

Tudjman's Nationalist Legacy

The Croatian government attempts to tackle the former president's nationalist legacy

Mladen Rogic was arrested in Zagreb last November at a protest against an EU summit being held in the city. But the police were more interested in what he was wearing than what he was doing.

Detained by Croatian police and questioned for several hours, Rogic was ordered to pay a fine of 579 kuna (£50). This earned him the dubious distinction of being the first person to be penalised under Croatia's newly reactivated law banning the wearing of fascist insignia.

During the November 30 protest, the thirty-six-year-old former officer from Biograd had been spotted wearing a cap sporting the letter 'U' - the fascist symbol of the Second World War puppet Croat state, Independent State of Croatia, NDH. The EU Summit had been convened to discuss the problems of reconciliation in the region.

The case was sympathetically covered by local daily *Slobodna Dalmacija*, one of a handful of Croatian newspapers which maintains a strong nationalist editorial line. In the piece, Rogic said he was astonished by his arrest.

"I fought under this cap throughout the five years of the Homeland War, " he said. " For twenty-two months I was in charge of Zadar's defence. While I was fighting nobody minded me wearing it. Today, five years later, I am taken into custody and fined 579 kuna."

In a sense, he is right. For the duration of the conflict no-one criticised him for the insignia he wore as a commanding officer of the Croatian army. Quite the opposite; it served as proof of his loyalty to the Homeland.

The Zagreb authorities have reactivated Tito-era laws proscribing the promotion of ethnic intolerance. The legislation fell into disuse under Franjo Tudjman's presidency, a period characterised by highly-charged Croatian nationalism.

During the latter's rule, around three thousand monuments dedicated to the anti-Fascist struggle and the partisan movement of the Second World War were destroyed. By presidential decree, the central Square of Victims of Fascism was renamed the Square of Croatian Heroes.

In ten other cities, streets, schools and even nurseries were named after Mile Budak, a minister in the former Ustase government, who after the Second World War was sentenced to death for crimes against humanity.

Though officially barred during the last decade, fascist insignia was not only tolerated but became highly visible, representing, for many, "a higher degree of patriotic consciousness" . It also shored up government-approved xenophobia.

At the same time there was a comprehensive review of school textbooks. Thousands of volumes by authors holding ideological beliefs anathema to the Tudjman regime, belonging to a nationality it opposed, or simply written in Cyrillic, were either removed from library shelves or destroyed.

Mladen Rogic's misapprehension at having to pay 579 kuna for attaching the letter 'U' to his hat, is a legacy of the Tujman era.

The late autocrat provided amnesty for those convicted of fascist crimes committed during the Second World War and reappraised the dark role played by the quisling NDH, in the name of 'national reconciliation'.

The height of this ideological craze was to have been marked by the digging of a common grave for Fascist soldiers and their victims at the site of the Second World War concentration camp at Jasenovac, where 80,000 Serbs, Jews, Gypsies and opponents of the Ustase regime perished. A critical report about the plans in the satirical weekly Feral Tribune provoked international outrage - they were abandoned soon afterwards.

The authorities, unsurprisingly, were not well disposed towards the paper's stance. In retaliation, the state prosecutor brought charges against me, its editor, and another journalist, Marinko Culic. We were charged with insulting and slandering the president.

We were also indicted under a law protecting the name of the head of state, under which criticism of the president is effectively outlawed. We faced a possible three year sentence, but the prosecution dropped the case last year following Tujman's death.

Yet while the case has been dropped, the reasons for doing so are cited as procedural. We have not been absolved, which tends to suggest that the pro-nationalist legal apparatus of the Tujman regime survives.

Imbued with a decade of nationalist ideology, Rogic naturally feels like a victim. A greater problem for Croatia is that the offspring of people like him will grow up with the same views. In the Slobodna Dalmacija report on the Rogic case, the journalist describes a conversation with his three-year-old son:

"Lovre, where was your dad?"

"In jail"

"Who put him there?"

"The reds, communists".

Lovre Rogic has already been taught "to identify his political enemies".

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