

CAFÉ EUROPE

Before Tudjman, after Tudjman

Ivica Racan and Croatia's first steps towards the EU

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When Ivica Racan, then leader of the League of Communists of Croatia, shook hands with Franjo Tudjman in May 1990, peacefully ceding power following the first multiparty elections in Croatia since World War II, it seemed that he, along with the disdained communists, was headed for the dustbin of history.

Not so. Ten years later, Racan returned to the political scene as prime minister. He was to start Croatia's transformation from a nationalist fortress isolated by the West into a democracy headed towards European Union membership. It was Racan who signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU in 2001, the first step to accession negotiations. On 21 February 2003, he submitted Croatia's application for EU membership to Costas Simitis, prime minister of Greece, which held the rotating EU presidency at the time. Racan said:

“Croatia is finally formalizing its strategic commitment to become a part of this new political entity on the world’s map. What other alternative would it have, being culturally and geographically placed at its centre, but to become an equal and constructive part of Europe.”

Racan was initially strongly supported by the EU and the United States as an antidote to Tudjman. The nationalist opposition, led by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), opposed his reforms and branded him – together with newly elected president [Stipe Mesic](#) – a traitor.

Racan did not follow through, however. By 2002 the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague had become critical of Croatia because of the government’s foot-dragging over extraditions of suspected war criminals. The UK postponed ratification of the SAA because of insufficient co-operation with the ICTY. At home, the pressure from nationalist opponents who strongly opposed co-operation with the court wore Racan down. Exhausted, he called elections two months before his term was up and in November 2003 suffered defeat at the hands of the HDZ, then led by [Ivo Sanader](#). Though elected on a nationalist ticket, Sanader turned around and continued Racan’s pro-European policies. In a number of difficult areas, like the arrest of war crime suspects, he was to go considerably further than Racan. Under the HDZ Croatia joined NATO in 2009 and completed EU accession negotiations in June 2011.

Croats still debate whether Racan lacked the guts to confront his opponents or whether his hands were tied by overwhelming nationalist sentiment. His attitude was often caricatured as “decisive maybe.” A 2003 U.S. embassy cable described him as “a man of patience and tactic, rather than one of action,” a trait that “has been maddening for those who hoped for decisive leadership and has meant missed opportunities for Croatia.” No one denies, however, that Racan made an early and crucial contribution placing Croatia on track to becoming the EU’s 28th member.

Racan was born on 24 February 1944 in a Nazi concentration camp in Ebersbach, Germany, where his father, a man of leftist views, and his mother were interned. A German woman saved Racan and his mother from the camp, sending them to her sister’s in Dresden. The two survived the city’s 1945 bombardment. Racan’s father was saved by the Americans.

The family returned to Croatia and lived in Slavonski Brod, in a cottage near the town's garbage lot. Benefiting from free access to university in socialist Yugoslavia, Racan studied law in Zagreb and lived, by his own accounts, as a "bohemian" and a "rebel." He loved Faulkner and Joyce, listened to Elvis and fell in love with the impressionists during a trip to Paris. Many years later, he admitted to smoking pot (the first Croatian politician to do so) in Amsterdam in the late 1960s.

In 1961, at age 17, Racan joined the communists, the only political force at the time, and became a full-time party functionary. He never held any other job. In 1972, he became a member of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Croatia. From 1982 to 1986 he also headed the party-run political school in Kumrovec.

In 1989, under Slobodan Milosevic, Serb nationalism was flourishing. In Croatia, the HDZ, led by Franjo Tudjman, was countering with its own nationalist agenda. In December 1989, the Croatian communists felt pressured to call the first ever multiparty elections, which were scheduled for spring 1990. In an effort to show a new face, they elected Ivica Racan as the party's leader.

Before the elections, on 22 January 1990, Racan led the Croatian delegation out of the 14th party congress of the Yugoslav communists, following the Slovenians, in protest of Milosevic's policies. These were the dying days of the Yugoslav Federation. (On 25 June 1991, Slovenia and Croatia would declare independence.) Racan would later recall:

"Many years later, [in 2001] I signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union in Luxembourg. It was a solemn, important act. The goals of our and Slovenia's projects were the democratization of Yugoslavia, the strengthening of its confederal units and its entry into the EU. Milosevic's machinery prevented it all. And then I signed the Agreement with the EU in the name of Croatia ... when I returned to the hotel and turned on the television, I saw the first hearing of Milosevic [before the ICTY] in The Hague. I stayed sitting there, aware of a diplomatic incident – they were waiting for me [for a ceremonial dinner] – but I stayed watching it for a full hour. For me, personally as well, it was a dramatic moment."

