
Branko
SALAJ

Former Ambassador to France
and former Minister of Information, Croatia

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS
ABOUT RELATIONS
BETWEEN HOMELAND
AND DIASPORA

Croatian diaspora was vigorously engaged in the struggle for independence and defence of their homeland. Their contribution in building a young state's institutions was considerably smaller in post-war circumstances because domestic political, economic and cultural settings quickly earned recognition. On the contrary, in the homeland political squaring of accounts, the very role of diaspora in the creation of Croatian state was occasionally brought into question.

Starting points

The most significant political contribution of diaspora to national liberation and creation of state independence was its faith in the attainment of independence during the long, post-war decades. In the final, crucial period, at the very beginning of the nineties, emigration indirectly helped in financing and strengthening political options, which aimed at prompter recognition of Croatian statehood in the homeland. The support of displaced Croatia surely played an important role in positioning Dr. Franjo Tuđman as an unquestionable representative of that option, which the Croatian people at the first democratic elections supported almost by popular demand.

After HDZ won, during the more noticeable and unmistakable aggression towards the new Croatian government on the one hand, and the more determined implementation of the state independence programme on the other, diaspora ardently continued to help bring about changes in the homeland. As the aggression towards Croatia grew, diaspora became more resolutely engaged in its defence, leaving aside their earlier differences of opinion.

Many volunteers from emigrant Croatia participated in the armed defence of the country and subsequently played an extremely important role in the war. Along with

strong national belief, some of them brought crucial military experience from abroad. Certain people from diaspora helped in avoiding an embargo on the import of weapons, which threatened to leave Croatians to fight with their bare-hands against the fourth military force in Europe. Tens of thousands actively worked on collecting humanitarian aid in their immigrant countries, which was of great financial and spiritual importance to the homeland.

Throughout the whole world, although not so prominent, but nevertheless an extremely important part of diaspora's activity, information networks and public appearances were spontaneously organized. In this way, the truth about the conflict in the homeland and about Great-Serbian aggression penetrated western media and put pressure on official structures. Likewise, emigrant children-volunteers played a very important role in informing foreign press representatives with whom they could communicate in a persuasive way, since they were familiar with their ways of thinking (Foreign Press Bureau). I have mentioned this because the defence process from aggression and Croatian independence was an example of a new type of specific war in which, like rarely ever before, military, diplomatic and media components were intertwined. The West would never have recognized Croatia as an independent state if the black myths that Belgrade official propaganda used for decades to convince foreign media that Croats are "some kind of genocidal and fascist people" had not been dispelled.

During the war, and after it, a number of people from diaspora held some of the highest positions in the country, as ministers in important ministries and in high positions in defence, diplomacy, administration and the economy. The influence of diaspora was initially large, especially in the sector of defence; a long-standing minister and a number of young generals came from diaspora. A special ministry for emigrant Croatia was founded and diaspora was well represented in the Croatian Parliament.¹

Nevertheless, the relative influence of diaspora decreased inasmuch as political power and state structures of the new Croatian government state stabilized, thus taking over many inherited value principles and thoroughly specific structures of earlier society.

Personal experience

I can testify quite competently about diaspora's share in the creation of the Croatian state, because I participated very intensely in this task, first as a member of the Constituent

Committee and then as the President's counsellor for modernization of the supreme state administration. I also organized the EU observers' arrival and was the Minister of Public Relations in the Government of Democratic Unity. I served as an ambassador in Paris and The Hague and was appointed manager of HINA. During the entire war, I was present at daily meetings of the First cabinet and gave daily reports to the President of the Republic, I also attended sessions of the highest state institutions. In the second half of the nineties, as manager of HINA, I had the opportunity to be present at the meetings of the highest state co-ordinations - in short, I saw, as in the British proverb, elephants dancing, and occasionally took part in this dancing. After the matter-of-principle conflict with the state leadership at the beginning of the year 1999, I had the opportunity to see how the opposition, that is to say, the party of today's government worked.

Considering some of the disparaging emphasis in later discussions on the role of diaspora in state-making, it is not inappropriate to mention that I did not come unprepared and inexperienced after forty years of exile to take on Croatian political functions. Back in 1959, I was the president of social science students in Stockholm, and later the manager of a Swedish Union of Employers, as well as an organization consultant at a high business level and a manager of a big auditing firm. I obtained a master's degree at one of the best American universities, published a few books about economy problems in Sweden, and I speak half a dozen languages. Above all, I was very active in organizing Croatian immigrants in Sweden and founded the first Society of Croatian Friends, followed by the Croatian cultural and sport societies under a very successful Croatian union, which was recognized at the highest state level.

