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Fascism and anti-#Serb sentiments in #Croatia

EU Reporter (11.05.2020) – <https://bit.ly/3bkcuuV> – On 1 May 2020, Croatia's president Zoran Milanovic left a state ceremony celebrating the 25th anniversary of the reconquest of territories held by rebel Serbs for four years in protest of a Nazi-era salute – writes Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

The president's reaction was prompted by a war veteran who was wearing the emblem 'For the homeland ready' (Za Dom Spremni) used by the Ustashi fascists during WWII. Between 1941 and 1945, the Nazi-aligned Ustasha murdered tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Roma. They were known for their particularly brutal and sadistic methods of execution. Despite the connotation of the event, Prime Minister Andrej Plenković

decided to stay, which demonstrated the challenges for politicians and society alike when confronted with the fascist past of the country.

The EU is currently developing a policy to support the gradual integration of the Western Balkans, including the accession of Serbia, but at the same time anti-Serb sentiments continue to increase in Croatia.

Dalmatia, a well-known touristic region along the Adriatic Sea, is one area where many Serbs do not feel at home.

An investigation with local Serbs that was carried out by Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) about the situation in Zadar, the main city of Dalmatia after Split, is particularly enlightening. Since 1990, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), a ruling party in Croatia and a member of the European People's Party (EPP) at the European Parliament, has continuously held the post of mayor of Zadar.

In 2008, Mayor Živko Kolega refused to lay a wreath at a monument for anti-fascists who died during WWII. Anti-fascists in Zadar objected, insisting that local and national authorities were not doing enough to combat the neo-Ustasha ideology. Anti-Serb hostility is a by-product of this fascist political agenda.

One example of how a political ideology has translated into hardship for individuals is the discrimination that Dalibor Močević faced. Močević is a Croatian citizen of Serbian descent who spoke to HRWF about the challenges he faced in receiving fair treatment by various administrations and the judiciary of Zadar.

From his birth in 1972 until 1994, Močević lived in an apartment in Zadar that belonged to his father. In 1992, his father died as a victim of the war in Bosnia after being placed in a sanatorium.

In 1993, Močević, who was employed by a merchant shipping company, returned from a one-year trip on foreign seas. He discovered that his house, which jointly belonged to him and his elderly mother, had been confiscated by the authorities and given to Croatian refugees who had been displaced by the war. After 15 years of judicial proceedings and conflicting decisions from the Zadar Municipal Court and Zadar County Court, Močević was deprived of his property rights. In 2010, he appealed this decision at the Supreme Court and then at the Constitutional Court, but to no avail.

In 2009, his mother died under suspicious circumstances. Močević requested access to a number of medical reports from the General Hospital in Zadar, which he is entitled by law, but his request was denied. He filed a complaint against the Ministry of Health but received no reply. Močević sent another complaint to the County Prosecutors Office in Zadar requesting an investigation based on his suspicions, but no criminal investigation was ever initiated.

Additionally, the second husband of his late mother, A. Radetić, who was friendly with some politicians that had dubious pasts, illegally took Močević's inheritance. In 2017, the Constitutional Court rejected Močević's complaint. Močević felt discriminated against because of the general anti-Serbian hostility that has persisted since the collapse of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. On 2 May 1991, during one of the many clashes between Croats and Serbs, Radetić's uncle was part of a Croatian mob that ransacked over a hundred shops of Serbian companies and businesses and destroyed hundreds of Serb houses in Zadar. The police passively watched these violent incidents without interfering.

In another case concerning his divorce, Močević was denied custody of his young son despite the fact that he had been taken from his ex-wife by the local Center for Social Welfare because of her persistent alcoholism and psychiatric problems.

Močević asserts that he was repeatedly denied justice in these

instances because of his Serb origin. His lawyer shares the view that Serbs in Croatia are discriminated against due to various personal or institutional collusions between a number of judges, political figures and extreme nationalists.

The President of Croatia did well to withdraw from a ceremony that had some fascist connotations, but there is still a long way to go before anti-Serb sentiments are eradicated entirely. The wars between 1991 to 2001 which led to the breakup of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the current frontiers between newly established states left wounds at individual, societal and institutional levels. These urgently need to be healed for the wellbeing of all Croatian citizens and so as to allow successful integration of the seven Western Balkan states into the EU.

Willy Fautré is director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

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