

---

Ivan  
ČIZMIĆ

Institute of Social Sciences "Ivo Pilar", Croatia

CROATIAN DIASPORA'S  
REPRESENTATION IN  
PARLIAMENT:  
AFFIRMATIVE OR  
NEGATIVE?



The Croatian diaspora, along with the Israeli one, ranks among the most homogeneous ones in the world, which is a good reason for productive co-operation between Croatia—the homeland and its emigration. Throughout their history, so many emigrated Croats have been actively involved in the struggle for an independent Croatian state, especially after the year 1990. Thereby the spiritual unity of Croatia and the Croatian people has been confirmed.

The Croatian diaspora seeks to have continued co-operation and live with the problems of Croatia. Furthermore, a sizeable share of Croats would like to return to their homeland from abroad and get inserted into the country's economic activities by encouraging small and medium-sized businesses, job creation, the transfer of new technologies, etc. A great share of fairly recent emigrants are still the owners of land property in Croatia, many of them have parents who still live in Croatia and in many instances their children, as well. The case in point is that people are directly interested in what goes on in Croatia. They are not third or fourth generation members, but rather, holders of regular Croatian citizenship.

Croatian emigration's remittances have always figured prominently among national budget items during past regimes.

With regards to the national budget of the Republic of Croatia money received in remittances from its emigrants is considerable, even higher than the income from tourism. According to some estimates, since the early 1990s emigrants have donated about 700 million DM so that an independent Croatia could be established. Money transfers sent to their families on a daily basis are not included in this figure. Along with tourism and the economy, earnings from emigrants constitute the third pillar of the national budget. Croatian emigrant youth get conscripted after they return to Croatia to serve in one of the armed forces.

It is a different matter with respect to how many and who will represent the Croatian Diaspora in the Croatian Parliament – Sabor. The answer depends on the generation-related “configuration” of the emigration. First- and second-generation Croats are definitely more concerned about the Old Homeland than the other generations: the former are directly interested in maintaining a many-sided linkage with Croatia. Nevertheless, emigrants have their particular needs and problems, the same as the national minorities who live in Croatia. Moreover, the countries of emigration are advised by the international community and other related institutions to allow their emigrants to become involved in the political life of the Homeland.

As part of modern European democratic processes, it is clearly indicated that emigration should be inserted more actively into the respective source countries’ normal day-to-day developments. Hence it is stated in one of the conclusions of Resolution 1035 (1994) of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, *inter alia*, that the States should consider integrating emigration-related issues into their state and international policies. The Council of Europe Memorandum dated 31<sup>st</sup> August 1998 on matters of migration, refugees and demography states the following: “It is in the interest of a State that its emigrants can practice their nationality in active terms as voters, thus providing them with possibilities as would not make them just sheer objects of nostalgia.”

The Committee on Migration, Refugees and Demography of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe issued a Memorandum on links between the Europeans living in foreign countries of their origin, distinguishing three groups of States:

- so-called mother countries (native lands) that have established a number of legal structures for the protection of their emigrants’ interests (mostly Mediterranean countries);
- countries with long traditions of emigration that have not provided for their emigrants (mostly Protestant countries);
- new democracies, Croatia is among such States, which have viewed their emigration, respectively, as the embodiment of freedom and democracy-related values.

According to the Memorandum, the right to vote may be considered as one of the main attributes of citizenship and its application as one of the fundamentals of democracy. The Memorandum also refers to the “Croatian case” as one example of the specific representation of the source countries’ emigration in their parliaments, advising

all Council of Europe States to follow the road that Croatia has taken.

The issue of emigrants' right to vote for their source countries' representative bodies has been discussed and settled in some other countries of emigration, as well. In Portugal, for instance, 1.7% of all votes are from Portuguese voters who live in foreign countries. They can vote for their parliament but not for the President of the Republic. Portugal has precise data on the number of citizens from abroad who are entitled to vote and a single electoral register for all voters at home and in foreign countries. Portugal also has a pure electoral system of proportional representation with 18 continental lists and two for abroad; from each of the lists a certain number of representatives are chosen in proportion to the number of voters in the electoral unit concerned. 2.1% of such voters vote for the parliament of Algeria, 1.3% for the one in Angola, and 5.3% for the upper chamber of the parliament of Mauritania. In Switzerland, the right to vote for representative bodies has been in existence since 1996. In Hungary, the World Alliance of Hungarians believes that a special list is a good solution and has proposed this to their parliament. Polish nationals abroad who have not acquired another country's citizenship are listed in just one electoral unit – the Warsaw centre – where they can exercise their right to vote both passively and actively in a country without dual citizenship.

