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Abstract: *The Croatian “diaspora” is an invention of the 1990’s. Over the course of the 20th-century, Croats living abroad were traditionally divided into three socio-political categories: “old emigrants,” “political émigrés” and “guest workers.” At the turn of the 1990’s, rising ethnic tensions in Yugoslavia pushed these groups towards a short-lived unity when diasporic organizations provided a vast humanitarian, military and lobbying support for the newly founded state of Croatia. At the end of the war, Franjo Tudjman’s Croatian Democratic Union used the supposed moral debt of the country to the “diaspora,” to enact discriminatory citizenship laws and enforce a de facto de-territorialized annexation of part of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Drawing on several years of research on diaspora politics in the former Yugoslavia, this paper highlights several simple yet often overlooked insights about the role of diasporas in international relations and conflicts. Firstly, it argues that “diasporas” are not agents of international politics in and of themselves. The agents are the organizations and institutions representing, or claiming to represent, a diaspora. The second argument is that “diasporas” should not be considered as unitary actors. Even if at times diasporic institutions might build coalitions, or unanimously support a cause for a certain period of time, in different circumstances these organizations can be significantly divided, disrupting notions of diasporic homogeneity. Finally, this paper shows that the all-encompassing label of “diaspora” can be appropriated by a government and used to push policies that have little to do with the “diaspora” itself but instead justify national policies that would otherwise be considered illegitimate.*

INTRODUCTION

The events in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s brought nationalism and ethnic conflict back onto the agenda of political science. It also confirmed the emergence of a phenomenon that was only eventually acknowledged by political scientists: the political role of non-state actors in international affairs, particularly of diasporas. Although almost fifteen years have passed since the end of the conflict in southeastern Europe, diaspora mobilization and various forms of “long distance” political processes have emerged and been recognized by political scientists as significant dynamics in other conflicts such as in Kosovo, Sri Lanka, and Iraq. However, a

number of simple insights from the Croatian diaspora politics of the 1990's are still overlooked in policy discussions. These can be summarized in three points:

- “Diasporas” are never agents of international politics in and of themselves. It is organizations and institutions representing, or claiming to represent a diaspora that are the agents.
- Diasporic institutions can be crucial in conflicts but are never unitary actors. In order to determine the role of expatriate communities in conflicts, one should unpack these internally variegated organizations and explore the politics under the all-encompassing label of diaspora.
- The label of diaspora, when appropriated by a government can be used to advance policies that have little to do with the dispersed populations themselves, but which justify transnational policies that would otherwise be considered illegitimate.

What underpins these three points is the argument that the language of diaspora, far from representing an immediate, objective reality, is a political discourse. Groups that were previously defined as émigrés, minorities, migrants, guest workers are now increasingly re-branded and identified as diaspora. It is in this sense that I talk about the “invention” of the diaspora as a social and political phenomenon. In this paper, I will first briefly outline the key political dynamics of the relationship between the invention of the Croatian diaspora and the Balkans conflict and elaborate on transnational practices of power. Finally, in the conclusion, I will put forward three policy considerations.

FORGING A CROATIAN “DIASPORA”

One of the first books to be published in English about the newly formed state of Croatia was Marcus Tanner's, *Croatia: A nation forged in war* (1997). The originality of the subtitle is debatable; after all, which nation has not, at least in part, been forged in war? Yet, Tanner's choice of subtitle highlighted a relatively banal element of nation-making: wars forge nations, and Croatia is no exception.

A number of studies have shown that the notion of diaspora, just like any other broad category such as nation or class, is not an objective group of people but always the result of a social or political mobilization, with foundation myths, rituals and representative organizations. The argument that the Croatian diaspora, just like the Croatian nation, was “forged in war” should therefore be read as a relatively banal one. However, apart for a few notable exceptions¹, this claim is still largely ignored by students of diaspora politics, particularly by those who study the role of diasporas in conflicts. Far from being a natural category, the “Croatian diaspora” – as it came to be described in the 1990's – is the outcome of a deliberate symbolic and material effort by political actors to unite several sociologically and politically divided groups into a single entity.