Racan's communists lost the 1990 elections. Back then, many in Croatia saw Tudjman's HDZ, which played the nationalist card and spoke of Croatian independence, as the only adequate answer to Milosevic's warmongering policies. Two years later, Racan's party,

renamed as the Party of Democratic Changes (SDP), barely made it into parliament.

Racan thought of retiring. He didn't, and instead refurbished the party into a modern centre-left group, the Social Democratic Party (SDP). His patience was to pay off. By the end of the 1990s, a decade into Tudjman's rule, Croats had grown tired of a malfunctioning, internationally isolated country. Tudjman's death in December 1999 marked a watershed moment. In elections held on 3 January 2000, a coalition led by Racan won a landslide victory. Racan knew his job would be difficult. His government had to revive the economy, ravaged by war and crooked privatization; to raise democratic standards; and to address Croatia's dark legacies and war crimes.

On 21 March 2000 Racan extradited a Bosnian Croat to the ICTY. In April 2000, Croatia's parliament adopted a declaration granting the ICTY jurisdiction over crimes committed during Croatia's 1995 military offensives in territories occupied by Serb rebels since 1991. (Tudjman had refused to do this, insisting that no such crimes could have taken place.) ICTY investigators began digging. Croatian nationalists, infuriated, declared Racan and President [Mesic](#) national traitors. Racan remained firm:

"The aggravation of relations with the court in The Hague and, by that, with the international community, does not serve Croatia. It serves a policy that until yesterday was covering up war crimes, harming Croatia and pushing it into isolation."

Still, feeling increasing pressure from the right, in October 2000 Racan had parliament adopt another declaration, which stated that Croatia had waged a defensive war of liberation. It was the first of several compromises that he would make as he sought to reconcile the irreconcilable: cooperating with the ICTY, which wanted to prosecute Croat war criminals, and pre-empting assaults from the right, which refused to accept that Croats had committed war crimes.

In February 2001, after a district court judge indicted Croatian general Mirko Norac – the first war crimes case against a senior officer – more than 100,000 people showed up at a heated protest in Split. The rally, organized by war veterans and backed by army generals and the HDZ, was as much against the prosecution of Norac as it was against Racan's government.

Racan apparently felt he had to cut deals to tame the radicals. When Norac was later indicted by the ICTY for other atrocities, Racan convinced the court to transfer the case to Croatia. In June 2001, Racan received a confidential war crimes indictment against General Ante Gotovina, whose adventurous past in France's foreign legion and wartime accomplishments had turned him into a national hero. Racan did not order his arrest, however. He instead wrote to the court's chief prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, asking her to reconsider the indictment. Gotovina went into hiding and Del Ponte blamed Racan for allowing him to flee. In 2002, Racan refused to extradite General Janko Bobetko, a former chief of staff, also accused of war crimes. Bobetko barricaded himself inside his home, declaring that he would not be taken alive. The case came to an end when Bobetko died in 2003.

In parallel, Racan was working on economic and democratic reforms. His government immediately curbed the powers of the presidency, which many felt had been abused by Tudjman. The ban on protests in front of government buildings was lifted. Curbs were placed against the wiretapping of political opponents and journalists. Critical media were no longer persecuted. The government's determination to play by market economy rules lowered investment risks and attracted foreign investment. A highway linking Croatia's north and south – Zagreb and Split – was built. The road helped revive tourism but also showed that a multimillion-euro business deal could be transparent and fair. In 2002, parliament adopted a constitutional law granting wide rights to minorities – from the right to use their native language to representation in governing bodies.

But all this proved too little for Croats hungry for a quick fix. Living standards had improved only a bit – in four years the average net wage increased from some €415 to €500. Instead of the promised 200,000 new jobs, only 50,000 were created, while some 330,000 people remained unemployed. Racan himself acknowledged his failure to go after tycoons who owed their fortunes to murky privatization deals during the Tudjman era.

Racan lost the 2003 elections but, in a way, had achieved the impossible: he had managed to get the EU to accept Croatia's application for membership while avoiding a nationalist backlash. "[He] will be remembered as a man who enabled democratic changes in Croatia and a prime minister who steered Croatia onto its European path," [Mesic](#) said when Racan died from cancer on 29 April 2007.

“I am satisfied,” Racan told his biographer, Zdenko Duka, in 2005, after it had become clear that the new HDZ leadership would remain committed to Croatia’s pro-EU course. “We moved Croatia closer to Europe and we raised its reputation. Our projects brought economic development, we stabilized democratic standards and parliamentary democracy. After that, it would be hard to go back to the 1990’s.” ■