

Ustasha Cult Repels Right-Wing Croats

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After years of tolerating neo-Fascist imagery, political correctness is penetrating such nationalist bastions as the Catholic Church.

For years, Croatia's right-wing establishment has turned a blind eye to songs, slogans and emblems glorifying the Second-World War Ustasha regime, or – worse – has actively encouraged them.

But as the country gets ever closer to the European Union, a growing chorus on the nationalist right is demanding an end to such glorification, as well as legal changes to penalise displays of neo-Nazi and pro-Fascist sympathy.

Last week, even the influential Catholic Church, which rarely criticised such sympathies in the past, condemned the trend in a very public response to the furore surrounding the lyrics of a right-wing pop singer.

Marko “Thompson” Perkovic, who has wowed youthful audiences for years with controversial songs praising the Ustasha, hit a new low with a recent song entitled “Jasenovac and Gradiska Stara”.

The tune lauded the Ustasha-run concentration camps of the 1940s in which Serbs, Roma and left-wing Croats were slaughtered. A line referring to Jasenovac and Gradiska Stara as the “home of Maks's family”, referring to Maks Luburic, a notorious Ustasha camp commander, disgusted many in the country.

A petition on a website entitled “Stop the Ustashe” demanded that the company behind the song, Croatia Records, stop recording and releasing Thompson's CDs. The petitioners urged Croatian Television to halt broadcasting his songs and asked the Catholic Church and the political right to distance themselves.

Previously, such anti-Ustasha campaigns had little impact on the public, being seen as projects of the political left.

But in a sign that political correctness is starting to embrace a much wider spectrum of opinion, both the Church and ministers of the new right-wing government have joined the condemnation of Thompson's songs and called for legal changes.

The Clerics message was forthright. In a public statement on 23 January, bishops lambasted “the messages and contents of Marko ‘Thompson’ Perkovic's songs, which use hate speech that is in any way linked with the Catholic Church”.

The bishops described such songs as “incompatible with the accomplishments of Christianity and civilisation”. They concluded, “The glorification of any crime and the failure to honour the legal system is in breach of all Christian doctrines.”

Politicians fell in line behind the bishops. On January 26, the new right-wing prime minister, Ivo Sanader, political heir to the late nationalist president, Franjo Tudjman, marked Holocaust Remembrance Day by attending the opening of a photographic exhibition on the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw in 1943.

The appearance of a leader of the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, at such an event was noteworthy in itself, as was his public reaction to the images. "Thank God in Europe and the rest of the world people are very conscious of the fact that such crimes must never be repeated," he said.

Sanader's presence lent extra force to the more predictable remarks of the centrist president Stipe Mesic. He said it would be a good idea to mail the pictures at the exhibition "to the addresses of all those nostalgic for Fascism, so they can see the results of such politics".

Over the past decade, the flaunting of Ustasha "U" symbols and pictures of the Ustasha leader, Ante Pavelic, have not been confined to eccentric folk concerts.

Football fans often sing a pro-Ustasha song entitled "Here comes the dawn, here comes the day". The police turn a blind eye to the merchandising of Ustasha symbols at sports stadiums, as well as to the sale of Pavelic and Ustasha emblems on tourist routes in the Adriatic.

Opponents of the Ustasha cult blame loopholes in the law for its persistence. "Quite incredibly, no one can be convicted for glorifying Ustasha crimes in Croatia," said the well-known intellectual Slavko Goldstein. "You can be punished for telling a Serb he is stupid, but if you glorify the killing of Serbs, you are not breaking the law."

Now the government also seems to be coming round to this point of view. In mid-January the new justice minister Vesna Skare Ozbolt admitted the law was illogical and announced legal changes to bring Croatia into line with European standards by penalising such practices.

The partial rehabilitation of Pavelic's Ustasha regime began in the Tudjman era. During the war of independence against the Serbs, which lasted from 1990 to 1995, lines distinguishing one brand of patriot from another became blurred. Ustasha sympathies were often passed off as a legitimate expression of Croat nationalism.

The reaction began in the mid-Nineties, when the ruling HDZ clumsily changed the name of a prominent square in Zagreb, named after the victims of Fascism, to "Square of the Croatian Leaders".

The supposedly patriotic act jarred with public opinion and a protest petition garnered widespread support. The square got its old name back after the HDZ lost the 2000 elections.

But the centre-left government of Ivica Racan from 2000 to November 2003 never seriously got to grips with the neo-Ustasha trend. They feared an all-out battle with the right and the consequent risk of being pilloried as unpatriotic.

When the HDZ regained power last year, the radical right hoped the time was ripe again to foist Ustasha ideas on people. They printed calendars with pictures of Pavelic, as Ustasha symbols blossomed at concerts by Thompson and other folk stars.

But the public was less receptive than they expected. Sanader deserves some credit for this, as the change in mood partly reflects his determination to show Europe that the HDZ has been reformed into a classical European, centrist party.

Sanader jolted his nationalist supporters when he sent Croatia's Serb minority a Christmas greeting using the traditional Orthodox formula, "Christ is born". He also broke with HDZ tradition by describing Croatia's minorities as part of its "riches", rather than an irritating problem.

He has yet to drag his supporters in his wake. One survey in mid-January suggested up to 70 per cent of HDZ members do not support this policy. But as the head of a right-wing administration, his stance is indicative of a wider shift in public perceptions.

With the support of the powerful Catholic Church, Croatia's political climate is undergoing major changes.

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