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Filip Škiljan<sup>1</sup>  
Institute for Migrations and Nationalities, Zagreb

## The Organisation and Political Position of Serbs in Croatia

### Abstract

In this paper the author gives ample information on political and non-political organisation of Serbs in Croatia in the last twenty years based on the literature, archival materials from the Archives of Serbs in the Republic of Croatia and the interviews conducted with representatives of the Serbian national minority from across Croatia. The paper consists of four sections: history of the organisation of Serbs in Croatia and their legal status, political organisations of Serbs in Croatia, non-political organisations of Serbs in Croatia and respondents' stands on the organisations of Serbs in Croatia.

Key words: Serbs, Croatia, political parties, non-governmental organisations, 20th century.

### Introduction

This paper includes four sections. The first section outlines the history of the organisation of Serbs in the territory of Croatia until 1990. The second section covers legal provisions governing the position of Serbs in Croatia from 1990 until present day, the third section treats political and cultural parties and organisations of Serbs in Croatia from 1990 until today, and the fourth section summarizes a survey of the stand of the Serbian population in Croatia on the parties, non-governmental organisations and cultural institutions of Serbs in Croatia.

The paper is written on the basis of literature, archival materials from the Archives of Serbs in the Republic of Croatia, and thirty one

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<sup>1</sup> Research Associate  
filipskiljan@yahoo.co.uk

in-depth interviews with members of the Serbian national minority and Internet sources.

To this date no single paper has depicted, not even sketchily, the activity and diversity of all Serbian parties and organisations in Croatia in the last two decades. There are several publications which treat Croatian national legislation governing the issue of national minorities, and in particular of the Serbian national minority. This paper treats in more detail relationship of the members of the Serbian national minority toward the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (SDSS), Councils of the Serbian National Minority, and the Serbian Cultural Society "Prosvjeta" (Education), as the most important institutions of Serbs in Croatia today.

### History of the Organisation of Serbs in Croatia<sup>2</sup>

Following their migration to the territory of today's Croatia, Serbs started building their political position. Numerous documents which granted them a special position within the borders of The Habsburg Monarchy testify to this. Immediately after their settlement in the territory of today's north-western Croatia, the 1630 Statuta Valachorum granted the Vlachs living between the Sava and the Drava river right to internal autonomy, though there were concurrent endeavours to deprive them of possibility to convene national assemblies, or at least efforts to ensure that every national assembly is under the supervision of military authorities. The largest Serbian migration to the today's territories of Croatia and Vojvodina was during the Great Vienna War (1683 - 1699). On 21 August 1690, worried over the state at the battle field, Austrian Emperor Leopold I issued the Privileges granted to the Serbs, which guaranteed them freedom of religion, right to use the old calendar, right to elect archbishop who, as the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Habsburg lands, was vested with the power to freely administer the church and appoint bishops and the clergy. On 4 March 1695, due to Turkish intrusions, Leopold issued a new edict on privileges. Reaffirming all the earlier Serbian privileges, the emperor reaffirmed as well the decrees issued by Matthias Corvinus and Vladislav II which exempted Serbs of the payment of the tithe to the Catholic clergy, subject to using such tributes exclusively for support to the Orthodox churches, and

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2 General information regarding the history of the organisation of Serbs in Croatia are taken from: Roksandić 1991; *Historija naroda Jugoslavije*, Vol. 2 1959, chapters XXXIII, XXXVI, XXXVII, XLII; Veselinović 1971: 114.

guaranteed them freedom of religion, “but without prejudice against the prelates and the Roman Catholic Church”. Headed by the metropolitan, National-Church Assembly and the Holy Synod of Bishops, which administered national and clerical convocations, the Karlovac Metropolia, divided into dioceses, comprised all the Orthodox Serbs in Hungary, Croatia and Slavonia (and also Romanians in Banat); in 1699 it detached from the Patriarchate of Peć, still considering it as the national religious hub until 1766. Privileges were reaffirmed also by subsequent emperors in 1717, 1732 and 1743, in order to be revoked by Empress Maria Theresa in 1770, and definitively terminated under the Declaration of 1779 which instead of political autonomy granted to the people ecclesiastical-educational autonomy. In 1791, under Article 17, Hungarian Diet granted to the Orthodox the right to confess their faith, to be officials or possessor, and to enjoy their earlier privileges. Article 30 provided also for the Serbs the right to own land and to hold official titles, so they became equal citizens of Hungary. In the first half of the 19th century many Serbs took part in the Croatian national revival and became its most prominent proponents (Petar Preradović). Cooperation between the Serbs and the Croats reached its peak in the 1848 revolution. Serbs sided with Austria, and in the second stage of the movement, the so called May Assembly was held in Sremski Karlovc, on 13-15 May. This Assembly demanded for the Serbian people in Austria and Hungary right to autonomous political and cultural development. In 1848 Serb representatives from the towns of the Civil Croatia also entered Croatian Assembly. Serb candidates made almost one half of the assembly representation and were “the most numerous in the group of representatives which from the beginning of the assembly session insisted on more radical solutions for the unsolved questions”, as stated by Dr. Roksandić. In the same year, in April 1848, Serbs from Dalmatia voiced their demands. They requested, among others, “complete freedom of our church, our Creed and all our rites and church books”, free conversion from Catholicism to Orthodoxy and vice versa, budgeted salaries for the priests, freedom of schools... As regards Governor (Ban) Josip Jelačić, his stand on the “unity and fraternity” between the Croats and the Serbs was never questioned. This is testified to also by his Cyrillic proclamation “To Croatian and Serbian peoples in the Triune Kingdom of Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia...” related to his appointment as the governor, in which he stated “... may accord and fraternity be among us irrespectively of our Creeds”. During the rule of Ivan Mažuranić and Khuen Héderváry, Serbs assumed high offices in Croatian society. At the time when Mažuranić was the governor, all the

three highest offices in Civil Croatia and Slavonia, with the exception of the bank, were held by the Serbs. Jovan Živković was the head of the Department of internal affairs and vice-governor. Livije Radivojević was the president of the Supreme Court, and Nikola Krestić was the Speaker of the Croatian Parliament. In 1887 representatives to the Croatian Assembly reaffirmed Serbian national-church autonomy. After the model of the 1868 Article IX of the Hungarian Diet, Serbs were granted church and school autonomy, and guaranteed equality with other religions, and were free to use Cyrillic script, too, in the whole territory of the Kingdom of Slavonia and Croatia, and to use it singularly in those regions where they lived in greater numbers.

In the last decades of the 19 century Serbs of Croatia created a sequence of powerful institutions such as the Serb Bank, Union of Serb Farming Cooperatives and Entrepreneur. In 1884 Serb Independent Party started publishing its party journal *Srbobran*. In the first decades of the 20th century the Croat-Serb Coalition was founded in the territory of Dalmatia and Croatia. In October 1905 two resolutions were signed, the one of Zadar signed by the Serbian part, and the other of Rijeka signed by the Croatian part, which emphasized unity of the Croatian and the Serbian people and their equality. In the Zadar Resolution Serbs supported Croats in their aspiration to unite Dalmatia with the rest of Croatia. In the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and subsequently in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the Independent Democratic Party of Pribičević, aspired toward integral Yugoslavhood and a strong national state. From 1925 until 1939 the Independent Democratic Party, as the strongest party of the Croatian Serbs, remained in opposition, and in 1939 came back into power as a coalition partner of the Croatian farmers party within the Farmers-Democratic Coalition. With the establishment of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941 began the most tragic period in the history of the Serbian people in Croatia. The uprising first started in regions with the Serbian population. Nevertheless, Serbs and Croats participated together in the resistance against the Ustashe, Nazis and fascists. From the joint resistance against the enemy a seemingly united Yugoslavia was born, although both Croats and Serbs of Croatia were scarred by traumas of WW II atrocities. Documents of ZAVNOH (The National Anti-Fascist Council of the People's Liberation of Croatia) acknowledged Serbs of Croatia, along with the Croats, as the constituents in the forming of ZAVNOH and in the adoption of all its documents by which Democratic Croatia was established during the National Liberation War (with the formation and activity of the Serb councillor group within the framework of the ZAVNOH).

Undoubtedly, the most important evidence of Croat-Serb cooperation in the twentieth century is the document from the Third meeting of the ZAVNOH, the Declaration of basic rights of peoples and citizens of the Democratic State of Croatia, because it was the basis for the constitutional development of the People's Republic/Socialist Republic of Croatia in the entire post-war period (ZAVNOH 1970). It says: "The Croatian and Serbian people in Croatia are equal in every way".

In the summer of 1990 Croatian Assembly adopted amendments to the Croatian Constitution of 1974. Since Croatian authorities had concluded that neither these amendments satisfied current needs of the social and political life, on 25 July 1990 they initiated adoption of a new Croatian constitution. Croatian Constitution from 1974 stated that "Croatia is the national state of Croatian people, state of the Serbian people in Croatia and state of nationalities (national minorities) living in Croatia". Correspondingly, this Constitution made specific reference to the Croatian Serbs, by name, as a people living in Croatia. Announcement of amendments to the Croatian Constitution was met by the disagreement of a part of Croatian Serbs. The new constitution was supposed to define Croatia as a national state of the Croat people and other nations and minorities who are its citizens.<sup>3</sup>

One part of Serbs from Croatia considered that the new Croatian constitution should define Croatia as part of the Yugoslav state, because this was the wish of and in the interest of the Serbs of Croatia. There were also suggestions that the new Constitution should define that the Republic of Croatia comprises autonomous provinces as forms of the territorial autonomy (in the territories where Serbs are a majority population) or as forms of the cultural autonomy (in all the other zones).

