year - a fate he shared with several prominent Croat politicians, including Budisa.

Like many politicians in Croatia, Mesic was at one time a member of the Communist Party - the only political party in the SFRY. With the first multi-party elections in April 1990, however, he joined Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), after some hesitation.

Initially, Mesic enjoyed Tudjman's trust. He became the first prime minister of the Croatian government before taking up the post as Croat representative on the rotating Yugoslav (SFRY) presidency in Belgrade.

But Tudjman's aggressive policy in Bosnia forced a split with Mesic in 1994. He was sacked from his post as speaker in the Croatian parliament, later joining forces with Josip Manolic and around a dozen fellow outcasts from the HDZ, to found a new party - the Croatian Independent Democrats. Then, in 1997 Mesic changed allegiance again, joining the Croatian People's Party.

Mesic comes over as a relaxed, unpretentious person, close to ordinary people. He is renowned for his jokes and wit, a style in stark contrast to Tudjman's dour rigidity and dark seriousness. Mesic - the candidate of the "Opposition Four"- a coalition combining the Croatian Peasants Party, the Croatian Peoples Party, the Liberal Party and the Istrian Democratic Assembly- does not dwell on history and Croat national myths.

Budisa, however, leader of the Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSLs), was unfortunate in that his manner, turn of phrase and, sometimes, his behaviour were mildly reminiscent of Tudjman. This difference in personality seems to have been key to Mesic's victory.

The programmes put forward by both candidates were remarkably similar - a reduction in presidential powers, the transference of government to parliament and an end to the luxurious lifestyle associated with the Tudjman presidency.

Similar programmes did not lessen, however, the intense competition for votes. At times the election campaign had been dirty. Some members of the Social Democratic Party members had declared that a Mesic victory could jeopardise the fulfilment of pre-election commitments made by the new coalition government, headed by Prime Minister Ivica Racan.

But even shortly after Mesic's victory, tempers appear to have cooled. Budisa was prompt to concede defeat and offer his congratulations to Mesic, wishing him "a lot of success in carrying out his presidential duties."

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