¹ On this theoretical approach to diasporas, see Brubaker, R. (2005). "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora" *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28(1): 1-19 and Sökefeld, M. (2006). "Mobilizing in transnational space: a social movement approach to the formation of diaspora" *Global Networks*, 6(3): 265–284.

In the mid-1980s, Yugoslavia's regime started to give the first signs of weakness. When Croatian nationalists organized their first visits among Croatian communities abroad, they found a divided transnational social and political landscape. Three distinct groups composed the transnational social and political landscape. These three categories of people corresponded in part to different waves of emigration, but were mostly constituted by differentiated relationships with the homeland government. With the turn of events of the 1990's, these categories disappeared in discourse, and converged into the newly invented label of diaspora.

STATE CATEGORIES OF CROATS ABROAD BEFORE THE INVENTION OF THE DIASPORA

The first category was the "old emigration" (*staro iseljništvo*), which is composed of migrants who left between 1880 and 1914, when the state now known as Croatia was part of Austria-Hungary. These emigrants were registered as Dalmatians, Slavonians, Istrians or even Austro-Hungarians - only later did they become described as Croats or Yugoslavs. Figures are difficult to establish, but most studies estimate that the number of emigrants was between 600,000 and 1,000,000 (Holjevac, 1968). In the first half of the century, these emigrants mostly worked difficult jobs in North and South America's mines and steel mills and provided a crucial source of remittances. Under communist Yugoslavia from 1946 on, this wave was considered to be potentially friendly to the regime, and was encouraged to maintain a folkloric identity with the "old country." Traditional organizations such as the Croatian Fraternal Union of America and Canada (CFU) still represent the descendents of this wave - the hyphenated Croats of the second, third or fourth generations that often describe themselves as Croatian-Americans or Croatian-Canadians (Čizmić, 1994).

While this "old migration" was composed of a largely religious, rural and working-class population with center-left political affinities, the majority of the second group of migrants was composed of skilled middle to upper-class Croats who fled communist Yugoslavia in the years after the end of World War II. This second group was much smaller than the first wave, numbering between 50,000 and 100,000 people. They were doctors, engineers, lawyers, professors. Many had sympathies toward the Nazi-supported Ustasha regime of Ante Pavelic, which instituted the short-lived Independent State of Croatia (NDH) between 1941 and 1945. The Yugoslav authorities categorized this group as the "Yugoslav enemy emigration" (*jugoslavenska neprijateljska emigracija*); while its members defined themselves as "political émigrés". This second group of emigrants established a myriad of political organizations, all firmly on the right or extreme right of the political spectrum, from romantic nationalists to those nostalgic for the era of the NDH. The post-WWII emigrants were joined in 1971 by the repressed students of the Croatian Spring – an event similar to Prague's spring of 1968. Despite the diversity of opinions and groups, the Yugoslav government considered anyone who left the country and agreed or collaborated with organizations as anti-Yugoslav. From the late 1970s until the early 1980s, the Croatian National Council, an umbrella organization based in all five continents, represented most of these organizations (Meštrović, 2003).

Finally, the last group of Croats abroad were workers temporarily employed abroad (*radnici na privremenom vremenu u inozemstvu*), more commonly known as guest workers (*gastarbajeteri*). With the opening of the Yugoslav borders in the 1960s, the government at first tolerated, and then actively organized, the “export” of part of the work force abroad, mostly to Europe (Germany, France, Sweden, etc). At its peak, the flow of workers abroad reached over a million Yugoslav citizens, or about 5% of the population of Yugoslavia, the majority of which were Croats. This last category was distinct from the old emigration in that they were expected to return home after a temporary stay abroad. The Yugoslav authorities considered this group as the “Seventh Republic,” a category of the population to be governed as if it lived inside the state’s territory. Workers temporarily employed abroad were tied to the state by social, pension and health care agreements; education for their children and social activities were maintained by dedicated consular services (Zimmerman, 1987). Politically, guest workers rarely created their own organizations, apart from social clubs and circles. Any political activity meant in fact a potential repression from the secret police, and the risk of losing their job and status.