With legal regulations that followed in the first half of the nineties, life conditions of Serbs in Croatia toughened. Although the law envisaged proportionate political representation of Serbs in the Croatian Parliament, this representation was not realised by having those representatives elected by Serbs themselves, but by having them elected

3 "Republic of Croatia is being formed as the national state of the Croatian people and the state of the members of other peoples and minorities who are its citizens: Serbs, Moslems, Slovenians, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Hungarians, Jews and others, who are guaranteed equality with the citizens of the Croatian nationality and the realisation of ethnic rights in accordance with the democratic norms of the United Nations Organisation and the free world countries" (Documents on the national sovereignty of the Republic of Croatia; from the first multy party elections in 1990 to the international recognition on 15 January 1992; Milardović 1992: 43-71). Constitutional changes were not adopted by the two-thirds majority vote, as envisaged by the law, but by a simple majority vote of the Croatian parliament (Pupovac 1999: 133).

by the ruling party. Thus also those below the electoral vote threshold found their way to the Parliament. Law on local administration and self-government units resulted in such territorial division of counties (županija) that Serbs made majority in two counties (Zadarsko-Kninska and Sisačko-Moslavačka), which sometimes led to absurd situations where county centres were over a hundred kilometre away. On the other hand, municipalities were formed in such a way to have the lowest possible number of Serbs in certain units, splitting logical wholes.<sup>4</sup>

Law on Croatian Citizenship prevented many Serbs from continuing their years or decades-long life in Croatia. Because of the prolonged procedures applied to their applications for citizenship, many lost their jobs, could not buy off their apartments or enrol children to school. Special problems were faced by persons who were granted the status of an alien with temporary or permanent residence, who could not travel outside Croatia unless completing the procedure for obtaining single-journey travel documents. Laws which regulated primary, secondary and high education at that time, did not allow Serbs of Croatia

4 During the existence of the Republic of Serbian Krajina, Croatian authorities offered Serbs in Croatia special, although limited agreements. Constitutional law on human rights and freedoms and the rights of national and ethnic communities or minorities in the Republic of Croatia (NN 65/91) guaranteed all national minorities which participate with more than 8% in the population of the Republic of Croatia the right to the representation in the Croatian State Parliament and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, as well as in the bodies of the supreme judicial authority, proportionate to their share in the total population. Chapter V of this law envisaged formation of municipalities (districts) with special self-government status in the territories where members of minorities make over-a-half majority of the population according to 1991 census. Constitutional law on amendments to the Constitutional law on human rights and freedoms and the rights of national and ethnic communities or minorities in the Republic of Croatia (NN 27/92) turned autonomous municipalities (districts) into counties Knin and Glina, which allows saying that this legal provision represented a concrete offer of territorial autonomy to Serbs in Krajina. These offers were not accepted by the Serbian part. County Knin was supposed to include municipalities of Knin, Benkovac, Obrovac, Donji Lapac, Gračac and Korenica, which were part of the Zadarsko-Kninska county, and County Glina – municipalities of Dvor, Glina, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Vrginmost and Vojnić, which were part of the Sisačko-Moslavačka County. Other municipalities would be outside the so called Serbian counties. This idea was abandoned after the Storm operation in 1995, when Croatian Parliament adopted Constitutional law on Temporary non-application of certain provisions of the Constitutional Law on human rights and freedoms and the rights of national and ethnic communities or minorities in the Republic of Croatia (NN 68/95). This law says that the application of the Constitutional law on human rights and freedoms and the rights of ethical and national communities or minorities in the Republic of Croatia will be postponed until the new census. Thus this law abolishes counties against the explanation that the number of Serbs in mentioned municipalities cannot be determined after the exodus of the Serbian population, and that therefore first a census should be conducted in order to conclude whether the existence of “Serbian counties” would be meaningful.

to develop autonomy in education which was, otherwise, envisaged by the Constitutional Law and the Constitution. Law on the official use of language and script provided for their official use only on the level of the local administration (municipalities and future districts), including all its instances.<sup>5</sup>

Today the Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities<sup>6</sup> puts forward good solutions for the protection of minorities, which often exceed European standards, but the application of those solutions in practice is sometimes very poor. The law grants national minorities in Croatia: political representation of national minorities in the Parliament, formation of Councils of national minorities in local self-government units, usage of own language and script in private, public and official use, upbringing and education in own language, usage of own insignia and symbols, employment of minorities in administration and judicial bodies, cultural autonomy, right of confessing own religion, access to media of mass communication and performing of actions of public information in the language and script they are using. Croatia started registering the practices of autonomy of minorities, funding of minority organizations and institutions through the Councils of national minorities, political representation of minorities in the Parliament and local self-government units, upbringing and education in own language and partly minority self-government through the Councils of national minorities. However, still missing is the proportionate employment of members of minorities in administration and judicial bodies, which hinders return of those who had left Croatia, as well as the usage of minority insignia and symbols, which is not sufficiently

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5 Archives of Serbs in the Republic of Croatia (ASH), Archive on the Serbian Democratic Forum, Položaj Srba u Republici Hrvatskoj danas (Today's Position of Serbs in the Republic of Croatia), 24 August 1994.

6 In addition to Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities (NN 155/2002), a whole sequence of laws concerning the position of national minorities in Croatia were adopted. These include: Law on the Use of the Language and Script of National Minorities in the Republic of Croatia (NN 51/2000), Law on upbringing and education in the language and script of national minorities (NN 51/2000), Act on the Elections of Representatives to the Croatian Parliament (NN116/1999, NN 109/2000, NN 53/2003), Amendments to the Law on the Election of Members of the Representative Bodies of Local and Regional Self-government (NN53/2003), Law on the Ratification of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (NN 14/1997), Law on the Ratification of the European Charter of Local Self-government (NN 14/1997), Law on the Ratification of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (NN 18/1997), Agreement between the Republic of Croatia and Serbia and Montenegro on the protection of the Croatian minority in Serbia and Montenegro, and Serbian and Montenegrin minority in Croatia (Agreement ratified by the Croatian Parliament in 2005).

represented (at least in case of the Serbian national minority) (Džakula, Bubalo and Ećimović 2008: 11-12).

Loss of the status of a constitutive nation, i.e. placing Serbs in the position of a national minority, means loss of a position which Serbs of Croatia have been building for centuries. Serbs have crossed the path from an unrecognized community, via a community organized through the mechanisms of personal autonomy and which restores the memory of its historical role, to a new community under construction within the new, future European society. A respondent from Hrvatska Kostajnica (1978) rightfully said that "What borders Serbs in particular is to be a minority". "One cannot lump us together with the Ruthenians or Slovaks. After all, we were building this state".

### **Political Organizations of Serbs in Croatia From 1990 Until Present Day**

During the last decade of the twentieth century several political organisations of Serbs in Croatia gained prominence in representing, with more or less success, this national minority. On January 11 1990 the Parliament endorsed a decision to change the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Croatia, and adopted the Law on Amendments to the Law on Social Organisations and Citizens Associations by which constitutional and legal prerequisites were laid to shift from a single to a multi-party system.<sup>7</sup> In the end of 1980s nationalism started blooming among a part of the Croatian Serb population. In Croatia, already then started the germination of an idea on the creation of a special Yugoslav federal unit which would encompass Serb populated areas of Croatia. However, it should be emphasized that such approach to the resolution of the issue of Serbs in Croatia was not upheld by the Serbs of civic orientation. This is evidenced also by the 24 October 1990 meeting of the Working Group tasked to draft a project of cultural autonomy of Serbs in Croatia. This group was composed of Croatian intellectuals, including some of the Serbian nationality. Working Group's materials, prepared by Dr. Drago Roksanđić, Dr. Mirko Valentić and Dr. Anđelko Milardović, were presented to the Parliament on 28 November 1990.<sup>8</sup>

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7 NN, 2/90. The first party to join together politicians and activists who will take part in a rebellion was the Yugoslav Independent Democratic Party, founded in Vojnić on 11 February 1990. Its president was Mile Dakić, and the party soon retreated from the political scene, never exceeding the limits of the Vojnić municipality (Žunec 2007: 261).

8 Ideas of Dr. Drago Roksanđić are presented in: Roksanđić 1990: 217-228.



Serbian Democratic Party (SDS)<sup>9</sup>, founded on 17 February 1990<sup>10</sup>, considered this group illegitimate and alleged that the cultural autonomy of Serbs in Croatia can be applied only in those parts of Croatia where Serbs are a minority, and even there only subject to approval by the Serbian National Council (SNV) which not long before that, on 30 September 1990<sup>11</sup>, declared Serbian autonomy in “ethnic and historical territories” populated by Serbs, located inside “the current borders of the Republic of Croatia as a federal unit of the SFRY”<sup>12</sup> (Barić 2006: 210-211). Numerous Croats joined the Croatian Democratic Union, and numerous Croatian Serbs joined the Serbian Democratic Party.<sup>13</sup> Yet however, in the first democratic parliamentary elections in Croatia, held on 22 April and on 7 May 1990, Serbian Democratic Party won, respectively, only 1.55% and 2% votes, which entitled them to only five seats in the Croatian Parliament.<sup>14</sup> Already on 18 May 1990, SDS froze its relations with the Croatian Parliament.<sup>15</sup> Serbian Democratic Party

9 The founder of this party was Jovan Rašković who enjoyed great respect among Serbs. Due to his disagreement with Milošević's policy, Rašković was replaced by more radical oriented Milan Babić.