There were more people with similar backgrounds, and they should be mentioned to understand that while helping their homeland, diaspora had some knowledge and experience that would have been impossible to gain in their country of origin. This was crucial for the recognition of the Croatian state, particularly during the first period. A good example is public relations, which is still one of the most deplorable parts of Croatian public life - slow, red-tape, bureaucratic and closed - directed towards "painting" public opinion, it irresistibly reminds us of the way socialist mastodons worked. People, who spent their lives under earlier one-party conditions, do not seem to react to this anachronism. Moreover, it certainly cannot pass in light of the conditions and way western media works.

In such an inherited environment, and at the beginning of the nineties it was immeasurably pronounced (it was emulated with great ardour against the opposing side, especially at YNA), the Croatian Ministry of Public Relations largely applied the principle of openness. The main rule was never to knowingly lie to journalists and to admit mistakes without being evasive. Censorship, which would not have been efficient in the new technological circumstances anyhow, was avoided. Journalists were allowed to approach the battlefield wherever the commands of military security permitted this. It is possible to prove that this very approach has eventually changed the admittance of Croatia to international media and gave way to an official understanding of new facts in our territory.

However, as mentioned before, such and similar positive experiences of applying those values which emigrants brought with them were not appealing enough to be continually applied in building of the state at a wider level. Why?

Conflicting relations between diaspora and homeland

Homeland and diaspora are very asymmetrical notions, not only in terms of size. Mutual homeland life strengthens a sense of identity in various ways with all its positive and negative aspects that are related to a certain space and time. With every new year of life in another environment and with every new generation, emigrants grow apart from their homeland numerically and in terms of the values that they hold. Besides, various parts of diaspora are exposed to different cultural and economic influences, depending on the country and the cultural circle in which they live. This makes diaspora additionally structureless and less assertive compared to the homeland sphere.

Therefore, those two categories often create unrealistic mental images about one another, which in addition makes the dialogue more difficult. Thus, for instance, homeland public opinion often has exaggerated ideas about migrants' standards of living and the supposed easiness it is achieved with. It misinterprets the social signs and behaviour, which migrants have adopted in their new countries, and sometimes it sees emigrants as competition in a professional or economic sense. Emigrants' remittances have already been an essential key element in the national economy for a long time, but collective consciousness barely recognizes this, and economic policy does not take them into account.

Many parts of diaspora have developed an idealized image of the homeland in which objective inadequacies that were the causes of emigration fade away in time and proportionally in terms of distance from the native land. However, when they return either for shorter or longer periods to the homeland, emigrants often find ways of life, institutional frameworks and values strange. They lack experience in recognizing social symbols specific for homeland circumstances; they lack equality and legal rights; they do not understand the logic and mechanisms according to which the government, even a democratic one, rules instead of applying laws to serve the people.²

At the crucial, almost revolutionary moment, when a constellation of forces in international circles made space for the realization of the Croatian nation-building ideas, the mentioned differences between homeland and diaspora were relegated to a position of secondary importance. Besides, the fact that nation-building ideas could have been publicly stated only in emigration, while in Yugoslav communist usage, at the best, it was suppressed, disguised and masked gave diaspora their “five minutes”. During spasms of surviving the open aggression, the role of diaspora as a bridge to the western world was particularly emphasized.

Yet, after war conflicts ended and while everything was returning to normal, all those banked up antagonisms, which from the beginning created a certain gap between homeland and diaspora cropped up again. Indeed, in a sense, they became even more stressed now because in the sovereign state, the responsibility could not be thrown on someone outside of the national corpus.

The part of Croatian emigrants, which formed under the conditions of democratic and post-industrialist society, is rather unprepared to be included in homeland milieu, for some of the following reasons:

- Politics, public administration, economy and even judiciary are tightly connected.
- Social networks and the possibility of buying power, not by clearly defined, inalienable citizen rights and duties, determine citizen status. Almost paradigmatic mistrust in citizens’ integrity and honour is expressed by hyper-production of laws and regulations with contradictory content and questionable range.
- Tradition is a dominant form of communication.
- There is no systematic processing of experience as a form of continued learning.