These three governmental categories – whether they were accepted or not by the concerned groups – structured the political and social landscape of Croats abroad from the World War II up until the late 1980’s. Yet the social reality was much more complex than this simple classification. While most of them identified as Croats (and not Yugoslavs), these groups were fragmented along geographic, political and social lines. Geographically, the “old emigration” was mostly located in the Americas (USA, Argentina, and Chile) or in Australia, whereas the political emigration was evenly distributed across the globe and guest workers were almost all in Europe. Politically, the “old emigration” leaned more towards the center-left (mostly voting for Democrats in the U.S., for example), the “political emigrants” were overwhelmingly conservative and nationalist, and the guest workers were divided between pro-Yugoslavs and those who joined the political emigration’s ideological opposition to the Yugoslav government. Socially, the “old migration” and the guest workers were predominantly working-class, and the political emigrants were generally of higher social class and education. These differences inevitably created frictions between the groups. While other lines of division were also present (such as exact origin in Yugoslavia), their geographic, social and political positioning consistently structured the divisions between Croats abroad - most of the times peacefully, but sometimes, as in the 1970s and the 1980s, violently.

When Franjo Tudjman, future leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and president of Croatia from the independence until 1999, visited Croats in Europe, the U.S. and Canada from 1987 on, his main goal was to create a united and cohesive “community” which could be mobilized in support of Croatian independence. Although Tudjman sought financial and political support, his main intention was to “awaken a national conscience.” He therefore forged the term “Expatriate Croatia” (*Iseljena Hrvatska*) to describe a new imaginary nation that constituted the second half of “Homeland Croatia” (*Domovinska Hrvatska*). In this terminology, expatriate and homeland Croatia united to represent the complete Croatian nation.²

The fear of Milosevic’s nationalist policies and the prospect of an autonomous or independent Croatia, along with three years of rallies, charity dinners, newspaper articles and demonstrations gave birth to Tudjman’s project of a united community of Croats abroad.

² Read the excellent biography of Franjo Tudjman by Hudelist (2004).

Probably under the influence of American and Canadian-Croats, Tudjman's term, "Expatriate Croatia" became the "Croatian diaspora" and became widely used. It encompassed members of the old emigration, political émigrés and former guest workers. In 1990 in particular, the "diaspora" organizations raised large sums of money for the party, and HDZ offices were established in cities from Toronto to Munich to Canberra.

DIASPORIC ORGANIZATIONS AS CENTRAL ACTORS DURING THE WAR

The newly created "diaspora" further materialized in the eyes of social actors when ethnic tensions became a full-fledged civil war. The "diaspora", still an abstract term for many, acquired its physical appearance on several occasions, such as the demonstrations on July 26, 1991 in Washington DC when more than 35,000 Croats gathered to support independence. It also became very "real" to Croats abroad when they gathered, united, in social and cultural events in support for the Homeland. All-Croat organizations, representing the three previously separated groups, became crucial actors in at least three spheres.

First, the associations organized political lobbying to support independence. With the help of well-established public relations firms like Rudder & Finn, the Croatian American Association (CAA) organized meetings with Congressmen in events such as 'Croatian Days on the Hill'. Examples of lobbying initiatives were the Nickels Amendment, which prohibited bilateral aid to Yugoslavia, the 'Direct Aid to Democracies Act' or the 'Bob Dole Bill' that provided direct assistance to USSR Republics as well as Yugoslav Republics. During the 1992 presidential elections, most of the Croatian-American associations actively supported Bill Clinton's presidential ticket, hoping for a change in foreign policy.

Diasporic organizations coordinated and delivered much of the humanitarian aid coming from Croats abroad, without much influence from the government. The destruction of the town of Vukovar in Eastern Croatia by Serbian troops in October 1991, as well as the shelling of Dubrovnik acted as electroshocks that triggered massive humanitarian support abroad, as well as a sense of unity. Around 300 different organizations were created in the U.S. alone. In Canada, Australia, Germany, Austria, the growth of support was similar. The biggest effort, in the United States, was made by the Croatian Fraternal Union, which raised more than an estimated \$24 million worth of aid, and shipped in more than 141 containers between 1991 and 1999. This was a vast infusion of money and goods - as a comparison, this represented more than ten percent of the EU foreign aid to Croatia through the ECHO program in the same period (Ragazzi 2003).