10 SDS for Slavonia was founded in May 1990.

11 The autonomy was declared after a plebiscite held between 19 August and 2 September 1990 in which allegedly 756781 voters turned out, out of whom 756549 allegedly voted for the autonomy. Voting took place in 23 municipalities, entirely, plus in 22 municipalities, partly, as well as outside Croatia. According to the opinion of O. Žunec, these figures and voting method, i.e. the number of voters are doubtful (Žunec 2007: 267-268).

12 Serbian National Council was elected on 25 July 1990 in Srb in the presence of 120000 - 200000 Serbs from Croatia and other parts of Yugoslavia. On that occasion Great Serbian Assembly was held and Declaration on the sovereignty and autonomy of the Serbian people was adopted (Žunec 2007: 263-264).

13 Serbs would join the Serbian Democratic Party only after Serbs who were members of the SKH-SDP became disappointed and got assured of the incompetence of this party in 1990.

14 The elections results show that SDS won in the election for the Social Political Council in Knin (17563 votes, i.e. 67.27%), for the Council of Municipalities of the Parliament also in Knin (18237, i.e. 69.8%), and in Donji Lapac (2400 votes, i.e. 46.22%), and Gračac (1962 votes, i.e. 27.89%) (in Gračac and Donji Lapac candidates entered the second round), for the Associated Labour Council in Knin (5286 votes, i.e. 61.19%). Correspondingly, it appears obvious that SDS enjoyed full support only in Knin, while in other Serbian municipalities in Croatia SKH-SDP enjoyed greater support. At the time of the first democratic elections SDS did not enjoy voters' support either in Banija and Kordun. Yugoslav Independent Democratic Party ranked better there. This party was particularly strong in the Vojnić municipality (Izbori '90, Informacije, no. 14, press center).

15 However, not earlier than in the second half of 1990, SDS representatives stopped attending meetings of the Croatian Parliament, and in January 1991 also those representatives of Serbian nationality who were elected as candidates on the lists of other Croatian parties (SKH-SDP) stepped out of Parliament. On 8 January 1991 Babić notified the Parliament

took as a point of departure the fact that the Serbs of Croatia are a constitutive people, and not a national minority, and that they have the right to political autonomy, which means forming of a Serbian state in the territory of Croatia in case of secession of the Republic of Croatia from the SFRY. At that time Party of Democratic Changes, i.e. the League of Communists of Croatia did not have a clear idea of how to approach the Serbian issue, thus one part of Serbian members or supporters of this party simply become passive or joined Serbian Democratic Party. After Serbs who were part of the League of Communists of Croatia, Serbian Democratic Party and Socialist Party of Croatia had stepped out of Parliament, it was not clear who represented Serbs in the Croatian Parliament. Split in the Serbian Democratic Party became clearly visible after the foundation of the SDS Party of Krajina, which unlike the primary SDS associated its activity to the territory of the Serbian Autonomous Region (SAO) Krajina. SDS of Krajina was founded in Gračac on 16 March 1991, and was headed by Ljubica Šolaja. Behind Ljubica Šolaja was Milan Babić from Knin who, unlike Rašković who pursued a peaceful course, maintained an uncompromising policy toward Croats. In 1991 Rašković moved to Belgrade, but kept on endeavouring to ensure creation of the SAO Krajina in a peaceful manner. Due to such policy, he completely lost the support of SAO Krajina. However, neither Babić's authority in the Republic of Serbian Krajina was of long duration. Because of his conflicts with Milošević, Babić was replaced from this position in the beginning of 1992. Zdravko Zečević stepped up then to the helm of SAO Krajina. At that time broke a conflict between Milan Martić and Milan Babić. Wavered by the conflict between Martić and Babić, Ljubica Šolaja, who until then was the president of SDS of Krajina left Knin and resigned. In addition to this, during June 1992 a moratorium was declared in Krajina which banned activities of all political parties. This decision was reasoned by the absence of a law on the work of political parties in the Republic of Serbian Krajina and, furthermore, by the need "to achieve unity of people and combatants at the front and in the back land" since in that period there was a strong possibility of attack by Croatian forces against Krajina. In the end of September 1992 laws which regulate the activity and funding of political parties were adopted. SDS of Krajina regarded that the Serbian people in Croatia had the right to establish their own state. According to the opinion of this party, genocide was committed against the Serbian people two times. The first time it was in 1941, and the

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and the Government that "representatives of SAO Krajina municipalities will not be coming to Zagreb" (Žunec 2007: 267-268).

second time in 1990, because Serbs were for the first time deprived of equality under the new Constitution of Croatia. For that reason SDS of Krajina rejected any possibility of communion with the Republic of Croatia. SDS of Krajina regarded delineation as the only option, and emphasized that the Republic of Serbian Krajina should encompass also parts which were not under their control, but had a majority Serbian population. SDS of Krajina considered that cooperation with peace forces was important because they made the status quo possible, and advocated unification with other Serbian lands (in the first place with the Republic of Srpska) and also attached importance to cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church. In November 1993, together with the SDS of the Republic of Srpska, SDS of Serbia and SDS of Montenegro, the SDS of Krajina entered the Serbian Democratic Party for All Serbian Lands. Thereafter the SDS for all Serbian Lands in the Republic of Serbian Krajina singled out and advocated the Republic of Serbian Krajina as an independent state which would ultimately join a commonwealth with other Serbian lands. This party was led by Mile Paspalj who, unlike Babić and SDS of Krajina who advocated implementation of the Vance Plan, supported Milošević and his role of the leader of the Serbian people (Barić 2005: 219-230). SDS fraction which advocated Principality of Krajina, headed by Tomislav Karadžević, was tagged "monarchist" SDS. In eastern Slavonia Goran Hadžić formed the Serbian Democratic Party for the Unified Serbian States. At the elections conducted in the Republic of Serbian Krajina on 12 December 1993 SDS of Krajina won 33 seats, SDS for All Serbian Lands 17 seats, Serbian Radical Party 15 seats, and out of the remaining 19 seats, eight were won by independent candidates, six by the Serbian Party of Socialists, four by SDP, and one seat by the "monarchist" SDS (Barić 2005: 248). Milan Babić and Milan Martić entered the second round of presidential elections in the Republic of Serbian Krajina. Milan Martić became the president with several thousands votes more than Milan Babić. Thereafter Milan Babić formed a coalition government together with the radicals (Rade Leskovac). Milošević wanted Borislav Mikelić to take the office of the Prime Minister in Krajina although SDS of Krajina, the winner at the elections, was against this. Mikelić was appointed as the Prime Minister and stayed in this office until May 1995, when his government was removed against a vote of no confidence after the Operation Flash. Thereafter Milan Babić was appointed as the prime minister designate of the last government of the Republic of Serbian Krajina, yet performed the duty of a Prime Minister only for a week, until the onset of the Operation Storm (Barić 2005: 242-255). In 1990 the

League of Communists – Movement for Yugoslavia (SK-PJ) was also formed in Croatia. This party was tagged “generals’ party” because many former Army officers had joined it. The League of Communists – Movement for Yugoslavia advocated, with no reserves, perseverance of Yugoslavia, underpinned by the Yugoslav National Army (YNA). The party assessed both Croat and Serb nationalism as dangerous and threatening to revive, respectively, the Ustashi and Chetnik movements. Therefore, formation of the Republic of Serbian Krajina was followed with the conflict between the leaderships of the SDS and the SK-PJ. The SDS deemed that Yugoslavhood and communism were obsolete options. As stated by Nikica Barić, conflict between the SDS and the SK – PJ was best displayed in the case of the President of the Municipality Vrginmost, Dmitar Obradović, who was a member of the SK – PJ. In the second half of 1991 he supported ideas of the Serbian Democratic Forum, and correspondingly backed a peaceful solution to the conflict between Croats and Serbs. However, Knin authorities first accused Obradović of being a “bolshevik”, then of being “a false Serb” and “CDU spy”, and ultimately his reconciliatory attitude toward Croats led to his assassination in June 1992 (Barić 2005: 233-240). In the Republic of Serbian Krajina also the following parties were active: Social- Democratic Party with the seat in Okučani, RSK Serbian Radical Party, RSK Serbian Party of Socialists, Democratic People’s Party of Krajina with the seat in Beli Manastir, Romanian-Roma Democratic Party with the seat in Beli Manastir and RSK Party of Serbian Patriots with the seat in Tovarnik (Barić 2005: 241).

On 18 May 1991 Serbian People’s Party (SNS) headed by Milan Đukić entered Croatian political scene. Since its onset, this party was a unique counterpoint to the Serbian Democratic Party which supported fulfilment of Serbian aspirations in the territory of Croatia without a dialogue. Serbian People’s Party defined as its goals in 1991: cultural autonomy of the Serbs of Croatia (enforcement of the right to language, cultural institutions and national symbols), local self-government and Serbs’ proportional participation in administration. Serbian People’s Party was oriented to the urban and not to the rural Serbs. Serbian media tagged it a pro-regime and pro-CDU party (Party of Tuđman’s Serbs). The most severe attacks at Serbian People’s Party came from the Serbian Democratic Party. SNS confronted also the views of the Serbian Democratic Forum which was throughout the war informing about the jeopardy of Serbs in unoccupied Croatian areas (Piskač and Domini 1992). President of the Serbian People’s Party Milan Đukić got the position of Assistant Minister of the Interior and Counsellor to Presi-

dent Franjo Tuđman. At parliamentary elections in 1992 SNS failed to reach the 3% threshold for the Parliament. However, by the ruling of the Constitutional court, three of its representatives, including Đukić, were granted Parliament mandates, because on the lists of other parties which had reached the threshold there were not sufficient representatives of Serb nationality to meet the quota prescribed by the applicable Constitutional Act on the Rights of National Minorities.<sup>16</sup> Constitutional court ceded mandates to the SNS, although the list of Social – Democratic Union was ahead of it by the number of votes won by the lists which have Serb representatives, stating in the reasoning that the SNS, as an ethnic party, enjoys greater right to ethnic mandates. Soon thereafter Milan Đukić became the Vice Speaker of the Parliament. After the Operation Storm SNS started criticizing CDU policy. The Independent Democratic Serbian Party soon marginalized the Serbian People's Party and in 2003 SNS lost its position in the Parliament.<sup>17</sup> In 2011, together with the Democratic Party of Serbs (headed by Veljko Džakula, who concurrently was President of the SDF) and Our Party, SNS tried to form a coalition block against SDSS.<sup>18</sup> Today this party controls two county organisations (in Karlovačka and Sisačko-Moslavačka County), three town and four municipal committees.<sup>19</sup>

In 1991 constitution of a Serb National Assembly was planned. It was schemed as a “supra-party representative-advisory body for defining the long-term policy of the autonomous will of the Serbian people in Croatia which will represent its legitimate interests in Croatia and before the international community”. The objectives of the Serb National Assembly were: permanent cease-fire and establishing peace, gaining back the trust and normalization of Croat-Serbian relations, discussion on global solution to the crises, defining autonomy for Serbian people in Croatia based on its national interests and its autonomous politic will, human freedoms and civil rights and democratization of the society.