Considering these and the other cultural differences between the two models of living and social organization

we should ask ourselves to which degree is emigrant experience useful at all and usable in homeland society if it wants to continue its trodden path. From this point of view, it is only logical that the role of diaspora in the post-war period is considerably marginalized, for in such a society emigrant experience does not carry any special value.

Campaign against diaspora taking an active part in the homeland

However, it is interesting, that in homeland discussions about emigration a diametrically opposed logic systematically appears, that is to say, “wild persons came and chased away the meek”. In the process, a couple of themes known from the Communist period are recycled, onto which a new prop-phrases are superimposed. By accepting the promotional stereotypes of the ex-Yugoslav regime about the alleged Ustasha character of emigrants, some media often add, for instance, that diaspora are poorly qualified, that there is a strong presence of Herzegovians (to whom labels of “tribal” connections and mafia-style are attached), a compound of clergy and politics according to “clergy-fascist” line of the old propaganda (to which Herzegovinian monks have been subjected, especially those from the monastery in Canadian Norwal) etc.

At the same time, emigrants have been accused of financial embezzlements and suspected of taking large sums of money and other means collected during the war for the homeland. In other words, some individuals made themselves rich by making use of their contribution to war efforts and the like.

Yet diaspora, proud of their contribution, do not seem to feel the need to contradict even some of the apparent lies and contrived statements. By limiting their history mostly to the importance of their own help and their roles in the crucial days of the struggle for independence, they allow critics to impose upon them subjects and agenda of discussions. Thus, the media often use information and statements about great financial help to the homeland as a confirmation of hidden notions about the role of emigrants as some mysterious Big Brother.

Years ago, I had the opportunity to warn of the political stratification of Croatian emigrants up until Croatian Spring in 1970, but I feel the need to emphasize it again.³ Namely, I am sure that the political situation in exile was as complicated then and subsequently during the next twenty years, up to the creation of the Croatian state. Only ignorant people or people with foul intentions could

attribute Ustashism to all emigrants, that is to say, describe emigrants as some monolithic bloc.

As for other statements, this is neither time nor place to analyze which of the mentioned above has some real foundations, and what is an arbitrary statement. It is enough to recall that it would be a true miracle if there were no large embezzlements and misuse of grave social conditions for one's own personal interests and the like at a time when the political system was changing, a new state was being created and the defensive war was led. It would be a real miracle if such phenomena were not also present among people who returned to the homeland from diaspora, exactly as there was among "the locals".

However, it is interesting, that the mentioned asymmetry between homeland and diaspora has also been expressed in the way media deals with these themes. Critical reflections and even lame hypothetical talk connected to diaspora are often much more interesting to the media than some other negative phenomena, which could have real weight in the homeland society. Reports on the "bravados" of certain rich people deservedly gained large publicity, but not in Croatian public circles. For example, according to some data, Croatian banks, during the biggest economic crisis (1992-1993) approved of at least 400 million DM for so-called managerial credits. This facilitated the transition of numerous firms into the hands of many former socialist managers who, with some exceptions, did not really prove themselves as competent, but were in such positions because of political party affiliations. We can only guess the extent of the damage to the economy, caused by recycling those almost completely non-transparent economic relations completely unprepared for market competition.

So, the real question is why embezzlements were not energetically sanctioned in the homeland? Excuses in some media, that the governing party was hiding them, are only partially correct because HDZ started investigations during their rule.

Closer to the truth is the statement that the governments, of HDZ and today's, have remained largely a prisoner of dominant social values. Using political power for the advancement of personal or particular interests is still considered, (although incomprehensible for many emigrants), with a dose of tolerance, and the system carefully disassociates itself from any change that could jeopardize the rules of the game, which facilitates such privatization of public business. Therefore, globally speaking, emigrants' experience would be useful, even precious, only in

a homeland reform that aims at a deep reexamination of institutions and values of the whole society. To begin with this is an unrewarding task and a difficult one too.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ This parliamentary representation was, to be fair, politically speaking and considering the voting system, more an attempt to include the representatives of Croats in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, rather than opening up towards diaspora, scattered all around the world.
- ² Each time I heard the complaints of President Tuđman that it was much easier to win the state than to put it in order, and I heard it at least a dozen times, I recalled those emigrants who believed that by simply creating a state “everything would fall into place”...
- ³ Branko Salaj, Spring and diaspora, *Croatian Review*, a renewed course II/1, March 2002, pp. 6-22.