Diasporic associations also provided crucial military support for the war directly through arms smuggling and indirectly through financial support. Although it is difficult to determine the full extent, it is clear that it was a significant factor in the first years of the war. The funds raised were transferred through two public bank accounts opened by the Republic of Croatia - one in Austria, another one in Switzerland - under the name of the Croatian National Fund. It is estimated that \$7 to 10 million (USD) were gathered solely from Chicago and \$25-30 million was raised in the U.S. as a whole. Therefore, approximately 20 to 25 per cent of the war effort until 1993 was directly dependent on diaspora funds (Ibid).

Yet, when it became clear that HDZ's plan was not only the independence of Croatia but also the carving out of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and when news and images of concentration camps arrived in the West in 1993, fractures emerged and the unity of the diaspora disappeared. In the U.S., for example, the CAA which was linked to the right-wing political emigration, continued to support Tudjman's government. Conversely, the CFU and the National Federation of Croatian Americans (NFCA) which represented about 110,000 Croatian Americans of the "old emigration" openly condemned Croatia's actions in the name of democratic principles. Similar divisions occurred in most countries where Croatian communities were present. It therefore cannot be concluded that the "diaspora" had one political attitude or another, as it is often argued, because each organization took political stances at varied times.

THE LANGUAGE OF "DIASPORA": JUSTIFYING TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES OF POWER

At the end of the war in 1995, it became a widely accepted discourse that the newly recognized Republic of Croatia had an immense debt to its "diaspora" that it had to pay back. Several measures were passed in this political context:

1. **A new citizenship law.** In 1991 a new law granted Croatian citizenship to all Croats and descendents of Croats, no matter where they lived.³ Through the articles 11 and 16 of the law, anyone who could prove Croatian descent was given citizenship and a passport. Although there are no official statistics, some estimates found that up to 1.15 million people (in a population of approximately 4.4 million citizens) acquired Croatian citizenship in this way.
2. **Voting Rights.** Croatian citizens abroad were given the right to vote (including the new citizens mentioned above), and a dedicated electoral constituency (unit 11). Initially, approximately 10% of the seats in the Sabor (chamber of deputies) were reserved for this constituency. After heated debates between the HDZ and the opposition parties, the fixed percentage was changed to a variable percentage calculated on the basis of voter turnout.
3. **A special ministry in the government.** First in 1991 with the short-lived Ministry for Emigration (*Ministarstvo za iseljništvo*) then in 1997 with the Ministry for Return and Immigration (*Ministarstvo povratka i useljništva*, until 1999), Croats abroad were given special bureaucratic and symbolic status.

Considering the lengthy relationship between Yugoslavia (and later Croatia), and its diaspora, these changes would seem to mark a progressive evolution, and a well-earned political status for the diaspora. Yet, it proved problematic for a certain number of reasons. In contrast with Yugoslavia and its relationship with the older emigrants, the actual social, political and economic relationship of the Croatian government with Croats abroad became almost non-existent.

³ Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia, 5/3/1991

Indeed, the “old emigration” continued a nostalgic folkloric relationship with the “old country” but their support for independence did not lead to a massive return or important investment relationship with Croatia. The “political emigration” had no further reason to exist, since Croatia was now officially a democracy. Guest workers had either returned, or had assimilated into their countries of destination, and the bulk of previous Yugoslav long-distance policies had been revoked. As such, the guest workers of the 1980’s also maintained only a symbolic link with the homeland.