16 Milan Đukić, Dragan Hinić and Veselin Pejnović entered the Parliament. In addition to them, further 10 Serbs entered the Parliament: two from the Croat People's Party and 8 from the Social Democratic Party. Out of these 8, three acted as independent representatives and five joined other parties. (ASH, Archive on the Serbian Democratic Forum, Položaj Srba u Republici Hrvatskoj danas).

17 Milan Đukić lost by 0.37% against Ratko Gajica from SDSS, who entered the Parliament. ([www.izbori.hr/2003Sabor/index.htm](http://www.izbori.hr/2003Sabor/index.htm)).

18 “Srpskom slogom protiv Pupovca“. Vesti online [Online] 14.10.2011. Available at: <http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Ex-YU/171354/Srpskom-slogom-protiv-Pupovca->. [Accessed on October 15 2011].

19 [www.sns.hr](http://www.sns.hr).

In 1996 the Alliance of Serbian Organizations was formed. This Alliance stemmed from the association of Serbian non-governmental and non-party organisations in Croatia and it focused on the new status of Serbs in public, cultural and social life of Croatia, on the formulation and establishment of the most adequate forms of organization and activity of Serbs, networking of Serbs from different organisations, on the protection of human rights and rights of ethnic minorities, education autonomy of the Serbs of Croatia, media presentation, economic equality and financial independence of the Serbian people in the Republic of Croatia and on the promotion of religious life. This Alliance operated until the establishment of the Serbian National Council (SNV) when Alliance's functions became redundant.<sup>20</sup>

A solid formation of an umbrella organisation which would gather together all the Serbs of Croatia started only with the constitution of the Serbian National Council, on 19 July 1997.<sup>21</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia defined the right of the Serbs of Croatia to appoint own minority councils – from the level of municipalities and towns up to the level of counties. These councils actually function as minority self-governments. County councils of national minorities can form their national Coordination and delegate to it part of their statutory powers. Thus the Serbian National Council is actually a Coordination of 19 County councils of the Serbian national minority.<sup>22</sup> In the elec-

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20 ASH, Archive on the Alliance of Serbian Organizations, Box 1, Programska deklaracija Saveza srpskih organizacija (Program Declaration of the Alliance of Serbian Organizations), 19 March 1996.

21 Declaration of the representatives to the Constitutive Assembly of the Serbian National Council underlines as priority tasks for all Council members "the removal of hindrance that violethe rights of all displaced persons and refugees to return to their homes, rebuilding mutual trust, broken by war and war atrocities, between the members of the Serbian and the Croatian peoples, and resolution of the status of the Serbian national community in the Republic of Croatia" (ASH, Archive on Serb National Council, Izjava vijećnika Konstitutivne Skupštine Srpskog narodnog vijeća). Dr. Milorad Pupovac has been the President of the Serb National Council ever since its constitution.

22 Councils are formed in all counties except in the Krapinsko-Zagorska County where neither a council nor a representative are present, and in the Međimurska County which has a representative of the Serbian national minority ([www.snv.hr](http://www.snv.hr)). Councils of the Serbian national minorities are formed in the following towns: Osijek, Rijeka, Kastav, Vrbovsko, Pula, Vukovar, Ilok, Vinkovci, Beli Manastir, Slatina, Garešnica, Grubišno Polje, Požega, Bjelovar, Daruvar, Koprivnica, Križevci, Sisak, Petrinja, Glina, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Karlovac, Ogulin, Slunj, Obrovac, Split, Dubrovnik, Knin, Otočac, Gospić, and in the following municipalities: Topusko, Gvozd, Majur, Hrvatska Dubica, Donji Kukuruzari, Vojnić, Barilović, Plaški, Lasinja, Saborsko, Krnjak, Plitvička Jezera, Udbina, Vrhovine, Donji Lapac, Borovo, Markušica, Nijemci, Negoslavci, Trpinja, Stari Jankovci, Tovarnik, Erdut, Darda, Jagodnjak, Kneževi Vinogradi, Magadenovac, Popovac, Šodolovci, Viljevo, Okučani, Đulovac, Voćin, Rasinja, Sirač and Sokolovac ([www.snv.hr](http://www.snv.hr)).

tions for the councils of national minorities, held in June 2007, Serbian National Council won 1684 mandates on the level of towns, municipalities and counties, which equals 84% of the councillor seats total, which entitles SNV to form councils in 19 counties with 470 councillors, in 49 towns with 657 councillors and in 54 municipalities with 527 councillors, as well as with thirty representatives wherever the number of Serbs is below the statutory minimum. In the course of its activity, Serbian National Council has achieved many prominent results of great importance for the Serb community in Croatia. With the Independent Democratic Serbian Party and Joint Council of Municipalities, it contributed to peaceful reintegration of the eastern Slavonia, Baranja and western Srem, and ensuring partial return of Serbs to areas exposed to operations Storm and Flesh, through the struggle for their fundamental human rights. Along with the Serbian Democratic Forum and Joint Council of Municipalities they started publishing the *Novosti* weekly. Serbian National Council participated in the drafting of the constitutional act on the rights of national minorities and struggled for its enforcement, and it also participated in the drafting of the inter-governmental Agreement on the rights of national minorities reached between the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Serbia. Within the Serbian National Council operate the Archives of Serbs in the Republic of Croatia (ASH), Centre for development and Tesla bank, and SNV can boast membership in the FUEN (Federal Union of European Nationalities) which is the advisory body of the Council of Europe.

In 1997, concurrently with the Serbian National Council, the Independent Democratic Serbian Party was formed. Independent Democratic Serbian Party was formed through the association of all progressive Serbian powers and political options which acted from 1991 until 1997 in the territories of eastern Slavonia, Baranja and western Srem under the leadership of the Serbian Democratic Party. SDS was declared to be a terroristic party and as such was banned, which has triggered a merger of the Independent Serbian Party from Zagreb<sup>23</sup> and the Serbian Democratic Party from Vukovar into the Independent Democratic

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<sup>23</sup> The same as the Serbian Democratic Forum, the Independent Serbian Party advocated a peaceful solution to the conflict between the Croatian and the Serbian people in Croatia. The Independent Serbian Party based its activity on the following objectives: peace and peaceful resolution of open issues between the Croatian and the Serbian people and their countries, national agreement as a way for the harmonization of national rights and state interests of the Croatian and the Serbian people, modern national and political identity of Serbs as a prerequisite for the promotion of their national rights and harmonization with the rights of the Croatian people, legal security and economic prosperity, and development of civil society institutions, and activities of the Independent Serbian Party as a partner for democratization. (ASH, SDSS Archive, Box 1, Program Orientation of

Serbian Party.<sup>24</sup> The founding assembly meeting was held in Zagreb on 19 March 1997, and Vukovar was assigned as the party seat.<sup>25</sup> In 1997 the SDSS succeeded to win 12 mandates in Vukovar, thus this party was individual winner in the elections, and further 28 electoral lists were submitted in the region of eastern Slavonia, Baranja and western Srem. In 2001 local elections this party won 4 representatives in the Sisačko-Moslavačka County, 4 representatives in the Šibensko-Kninska county, 3 in Osječko-Baranjska, and 7 in the Vukovarsko-Srijemska County. After coming into power in Trpinja, Markušica, Negoslavci, Borovo, Erdut, Darda, Jagodnjak, Mirkovci, Beli Manastir and Tenja - in 1997, and then in Plaški and Biskupija - in 2001, further to elections in 2005 the SDSS came into power in Krnjak, Kistanj, Gvozd (Vriginmost), Udbina, Gračac, Dvor, and in June 2006 also in Donji Lapac. In 2000 parliamentary elections, the SDSS failed to enter Croatian Parliament as it had not reached the 5% threshold in any of the electoral units. In 2003 the SDSS won all three representative seats in the Croatian Parliament further to law amendments that provided for three instead of

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the Independent Serbian Party 1995). President of the Independent Serbian Party was Professor Milorad Pupovac, Ph.D.

