

## **Zagreb Ignores Nationalist Rallying Cry**

**Author:** [IWPR](#)

Croatian nationalists suffer setback as their country-wide protests fizzle out

A surprisingly low turnout for a nationalist protest in support of an ex-Croatian army general wanted for alleged war crimes left organisers bitterly disappointed on Thursday.

Bold claims that crowds would exceed 200,000 proved wildly exaggerated when only 5,000 demonstrators, mostly bussed in from the provinces, gathered outside the parliament buildings in St Marc's square.

A demonstration in Split on February 11 attracted 100,000 people, leading to fears a similarly strong showing in the Croatian capital could weaken or even break the six-party ruling coalition.

But residents in Zagreb ignored the nationalists' rallying cry, preferring to watch from the sidelines. The general consensus appeared to be, "We'll never get into Europe with this lot!".

Retired general Mirko Norac is wanted by the Croatian police for alleged war crimes against Serb civilians in Gospic in 1991. The protestors demanded the government pass a law granting amnesty to all Croatian soldiers and an end to investigations into their actions during the so-called "Homeland War" of 1991-1995.

"If they do not pass this law we shall organise an all-Croatian rally and go all the way to the end," said Tomislav Mercep, one of the protest coordinators. Mercep has also been linked to war crimes allegedly carried out by units under his command in Pakracka Poljana in 1991.

Drazen Budisa, leader of the Croatian Social Liberal Party, HSLP, and Prime Minister Ivica Racan's main coalition partner, said in parliament, "Acceptance of these attitudes and such laws would place Croatia in a dangerous position and threaten the country's future."

Political analysts have interpreted Budisa's comments as a clear sign the coalition government can weather the nationalist storm.

The HSLP is one of the more nationalist of the coalition parties. And with 24 MPs, it's the second largest party after Racan's Social Democratic Party. The Croatian Right was optimistic that pressure over the Norac issue could push the party into withdrawing from the government.

While the demonstrators chanted at the Zagreb rally, Ivica Pasalic, leader of the powerful so-called Herzegovina lobby and a former close advisor to the late president Franjo Tudjman, called on MPs to demand a pardon for Norac. Pasalic, a key organiser of the recent protests, said such a move would defuse tensions in Croatia.

But MPs from the ruling coalition reacted furiously to Pasalic's speech. "Accepting such a proposition could only lead to Norac being tried in The Hague," said one SDP member, indicating the existence of an arrangement with the tribunal allowing for some former generals to face trial in Croatia.

During her visit to Zagreb, tribunal chief prosecutor Carla del Ponte is thought to have agreed to this in January, as a way of defusing possible nationalist anger in the event of the government being forced to extradite high profile Croatian military "heroes".

The largest opposition party, the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, kept a low profile at the Zagreb rally. Leaders did not make speeches as they had done in Split. Nevertheless, the HDZ is believed to be the main motivating force behind the demonstrations.

Croatian President Stipe Mesic said the HDZ was using the Norac issue as an excuse to demand early elections and to undermine the state.

"All criminals must face the courts; their houses, companies and personal belongings are all products of their criminal acts," Mesic said, referring to former HDZ leaders, many of whom are under investigation for corruption and criminality.

HDZ leaders are aware that a refusal to cooperate with the Hague war crimes tribunal or to prosecute suspected war criminals at home would plunge Croatia back into international isolation.

Analysts suspect the HDZ, by causing constant friction, is doing all it can to prevent the government dealing with vital issues such as unemployment, economic recovery and raising poor living standards.

The HDZ has organised road blocks in Dalmatia, for example, Croatia's prime tourist region. The tactic has damaged the government, but also has serious economic consequences for the country as a whole.

Some analysts believe the HDZ hopes to exploit any further social deterioration to bolster demands for early elections or even to rally support for a coup attempt. One theory claims the Norac protests were organised by the Croatian Right to test the waters ahead of a possible putsch attempt in the autumn.

Meanwhile, the whereabouts of Norac remains a mystery. The pro-nationalist daily Slobodna Dalmacija claims he was among the crowd at the Split rally. Another paper suggests he has taken refuge in a monastery in Herzegovina, a predominantly Croat area of Bosnia. The Herzegovinian friars are outspoken supporters of the Croatian nationalist cause.

Norac, meanwhile, has presented four conditions under which he says he would be prepared to appear in court. Again using a go-between, he said he wanted to be granted bail; a guarantee he would not be sent to the Hague; that prosecution witnesses be cross-examined again in court, and that his former military colleague Canic be released.

Canic is also charged with involvement in the Gospic murders and is being held by the Rijeka court of inquiry.

Mesic told Croatian television on February 15 that the fugitive general had asked through an intermediary to meet the president as his commander-in-chief. Mesic said he had agreed to a meeting on Wednesday, but that Norac had failed to turn up. According to sources close to former general, he had intended to ask Mesic to guarantee these conditions.

The president remained optimistic the ex-general would soon turn himself in. "I expected him yesterday and I expect him today," Mesic said. "I think everything has been more or less settled."

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**Location:** Croatia  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

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