Even though the international organisations mentioned above advocate a diaspora participation in the life of its source country, some of their representatives have expressed their reservations vis-à-vis the Croatian experience. For instance, amid the twenty-one conditions that were accepted and signed by President Franjo Tuđman and Academician Vlatko Pavletić on the eve of Croatia's admittance to the Council of Europe, there is one requiring that the Electoral Law be amended and, in particular, that the provision on a special list for the diaspora be annulled.

The estimated number of Croatian citizens non-resident in Croatia entitled to vote, is 398 thousand – that is, about ten per cent of the overall number of Croatian citizens with voting rights. Based on such a proportion, 12 MPs get elected from the diaspora out of 120 seats in the House of Representatives.

The Croats non-resident in their homeland vote only in elections for the President of the State and for the Parliament. With regards to the debate on the issue of Croatian diaspora's representation in Parliament: it has been controversial ever since 1995, when there was a clash of

two principal opinions, involving the Opposition and the ruling party. According to the former, it is unacceptable for the special diaspora list to provide a footing for representatives from the Croatian Democratic Union (CDU).

Indeed, the CDU was the first to recognise the interest of Croatian emigration in the Old Homeland and subsequently offered Croatian diaspora an appropriate political programme. Furthermore, this party established its coordinating associations and branches in emigration: of the former, 23 are active to-date, of the latter, 121. The Croatian World Congress was also created by the CDU, and the party has been active through other cultural, religious and sports organisations. It is not by chance that the twelve MPs from diaspora, who have been in Parliament hitherto, are CDU activists, for the most part.

This issue has to be separated from the interests and competition between parties and dealt with as one of Croatia's current general interests.

The opinion argument that the voting rights of Croatian diaspora should be withheld on the grounds that they do not make money and do not pay taxes in Croatia so they can not make decisions about the fate of the people who live in Croatia does not hold water. There are Croatian citizens who do not pay taxes, i.e., the unemployed, students and soldiers. Moreover, Croatian emigrants actually pay taxes indirectly, e.g., property tax, and their families in Croatia pay tax on consumption. If Croatian diaspora do not obtain their parliamentary representation, no one can represent their interests in Parliament.

In the 1995 elections, diaspora representatives were elected from a special list, mostly by voters from Bosnia and Herzegovina (B-H). According to the related data, 98 thousand electors voted for the list: 79 thousand from B-H and 9 thousand worldwide. This points to the dubiousness of the term "emigrated Croats" since Croats in B-H are an autochthonous population. They are also one of the constituent peoples there, which is another reason why they cannot be compared to emigrated Croats. It is a fact, however, that a diaspora means a people that are scattered in some territory. Not by their own will, but by a decision made by the Antifascist Council of the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (AVNOJ) in 1943. – Croats were left outside of the territory of the Croatian state, so they cannot be denied the right to elect representatives from a special list.

The Social Democratic Party (SDP) feels that Croats in B-H are a particular case, in that they are not diaspora but a constituent people in a sovereign state. It is unprin-

ciplined to insist that they are constitutive while providing, at the same time, a special list to choose from at elections, even though they are citizens of a sovereign state.

The Croatian diaspora and the Croats from B-H - as the other half of the Croatian national body - knew how and sought together with the home country to establish and defend a modern and sovereign Croatia, so there is no reason why they should not be equally entitled to take part in its construction, as well.

The CDU has a grudge against the SDP: in the first place, with the latter allegedly aware of the responsibility for the Croats' displacement in the past fifty years so they know in advance that the electorate of the diaspora do not favour them.

Not that the Opposition are against such a solution in principle but because of the fact that in the past elections 1995, all of the twelve parliamentarians came from CDU. It obviously seems as if narrow partisan interests are at work. Even an objective observer must be critical of the opposition's inability to produce a political programme that could win over at least a part of the Croatian diaspora.

In sovereign Croatia, emigrated Croats have to be represented in Parliament as a guarantee for improving their close links with the homeland. This stems, in the first place, from the fact that the home country - Croatia and its emigration went to great lengths to jointly create an independent Croatian state. However, it is equally important that Croatian emigrants seek to continue to be an integral part of the Croatian national body. Nor should we disregard the fact that - almost as a rule in today's world-source countries have been building bridges with their diasporas, respectively, for economic, culture-related, national and political reasons. In contrast, the activities of the Croatian political parties in the diaspora have neither some good purpose at present nor any future. On the other hand, Croats from abroad are entitled to have their official and representative voice in Croatia. Putting modalities aside, the issue should be dealt with by our politicians.