24 The Independent Serbian Party changed its name into the Independent Democratic Serbian Party.

25 Independent Democratic Serbian Party, Vukovar 2007. On 5 March 1997 in Vukovar also the Independent Democratic Serbian Party held its founding meeting, in order to merge two weeks later in Zagreb with the Independent Serbian Party. At the founding meeting in Vukovar spoke Goran Hadžić, Miloš Vojnović, Vojislav Stanimirović, and Branko Šekuljica. Hadžić's address revealed Serbs' fears concerning peaceful reintegration. He underlined that no one from the list of war criminals was a criminal and that there is no reason for anyone to move out of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srem. Stanimirović emphasized that the new party "has incorporated into its program the ideas and experience of Serbian political champions: Svetozar Miletić, who was the founder of the Serbian National Freethinkers Party, Bogdan Medaković, the founder of the Serbian People's Independent Party, Svetozar Pribičević, the founder of the Independent Democratic Party and Jovan Rašković, the founder of the Serbian Democratic Party". By consensus, all the parties of the former SAO Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srem were united into a single party. Stanimirović underlined that there was no more room for war solutions and that the SDSS would advocate demilitarization of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srem. Branko Šekuljica presented the program and objectives of the SDSS: the principle of agreement, the principle of autonomy and the principle of integration. National unity and accord, inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance, security and equality of all individuals, cultural and personal autonomy of Serbs in the entire Croatia, local and regional self-government and administration in the Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Srem were highlighted as important elements of SDSS activity. At the founding meeting in Vukovar 33 members of the Main Board were elected, as well as members of the Statutory and Supervisory Boards (ASH, SDSS Archive, Box 1, Minutes of the Founding Meeting of the SDSS, held on 5 March 1997 in Vukovar). A comprehensive Draft Program of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party was endorsed in December 1997 (ASH, SDSS Archive, Box 1, Program of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party).



one Serbian representative to the Croatian Parliament. Today the Independent Democratic Serbian Party has three representatives to the Croatian Parliament and more than 250 councillors in county, town and municipal assemblies.<sup>26</sup> In accordance with the Erdut Agreement and Constitutional Act, representatives of the SDSS discharge duties of County's Deputy Governor in the Osječko-Baranjska and Vukovarsko-Srijemska County, and are members of the county government in Sisačko-Moslavačka, Šibensko-Kninska and Karlovačka counties.<sup>27</sup> SDSS has more than 10000 members, and 68 municipal, town and county organisations.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to the mentioned political parties, Serbs in Croatia have also the following political parties: Democratic Party of Serbs, Our Party, New Serbian Party, Party of Danube Serbs. One more party was active before, namely the Serbian Democratic Baranja Party established in 1998 in Beli Manastir. In 1999 it had 425 members, but was officially dissolved in 2007. In addition to Beli Manastir municipality, this party acted also in the municipalities of Jagodnjak and Darda. President of the party was Ljubomir Mijatović. Together with the Party of Danube Serbs, the Serbian People's Party and a number of other Serbian organisations, this party formed Serbian National Council in 1999 as an alternative option to SDSS. The Democratic Party of Serbs was formed on 4 August 2009 with the seat in Zagreb. The initiative for the establishment of this party came from the Serbian Democratic Forum.

This party is a member of the Serbian Accord coalition. President of the party is Mitar Kojadinović, and president of the Party Program Board is Veljko Džakula. The coalition which it formed with the Ser-

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26 SDSS is now in power in the following municipalities: Biskupija, Borovo, Dvor, Erdut, Ervenik, Gvozd, Jagodnjak, Kistanje, Krnjak, Markušica, Negoslavci, Šodolovci, Trpinja and Vrhovine ([www.sdss.hr](http://www.sdss.hr)).

27 Serbs are County Deputy Governors in the following counties: Vukovarsko-Srijemska, Osječko-Baranjska, Požeško-Slavonska, Bjelovarsko-Bilogorska, Virovitičko-Podravska, Sisačko-Moslavačka, Ličko-Senjska, Karlovačka, Zadarska and Šibensko-Kninska. From among them, 7 are members of the SDSS. In the following towns Serbs hold offices of deputy mayors: Vukovar, Lipik, Pakrac, Grubišno Polje, Slatina, Glina, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Ogulin, Slunj, Gospić, Vrbovsko, Benkovac, Obrovac, Skradin and Knin. From among them 7 are members of the SDSS. In the municipalities of: Stari Jankovci, Darda, Popovac, Podgorač, Viljevo, Đulovac, Sirač, Velika Pisanica, Dragalić, Okučani, Voćin, Suhopolje, Rasinja, Sokolovac, Topusko, Hrvatska Dubica, Majur, Sunja, Barilović, Lasinja, Saborsko, Plitvička Jezera, Lovinac, Lišane Ostrovičke, Polača, Zemunik Donji and Civiljane - Serbs hold only the offices of deputy heads, while in those municipalities where they hold the offices of municipality heads (Borovo, Markušica, Negoslavci, Trpinja, Erdut, Jagodnjak, Šodolovci, Gvozd, Dvor, Krnjak, Vrhovine, Gračac, Biskupija, Ervenik i Kistanje) Serbs hold as well the offices of deputy heads.

28 President of the Independent Democratic Serbian Party is Dr. Vojislav Stanimirović.

bian People's Party and Our Party in the 2011 parliamentary elections was named the Democratic Opposition of Serbian Parties. Džakula won 16% of the votes in the 12th electoral unit which was not enough for entering the Croatian parliament. Our Party was formed in 2011 in Borovo, headed by Jovan Ajduković, former high-positioned member of SDSS from which he was expelled further to his independent candidacy for County's Deputy Governor of the Vukovarsko-Srijemska County in 2009. Ajduković won 21.5% of the votes in the 12th electoral unit which was not enough for entering the Croatian parliament.<sup>29</sup> New Serbian Party was formed in Vukovar in 2009, with Svetislav Lađarević at its helm. The Party of Danube Serbs is a continuation of the activity of the Serbian Radical Party in the territory of former Republic of Serbian Krajina. Organizations of the Serbian Radicals in Krajina had its branches in Vukovar, Kostajnica and Dvor upon Una. The party in Krajina was led by Rade Leskovac, but at the end of 1994 he tried to make RSK Serbian Radical Party independent from the Central Fatherland Administration in Belgrade, and was therefore removed from the office, and Branko Vojnica took over the helm (Barić 2005: 230-233). After the peaceful reintegration in 1998 former RSK radical party was registered under the name Party of Danube Serbs. It was formed on 17 April 1998 in Vukovar, headed by Radivoje Rade Leskovac. Party took part in 2007 elections in the 12th electoral unit, and candidate Rade Leskovac won 10.9% of the votes. On the posters posted all around Vukovar and in its vicinity, Leskovac was photographed with the three-finger salute which gave rise to numerous protests of Vukovar citizens and Croatian public.<sup>30</sup>

In accordance with the Erdut Agreement and the Letter of intention of the Government of the Republic of Croatia a Joint Council of Municipalities was formed in the territory of two counties: the Osječko-Baranjska and the Vukovarsko-Srijemska. Joint Council of Municipalities played a very important role within the process of peaceful reintegration and affirmation of constitutional rights of Serbs in the Republic of Croatia. Joint Council of Municipalities is an advisory body which follows and analyses overall affairs in the sphere of consistent implementation of education and cultural autonomy, protects human, civil and minority rights of the Serbian national minority in accordance

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29 [www.nasa-stranka.hr](http://www.nasa-stranka.hr).

30 [www.hidran.hidra.hr](http://www.hidran.hidra.hr).

with the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia.<sup>31</sup> Joint Council of Municipalities is the assembly composed of members of the Serbian national minority irrespective of their party affiliation, who are elected in the elections for local self-government and administration bodies in the territory of the two mentioned counties. In the present term of office the Assembly has 28 counsellors. Deputy Governors of these two counties are vice presidents of the Joint Council of Municipalities, and presidents perform the function professionally.<sup>32</sup>

The motives for the establishment of Serbian parties which operate today, except in case of SDSS, mostly include aspirations to gain power and esteem as well as material benefits for individuals and party mem-

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31 Joint Council of Municipalities has the following scope of competence: nominates candidates for the two positions of county's deputy governors in county assemblies, nominates candidates for the office of assistant ministers in the Ministry of the Interior, Justice, Education, Sport and Culture, and high-ranking office in the Ministry of Development and Reconstruction, and the Department for Exiles, nominates candidates for other offices, monitors work of its appointed and elected representatives, analyzes situation in municipalities and submits motions to higher-instance competent bodies and organizations, founds and directs, in accordance with the law, information and publishing activity of the Serbian national community (TV, radio stations and other mass media of communication), monitors implementation of cultural and education autonomy and gives proposals for their realization and promotion, takes care of the realization of human, civil and ethnic rights of the Serbian national community, analyzes and gives proposals in connection with the proportionate representation of Serbs in the police, judiciary, healthcare and other public services, maintains contacts with the President of the Republic of Croatia or his Office, participates in the building and maintenance of the institutional links with other Serbian ethnical communities in Croatia and abroad and cooperates with other entities in compliance with its scope of activity ([www.zvo.hr](http://www.zvo.hr)).