If the Croatian government relationship with the “diaspora” had become so tenuous, then what justified these policies that purported to pay back and empower the diaspora? Three answers can be put forward: -

1. First, while the newly designed citizenship laws allowed for the inclusion of a large number of Croats abroad, they also excluded non-Croats residing in the Croatian territory from citizenship. As many international organizations (UNHCR⁴, OSCE⁵), NGO’s (HRW⁶), and political analysts claimed, the 1991 law functioned as a strategic way to ethnically re-balance the citizenry of the Republic of Croatia.
2. Second the government’s definition of the “diaspora” is quite far from the common understanding of what a “diaspora” is. When looking at the geographic dispersal of voters in the elections, one gets a clearer idea of where the Croatian “diaspora” is located. For the elections of 1995, 1997 and 1999, out of the 350,000 to 400,000 voters in the diaspora constituency, 80% to 90% had their registered residence in neighboring Bosnia-Herzegovina. It therefore appears that the bulk of the Croats abroad who were impacted by the ministries and the citizenship laws are not the Croats living in the U.S., Canada, Argentina or Australia, but the Bosnian citizens with double-nationality living in Mostar, Livno or Sarajevo. In all the national elections so far, the HDZ candidate always received an overwhelming majority in this particular constituency. Since the HDZ could secure almost without failure up to 10% of seats in parliament through the diasporic constituency, this electoral support was crucial for the HDZ in almost all elections.
3. This is however linked to a third phenomenon, which I have- defined elsewhere as the “deterritorialized annexation” of Herzegovina by Croatia (Ragazzi, 2009). One of the objectives in the conflict between Croatia and Serbia after 1993 was the split of Bosnia-Herzegovina in two, and the further annexation of these two parts to their kin-states, as established in the secret Karadjordjevo agreement of 1991. But the 1994 Washington agreement put an end to this, and the Dayton peace agreement of 1995 definitively sealed the future of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent state. The HDZ-led government of Croatia, however, did not let go of “its” Croatian part. For many years, the Croatian component of the armed forces of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as the administration in the communes and cantons with a Croatian majority,

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

⁵ Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe.

⁶ Human Rights Watch.

including services such as schooling, pension and health care system, have been directly financed by the budget of the Republic of Croatia (Kasapović, 2001). The “diaspora” laws and discourse were therefore an efficient way of enacting a de facto annexation of parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

CONCLUSION

This brief account and analysis can direct us to reconsider claims about diasporas and point us towards policy considerations for the future.

- **“Diasporas” are not agents in international politics, but organizations and institutions representing a diaspora, or claiming to do so, are.** When including a “diaspora” in policy considerations, it is important to map the organizations that claim to represent it, and understand how they relate to different waves of migration, sending-government interests and or self-categorizations. This step is necessary in order to avoid taking for granted the discourse of organizations claiming to represent a homogenous community linked to a homeland.
- **Therefore, diasporic institutions can be crucial in conflicts, but are never a unitary actor.** In the context of humanitarian aid, development projects, and conflict situations, the “diaspora” is not a singular unit of analysis. One has to clearly establish the role and the politics of different organizations. In the Croatian case, all the diasporic organizations shared a platform until Croatian independence and then disagreed on the post-1993 Croatian politics in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- **Finally, when the label of “diaspora” is appropriated by governments it can be used as a guise to push forward several policies that have little to do with the diaspora itself; yet serve to justify transnational policies that would otherwise be considered as illegitimate.** As the 2008 intervention of Russia in Georgia showed, government-led attention to “nationals” abroad and government-led diaspora policies often share affinities with irredentist policies. Citizenship laws prove particularly useful to justify and enact these policies. In the Croatian case, as it has been shown, the “diaspora” policies were enacted mostly to make up for the missed annexation of a part of Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as for the tentative elimination of the Serbian minority from the territory. As the repeated protests of international organizations show, these practices should be monitored with care.

The Croatian example therefore provides an empirical description of the ways in which transnational identity formations are increasingly being “rebranded” or are “rebranding” themselves as “diasporas.” Thus, the multiplication of diasporas in international politics must be understood less as the material, physical emergence of these formations (most of them have a long history of dispersion) but rather as symptomatic of the changes in discourses transnational social and political actors. As we move from monolithic nation-states to multicultural societies, the language of “diaspora” invokes transnational ties, disrupts discrete cultural identities, and empowers or subordinates groups vis-à-vis the states in which they live, as well as the states

from which they originate (even if only symbolically). Scholars and practitioners should avoid the pitfall of taking those identity claims for granted, and carefully study the political processes that occur below the surface of these linguistic claims. What is at stake, in fact, is the progressive abandonment of the territorial referent as the basis for legitimate identity politics, both from state and non-state actors.

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