32 [www.zvo.hr](http://www.zvo.hr) and ASH, SDSS Archive, Box 1, Letter of Miloš Vojnović dated 17 December 1997 addressed to the Parliament of the Republic of Croatia. In this letter Miloš Vojnović wrote about all the roles of the Joint Council of Municipalities and expressed his dissatisfaction because the Council "was registered as the association of citizens" whereby stipulations of the Erdut Agreement and Letter of Intentions of the Government of the Republic of Croatia were violated. By such registration the Council was reduced "to the margins of social developments and is prevented from realizing its role defined under the stated acts, which means that in soon future it shall, by itself, dissolve", concluded Vojnović. Therefore Vojnović suggested to assign the Council a place "in the legislative-legal system of the Republic of Croatia, either through the amendments to the current Constitution Act on human rights and freedoms and the rights of ethnical communities and minorities in the Republic of Croatia, or through the Parliament's adoption of a special law". In 2001 the Department for international legal affairs of the Republic of Croatia sent a notification that after the conclusion of the UNTAES mission in Eastern Slavonija the Erdut Agreement shall remain in force, and specifically that further applicable shall be the provisions on proportionate representation in local self-government bodies, provisions on proportionate representation in police, healthcare and judiciary, and the fact that Serbs hold offices of two county's deputy governors in Osječko-Baranjska and Vukovarsko-Srijemska County ([www.zvo.hr](http://www.zvo.hr)). Joint Council of Municipalities is currently presided by Dragan Crnogorac.

bers, and in some cases the need for regional development of certain Croatian areas. Aspiration to material benefits, esteem and power is the most common reason in the creation of parties. This is most clearly visible from the fact that small Serbian parties, which do not have substantial number of voters in any Croatian region have joined together in order to defeat the Independent Democratic Serbian Party, and that their leaders, most often former prominent members of the SDSS or close associates of Dr. Milorad Pupovac, have joined together against the most powerful Serbian party in Croatia with the aim of gaining material superiority.

### **Cultural and Non-Governmental Organisations of the Serbs of Croatia**

The most important cultural institution of Serbs in Croatia is the Serbian Cultural Society "Education" (SKD "Prosvjeta"). It gathers together members of the Serbian population in Croatia and their institutions with the view to maintain and develop national identity. SKD Prosvjeta was formed in 1944 in Glina. The act of forming the society meant a continuation and renewal of the tradition of the activities of Serbian cultural, educational, publishing, scientific, economic, and humanitarian organisations which worked in Croatia at the end of the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th century. Thus the SKD "Prosvjeta" built its activities directly upon the activities of the pre-war Seljačko Kolo. After WW II this society formed over 300 sub-boards and gathered together a few dozens of thousand of members. It published newspapers *Srpska Riječ*, magazine *Prosvjeta*, and founded Publishing Company *Prosvjeta*, Museum of Serbs in Croatia and Printing House *Prosvjeta*. The activities of *Prosvjeta* died out after 1971, at the time of well-known political developments, and the activity of the Society was formally banned in 1980. In 1990, Society was revived, but its activities were completely absent due to war events. The activities of the *Prosvjeta* which operates today, were renewed in 1993. At first, sub-boards were active in the areas controlled by Croatian forces, and after 1997 sub-boards were formed throughout Croatia<sup>33</sup> During the war in the

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33 Sub-boards operate in Zagreb, Rijeka, Vrbovsko, Srpske Moravice, Donje Dubrave, Daruvar, Pakrac (Western Slavonija), Umag (Bujština), Karlovac, Osijek, Vukovar, Beli Manastir, Split, Knin, Dalj, Okučani, Negoslavci, Jagodnjak, Darda, Markušica, Trpinja, Mirkovci, Borovo, Korenica, Garešnica (Moslavina), Krnjak, Pačetin, Bršadinu, Veri, Petrinji, Malom Gradcu, Bijelom Brdu, Vrginmostu (Gvozdu), Gabošu, Kistanjama, Ostrovu, Biskupija, Vojnić, Dvor, Kneževi Vinogradi, Udbina, Gomirje, Glina, Bobota,

areas controlled by the Serbian forces Prosvjeta's work was manifested through other associations (Zora in Knin, Srpski Glas in Topuski and Serbian cultural centre in Vukovar).<sup>34</sup> Today SKD Prosvjeta publishes the Prosvjeta bimonthly magazine, the Ljetopis SKD Prosvjeta Annual Chronicles, books related to national culture and history of Serbs in Croatia, as well as fiction and poetry authored by Croatian Serbs.<sup>35</sup>

The second non-governmental, non-party and non-profit civil society organization which protects and affirms human rights and rights of national minorities is the Serbian Democratic Forum. At the initiative meeting, held on 13 June 1991 in Lipik Declaration on the interests and rights of the Serbian people in Croatia and procedures for their realization was adopted. From among the interests of the Serbian people it emphasizes the interest of remaining in a common state (together with the Serbs from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) and fostering of ethnical and cultural particularities along with taking into account cultural unity and cultural ties between the Serbian people and other peoples, including particularly Croatian people. From among the rights of the Serbian population in Croatia it emphasizes possible territorial, cultural and political autonomy. It also stresses the need to pursue independent policy, and specifically to form representative supra-party body, renew the party and set up negotiation groups with a negotiating position.<sup>36</sup> At the meeting in Lipik, Jovan Rašković was also present, and the meeting was backed also by the vice president of the SAO Krajina government Dušan Starević, at the same time also the president of SKD "Prosvjeta". Leadership of the SAO Krajina strongly opposed this meeting, and announced removal of Dušan Starević from the position of the vice president of the SAO Krajina government. Serbian Democratic

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Vrhovine, Ogulin, Virovitica, Sisak, Viškovo, Bjelovar, Hrvatska Kostajnica, Voćin and Metković ([www.skdprosvjeta.com](http://www.skdprosvjeta.com)).

34 [www.skdprosvjeta.com](http://www.skdprosvjeta.com).

35 The objectives of SKD Prosvjete include study of the history, culture and modern life of the Serbian people and preservation of cultural-education legacy, encouragement of scientific, research, art and literary work, organization of public discussions and gallery displays, and other activities in the sphere of science, culture, literary meetings and book promotions, publishing regular and periodical publications, organization of folklore, music and other cultural activities, support to development of reading clubs and libraries, study of the identity and script of the Serbian people, encouraging adoption and providing for the implementation of teaching programs important for the preservation of the identity of Serbs in Croatia, supporting gifted pupils and students, cooperation with akin societies, cooperation with the Serbian Orthodox Church, marking important cultural events and figures from the history of the Serbian people and promotion of public education as a traditional function of the Society.

36 ASH, Serbian Democratic Forum Archive, Deklaracija o interesima i pravima srpskog naroda u Hrvatskoj te postupcima njihova ostvarivanja.

Forum was formally established on 8 December 1991 in Zagreb, with 26 founders attending the assembly. At the founding assembly Starting Points for the Resolution of the Serbian Question in Croatia were adopted. Starting Points propose cultural and territorial autonomy of Serbs in Croatia.<sup>37</sup> The Proclamation of the Serbian Democratic Forum of the same date emphasizes that the Serbs of Croatia do not want to be “Palestinians in a Greater Serbia or in an Independent State of Croatia.”<sup>38</sup> It is visible from the documents of the Serbian Democratic Forum originating from the early nineties that the standing policy of SDF was a peaceful resolution of war conflicts and negotiation between the belligerent parties. Besides this, as hardly any other organisation in Croatia, SDF was keeping records also of all discriminatory regulations, violations of human rights and crimes against Serb civilians and Serb property in parts of Croatia which were not under the control of the Army of the Republic of Serbian Krajina.<sup>39</sup> Over many years, as well, SDF kept warning Croatian and foreign officials about the possible consequences of a conflict (which have ultimately come true). Since SDF had expanded its activity over the years, its Assembly supplemented the SDF Statutes. As of 24 July 1996 SDF is registered for providing assistance to citizens in the protection of their human, civil and national rights and giving them expert advices, for collecting humanitarian aid, conducting researches related to cultural and other assets of Serbs in Croatia and studying research findings, for publishing activity and working on the settlement of war consequences and renewal of devastated areas. SDF-led projects today include free of charge legal aid, human rights on the local level, minority employment, institutional support to stabilization or development of association, NGO capacity building and publishing the Identity magazine (Srpski demokratski forum 1997: 4-10).

The third key non-party and non-political organization of Serbs in Croatia is the Serbian Business Association “Entrepreneur” (“Privrednik”), formed at the end of the 19th century in Zagreb upon the initiative of Vladimir Matijević from Gornji Budački, a wholesaler

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37 ASH, Serbian Democratic Forum Archive, Polazišta za rješenje srpskog pitanja u Hrvatskoj.

38 ASH, Serbian Democratic Forum Archive, Proclamation of the Serbian Democratic Forum. The objectives of the Serbian Democratic Forum 1991 included work related to normative solutions which regulate the position of the Serbian people in Croatia, based on the agreement with representatives of the Croatian people, maintaining intensive contacts with all relevant social, political and government factors in Croatia, Europe and the world with the view to establish lasting peace and lasting agreement between the Serbian and Croatian people in Croatia.

39 See SDF's Bulletins I-V which, among others, include 1992- 1995 records of numerous crimes against Croatian Serbs, and against their property.

and a patriot. After the foundation of the Serbian Bank and the Union of Serb Farming Cooperatives, Matijević's idea about an institution which would financially support gifted children from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Vojvodina was realised. From its foundation in 1897 until its closure by the communist authorities in 1946, the "Entrepreneur" provided for the schooling of 36.775 pupils. The "Entrepreneur" was renewed before the first democratic elections in May 1990, but as a part of SKD "Prosvjeta". The same as "Prosvjeta", the "Entrepreneur" too, failed then to become sustainable. However, along with the renewal of the "Prosvjeta" on 18 December 1993, activities of "Entrepreneur" were renewed and since then it has been operating independently, and its main task is, the same as at the time of its foundation, to extend scholarships to gifted students and students of poor financial standing, and also to enhance economic opportunities in rural areas with Serbian population.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to these non-governmental, non-party organisations, also active in Croatia are numerous cultural-art societies, cultural-scientific centres (such as for example Milutin Milanković Cultural and Scientific Centre in Dalj) and other types of organizations (Entrepreneur Junior, Serbian Youth Forum, Community of Serbs from Zagreb, Community of Serbs from Rijeka, Community of Serbs of Istria, Community of Serbs in the Republic of Croatia, Miloš Vojnović Native Club of Kordun and Banija, 'Against Forgetting' Association of the Serbian Families of the killed, missing, kidnapped and disabled, and others).<sup>41</sup>

## Respondents' Stands on the Organisations of the Serbs of Croatia

In the framework of a research regarding the identity of Croatian Serbs in the territory of the entire Croatia, a survey was conducted in which two questions were related to political institutions and non-political organisations of Croatian Serbs. Respondents were asked the following questions:

- To what extent do political parties with the Serbian prefix (e.g. SDSS) have importance for the formation of the identity? In the area where you live, are there more Serbs in the Croatian political parties (e.g. HNS, SDP)?
- To what extent do non-political organisations (Prosvjeta,

<sup>40</sup> Srpsko privredno društvo Privrednik – programska načela.

<sup>41</sup> www.snv.hr.

Entrepreneur...) have importance for the identity of Serbs in Croatia/Krnjak?

This survey encompassed 36 persons of Serbian nationality from eastern Slavonia (Osijek: 2, Našice: 1), western Slavonia (Daruvar: 2, Pakrac: 1, Slatina: 3, Nova Gradiška: 1), north-western Croatia (Bjelovar: 3, Ludbreg: 1, Koprivnica: 1, Garešnica: 2), Banija (Dvor: 1, Kostajnica: 2, Glina: 1), Kordun (Slunj: 2, Karlovac: 1), Lika (Otočac: 1, Gospić: 1), Gorski Kotar (Ogulin: 1, Vrbovsko: 1), Dalmatia (Split: 1, Knin: 2, Benkovac: 1, Sinj: 1, Imotski: 2) and Dubrovnik coastal area (Dubrovnik: 1). Respondents belonged to different age groups. Thus, six belonged to 20 - 30 age group, nine to 30 - 40 age group, one to 40 - 50 age group, six to 50 - 60 age group, twelve to 60 - 70 age group, one to 70 - 80 age group, and one to above 80 age group.

It should be particularly emphasized that the responses quoted here are personal considerations and opinions of the respondents themselves, and that they do not represent general conclusions, or definitive facts. Additionally, although the respondents were sampled from different regions of Croatia, already their consent to interview places them into a group of those who want to talk about the Serbian party and non-party organisations in Croatia, or about other questions concerning the identity of Serbs in Croatia, whereby they can be classified as members of the group which accepts dialogue about this type of questions, opposed to the other existing group which does not want to speak about the asked questions either out of fear or because those questions are of no interest to them. I could not cover this type of respondents, thus this survey is inevitably partial in the very inception.

Answers to the first question mostly regarded the Independent Democratic Serbian Party and the activity of the Serbian National Council, considering the fact that minor parties do not have significant influence among Serbs of Croatia. Respondents' opinions depicted different aspects of the activities of the Party and the Council.

One of the opinions, entirely correct, is that SDSS has the greatest number of voters precisely in Vukovarsko-Srijemska and Osječko-Baranjska County. Namely, in these two counties, where peaceful reintegration had been carried out, the greatest number of Serbs have staid, and precisely SDSS was the most meritable for the conclusion of the Erdut Agreement which had made this possible. Serbs in eastern Slavonia and Baranja are still of the opinion that SDSS provides them for a better position than in other parts of Croatia. A respondent from Osijek (1957) thinks that position of the SDSS is the strongest in eastern Slavo-



nia and that there they make part of the Serbian identity: "SDSS in eastern Slavonia had ensured that Serbs could stay and therefore they are the main Serbian option. Serbs expect SDSS to protect Serbian interests and to ensure their survival and staying". A respondent from Dalj (1955) says that "thanks to peaceful reintegration and SDSS, Serbs in eastern Slavonia feel significantly better than in the rest of Croatia". In the rest of Croatia SDSS is also successful, especially in areas where traditionally 'Serbian' parties domineered. Thus SDSS has voters in Lika and parts of northern Dalmatia, but also in certain areas of Banija and Kordun where their influence is significantly weaker due to the anti-fascist past of these areas. A respondent from Gornji Kosinj (1967) speaks about this fact. "They (SDSS) have re-ethnicized the population there. What they had failed to accomplish in Banija and Kordun, where the anti-fascist tradition was stronger, they accomplished in Lika where Serbian parties and programs have always had more success. In Lika the power is divided between the CDU and the SDSS. There is no room for other parties." Serbian parties have had traditionally weak status in Hrvatska Kostajnica. A respondent from this town (1978) says that her "grandfathers and grand-grandfathers have never voted for Serbian parties. Grandpa used to say: nothing good can come out of it! Thus in my town also HNS is almost a purely Serbian party". Also in parts of western Slavonia, although in a considerably lower extent, SDSS is successful. Yet, here SDSS did not succeed to win power in any single municipality. The reason for this is probably related to a small number of returnees and insufficient engagement by the party itself, or stronger engagement by the non-party SDF which is in conflict with the SDSS leaders. A respondent from Voćin near Podravska Slatina (1976) testifies to a relative success of the SDSS: "Political parties with the Serbian prefix might have strongest impact on the formation of the identity, because if in power in individual municipalities they can initiate and fund concrete projects that contribute to creating and preserving identity. In Voćin municipality 75% of Serbs vote for the SDSS, and in parties with Croatian prefix Serbs are not in leading positions." A respondent from the surrounding of Pakrac (1961) regards that Serbian parties do not have more success in western Slavonia due to their disunity. "In Pakrac SDF and SDSS are active. They are disunited, actually fragmented into several fractions. People, you know, get more attached to individuals, to a name or a man." In some areas SDSS does not have enough voters due to its insufficient engagement. A respondent from Knin (1983) considers that the Party did not accomplish much in her community. "In Knin people do not care much for the party. They react

commensurately to benefits that a party had brought them. The question is what did that party do for the returnees?" Also a respondent from Garešnica (1986) thinks that the Party is strong only where there were conflicts. In addition, he explains other reasons why Serbian parties do not have success in areas where there were no interethnic conflicts. Another reason of insufficient interest in Serbian parties is weak Serbian identity in those areas (the area of Drava basin, Bjelovar and around Moslavina). "There the party resolved problems (he refers to eastern Slavonia and returnee regions). Here, in Moslavina, there were no such things, so the party is weak. A minority party cannot be successful where there is no jeopardy. Here we have a strong antifascist tradition, so people vote for SDP. Besides, Serbs in Moslavina are not interested in Serbian policy, they do not perceive themselves as a minority but as a part of population living in Croatia. Serbs may well join the Council or "Prosvjeta", but by no means would they join the Party". In some places the influence of SDSS is weak because of the small number of Serbs. A respondent from Imotsko (1957) regards that SDSS did not make much effort to win over voters in her community. "There where Serbs are a majority population, Serbian parties have more success. This does not apply to our community that much, because until the last year nobody from SDSS had turned up. I think that people have more trust in SDP and HNS." A respondent from around Ludbreg (1985) shares the same opinion: "Here half of the people take the voting lists for minorities, and the other half for the national list. SDSS does not have sufficient electorate here to be able to at least present itself." Also in Sinj, where the number of Serbs is extremely low, the situation is similar, according to a respondent from Dabar near Sinj (1949): "Here members of the Serbian community are most often politically organized through the SDP as well as through some other parties of left orientation." Even in Nova Gradiška, where there are significantly more Serbs than in Ludbreg, Sinj or Imotski, Serbian parties do not have much success: "Here most of the Serbs are traditional voters of the SDP and even members and voters of SDSS and other Serbian parties are concurrently members of SDP," said a respondent from Nova Gradiška (1981). A respondent from Benkovac (1982) regards that SDSS could deliver much more in his town. "Our representatives in Benkovac are not good. Much more should be done for the returnees, specifically one should go to see them and ask them about their problems." That SDSS is not just a national party is also the opinion of a part of my respondents. A respondent from Budimac near Našice (1960) regards that the SDSS is not "just a national party, it is a social-democratic party too.

Notwithstanding seven Serbian parties, there are many Serbs in Croatian parties. People from Banija are in HNS, because in their returnee communities this party was the only moderate option against the CDU.” A respondent from Ogulin (1979) talks about the division between the Serbian parties and the Social-Democratic party, but also about the necessity to present Serbian identity through the Serbian prefix: “Political representation of Serbs through the parties with the Serbian prefix is presently the only realistic representation of the Serbian community. Serbs are divided between Serbian parties and the SDP. And the only reason for this is that Serbs in Ogulin are nostalgic toward the Communist Party (KP) and live with conviction that the SDP is KP. Every public representation, activity or anything else through anything that holds a Serbian prefix helps to preserve the identity, if by nothing else then at least by mentioning the name. Serbs are still frightened, they are afraid to express their identity, therefore it is necessary to act in all fields under the Serbian prefix.” A respondent from Zagreb (1948) regards that Serbs had been traditionally SDP voters, before the Communist Party. “However, in the last conflicts SDP did not take the side of Serbian people in Croatia. In the 1990 elections all my people voted for SDP, believing that they would represent them. Yet, SDP kept silent, and silence means approval. That is why they no longer have equal Serbian support.” Serbian identity is also weak in big cities where because of mixed marriages also those who declare themselves as Serbs do not want to vote for the ‘Serbian’ parties, and instead vote for the ‘national’ parties. A respondent from Garešnica (1981), who works in a Serbian organization, gave an interesting statement, which coincides with the previous one given by a respondent from nearby Garešnica. “We called over 1000 people in Zagreb to explain them that there is a minority voting list. Most of them answered they were not interested in voting for a minority list because they feel as citizens of this state, and not as a minority, and that therefore they would vote for the national list.” Reasons for voting for the national list can be of different nature. A respondent (1986) from Velike Grabičane near Koprivnica (1986) recounted how she came to poll in Črnomerac (Zagreb) and asked for a national minority list. “To my astonishment, they asked me what minority I belonged to. In spite of my belonging to a minority, they were urging me to take the voting list for the national list. Only after I had long insisted that I want to vote as a minority they brought me the minority list, and then I filled it in at their desk. It was such an embarrassing experience.” How changeable and differently understood the identity can be illustrates the case of the grandfather of a respondent from Garešnica (1981). Additionally, it exposes reasons why a part of Serbs

in Croatia do not vote for the minority list. "When my grandpa and his friend came to vote at the last elections, a woman from the electoral commission asked them: 'Do you want to vote for the minority list?' Grandpa started yelling at her and told her that he was no minority but a citizen of this country and that his family has been there for three hundred years. These old people will never accept that they are a minority. They are so attached to this area and ever since they know of themselves they know they belong there".

Some respondents perceive SDSS as centralized, or oriented only to the area of eastern Slavonia, Baranja and western Srem where they have the largest number of voters. A respondent from Vlahović near Glina (1946) regards that "it is not good that SDSS has its headquarters in Vukovar. They should establish other local centres, and then the party would surely be stronger". A respondent from Daruvar regards that SDSS is sometimes insufficiently convincing: "SDSS accomplished most on the psychological level, to have the political voice of Serbs heard to some extent, but they were often unconvincing, short of political skill. Probably there is no consistent policy of Serbs in Croatia, all parties with the Serbian prefix quarrelled among each other over preferential treatment by the authorities, so we could name this policy a policy of favouritism. The official Croatian policy does not allow articulation of authentic political interest of Serbs in Croatia, nor the establishment of Serbian political unity. Sometimes, it seems to me that some people are paid not to express interests of Serbs in Croatia in a proper way". Some join a party exclusively because of the individuals at its helm. A respondent from Primišlje (1949) who lives in Zagreb for a long time recollects that "throughout the war Pupovac was with us in Zagreb and he never concealed anything". Some Croatian Serbs criticize SDSS along the same lines as a respondent from Zagreb (1948) who regards that "the party functions more based on interests. They quickly fall for material benefits, and much more could have been accomplished and many more people could have come back". A respondent from Knin (1979) reasons similarly: "It turns out that the parties serve more to themselves than to their electorate".

It appears clear out of all the respondents' answers that for Serbs in Croatia SDSS is the only party identifiable as a serious representative of this national minority. SDSS obviously accomplished most for the Serbs in eastern Slavonia, Baranja and western Srem where they succeeded to rescue Serbs from exodus. Therefore, the headquarters and the largest number of voters of this party are there. The party has success also in certain returnee communities where Serbian parties traditionally have

more voters. However, in north-western Croatia and in big towns the party has no success because of its weak engagement and a small number of voters, notably because of the weak Serbian identity. In some returnee communities with stronger antifascist tradition, SDSS has a feeble influence (e.g. Vojnić where it defeated SDP). The situation is similar also in returnee communities where before the arrival of SDSS, Croatian parties got formed and attracted local Serbs (as in Hrvatska Kostajnica). Some respondents vote for SDSS because of the prominent individuals who by their endeavours in the protection of the rights of Serbian national minority in Croatia have obliged Serbs of Croatia (e.g. Dr. Milorad Pupovac).

Only one response testifies to the importance of the Council in certain communities. A respondent from Primišlje near Slunj (1949), residing long in Zagreb, regards that the Council gives citizens of Serbian nationality possibility to socialize. "The Council gathers us together on New Years' Eve in the Globe. It is a gathering of Croatian Serbs and there we see each other. Otherwise, we would not see each other anywhere." The fact that no one else from among the other respondents found the Council individually worth mentioning, and that it was usually mentioned only alongside parties, pictures in realistic colours Council's recognition and importance for the respondents.

Respondents' answers mostly affirm the importance of minority institutions of non-political character, where the "Prosvjeta" holds a special place. A respondents from Velike Grabičane near Koprivnica (1986) spoke about the importance of the activities of the Serbian cultural society "Prosvjeta" for her personal identity after her coming to Zagreb: "I went to 'Prosvjeta' to socialize with Serbs. Thereby I somehow nurtured my identity in a big city. I wanted to dance Serbian folklore and I found free time for this. I knew that it was something ours." It is noteworthy that "Prosvjeta" in Zagreb does not gather Serbian residents of Zagreb. A respondent from Budimci (1960) regards that in big towns mostly "rural Serbs, those who had moved to that town, gather together in "Prosvjeta". He finds the reason for this in the awareness of the own identity and the elements that make it. With rural Serbs those are national customs and folklore, while urban Serbs are mostly short of that part of the identity. It is visible that in areas where Serbs make absolute majority, cultural institutions are not as important as in those areas where Serbs are not a majority population and where they are not well politically organised. A respondent from Gornji Kosinj (1967) who spent a part of his childhood in Doljani near Donji Lapac gave an interesting comment. "In Donji Lapac people treat culture as a light

stuff. Otherwise, their antennas are directed toward Bosnia and Serbia, they have strong Serbian parties, and they play big Serbs in pubs, so they do not need 'Prosvjeta' to preserve identity. Besides, culture is of no importance to them, and politics comes first." In Ogulin, where Serbian identity was nearly suppressed after the War in ex-Yugoslavia "Prosvjeta" played a very important role of the initiator of national awakening and blocker of the assimilation. A respondent from Ogulin (1979) regards that "Prosvjeta" is one of the factors meritable for the restoration of co-existence after war tragedies between 1991 and 1995: "in 2005 Serbian cultural association 'Prosvjeta' was formed in Ogulin and folklore section began to work. Fifty children got enrolled. The first performance was held in the movie theatre (in 2006) with the participation of two Serbian (from Drežnica and Ogulin) and two Croatian cultural-art societies. Around 500-600 viewers (of different nationalities) watched the programme and I can say that this started a new era of co-existence among people. I believe that many have understood that differences must not be the reason for hate but the bridges that connect us. 'Prosvjeta' was the first to stop assimilation by its cultural work and activity. It opened the way for the church (it gathered children and freed some parents from fear) for the programme of religious education." In Benkovac, where Serbian identity is relatively strong, SKD "Prosvjeta" makes it even stronger. "By organising the folklore, the Days of Desnica and similar events they contribute to preserving the identity", said an interviewee from Benkovac (1982). Sub-boards of the "Prosvjeta" dissolved in certain Serbian communities in Croatia precisely because of the lack of people. "Our first sub-board of 'Prosvjeta' was established in Kosinj in 1994. It dissolved because of the absolute lack of people", regards a respondent from Gornji Kosinj (1967). Still, most of the respondents regard that "Prosvjeta" has a very low importance among Serbs in Croatia. "The identity of Serbs in Ludbreg is formed by religion and church. People don't have a clue about the 'Entrepreneur', while 'Prosvjeta' is also an unknown to them", said an interviewee from Ludbreg (1985).

Taken all together, these statements allow for a conclusion that "Prosvjeta" had achieved really much in those communities where this Society had exceptional figures as its organisers and, on the other hand, failed to gather together Serbs in those communities where the number of Serbs is very low, where Serbian identity is weakened and where insufficiently committed individuals lead "Prosvjeta". In areas where Serbs are in absolute majority, like in some parts of Lika, Kordun, Banija and eastern Slavonia "Prosvjeta" does not play an important role in the creation of the Serbian identity. There, Serbs have their parties, church

organisation, councils, media, thus a folklore society does not make particularly important element in their identity. "Prosvjeta" is also not strong in Croatian towns since the identity of urban Serbs is based on other elements. Practically, we can conclude that "Prosvjeta" is the most important in small rural areas where Serbian identity is endangered because of the assimilation, ethnic mimicry, and mixed marriages. There it preserves Serbian customs and folklore and the Serbian people identity which would otherwise be either suppressed, among the older generations, or forgotten or unknown, among the younger.

## Conclusion

In the last twenty years Serbs of Croatia crossed the path from guardians of the state to guardians of the name. By organising themselves into numerous political and non-political organisations Serbs of Croatia tried to preserve their legal position the best they could. In early nineties, one part of Serbs of Croatia tried to do this by violent means establishing the Republic of Serbian Krajina (RS), while the other part, acting in Croatian towns, tried to ensure referred position by legal means (SDF, SKD "Prosvjeta"). After 1995 and exodus of Serbs from western Slavonia, Banija, Kordun, Lika and northern Dalmatia the number of Serbs in Croatia significantly decreased. Legal means for the realization of the rights of Serbs in Croatia remained as the only possible modus. During the implementation of the peaceful reintegration of the Danube Basin territories, the Independent Democratic Serbian Party was formed, as the only relevant Serbian party present in Croatia, and thereafter also a sequence of other minor parties with the Serbian prefix which failed to attract voters to their programmes (partly because from their inception they were split parties, partly because they were politically obsolete, and partly because they were limited to a smaller territory). Through the Serbian National Council, county Councils and Joint Council of Municipalities Serbs of Croatia managed to realize equality at the local level, and through three parliament representatives at the state level. Although, numerous problems have not been solved yet, although numerous status rights of Serbs of Croatia have not been fully defined, after examining the development of the Serbian organizations in the last twenty years we can conclude that the democratic processes that Croatia has been undergoing in the last twelve years have opened way towards a more equitable society in which national minorities, including in particular the Serbian, as the most numerous national minority in Croatia, will be enjoying the position they deserve.

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