

# CAFÉ EUROPE

## The EU as a chance for Croatia's Serbs

Milorad Pupovac and political change

Kristof Bender and Snjezana Vukic 10 May 2012



*Milorad Pupovac. Photo: Dalibor Zoric/flickr*

Twenty years ago, Milorad Pupovac was in an unenviable position. Most Serbs considered him a traitor. Most Croats saw him as a public enemy. Today, Pupovac is Croatia's most popular Serb politician, has earned the respect of many Croats, and represents his country – expected to accede to the EU on 1 July 2013 – as an observer in the European Parliament. “Serbs immediately recognised the EU accession process as a chance to restore their political role in Croatia,” he tells ESI.

**M**ilorad Pupovac was born on 5 November 1955 in the village of Ceranje Donje on the Dalmatian coast. He graduated from the University of Zagreb with a degree in philosophy and linguistics. An ardent student – he worked as a tram

driver to beef up his budget – Pupovac stayed on at the Faculty of Philosophy as a professor of linguistics.

In 1988, as nationalist tensions were rising across socialist Yugoslavia, Pupovac joined intellectuals from Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo and other parts of Yugoslavia to form the Association for the Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (UJDI), a group dedicated to promoting the country's transition to democracy. Eventually, the project was hijacked by nationalists, Pupovac says.

*“Once they came in, I felt responsible. My alternative was to just go my way, to leave, as many people called me to come to Belgrade, as many people expected me to go to one of the European universities. But at the same time, I felt that I had helped to open a certain process and that suddenly someone took control over the process and started to misuse what we had made.”*

Pupovac stayed, determined to remain a moderate voice. His Serb colleagues were to turn against him in 1991 after Pupovac called the creation of “autonomous areas” by Belgrade-backed Serbs in Croatia a “dangerous and unacceptable act of suicidal self-statehood.” (Soon after the Yugoslav army, controlled by Slobodan Milosevic, turned its guns on Croatian cities like Dubrovnik and Vukovar in a war that would end only in 1995, confirming Croatia's statehood in its pre-war borders.)

Pupovac openly supported Croatia's independence and took part at a peace conference at The Hague in 1991, which – unsuccessfully – tried to find a peaceful solution for Croatia.

Returning from The Hague, he learned about the killings of dozens of Serb civilians at Gospic, some 50 kilometers from the Adriatic town of Zadar.

*“I started to speak about that. I felt responsible for them. I was going to The Hague on behalf of them, not on behalf of myself. And then I became a public enemy in Croatia.”*

War was a difficult time for Pupovac. Every evening when he returned home, he wondered, before turning on the light, what kind of graffiti he would see or “whom I might meet and with what kind of intention.”

It took a long time for the situation to improve. In 1995 Pupovac was elected to parliament as the only MP of the short-lived Social

Democratic Action of Croatia, a splinter party of the Social democrats. In 1997 he established the Independent Democratic Serbian Party (*Samostalna Demokratska Srpska Stranka, SDSS*), which soon became the leading Serb political party in Croatia. He later also established the Serbian National Council (*Srpsko Narodno Vijeće, SNV*) as an umbrella organization for all Serbs in Croatia. The Council sought to look after the Serbian community's rights and identity, as well as its integration into Croatian society.

Pupovac identifies three big post-war turning points in relations between Croats and Croatian Serbs. The first was the peaceful re-integration of rebel Serb-occupied Eastern Slavonia into Croatia in early 1998, two years after the Croatian army retook Serb-occupied territory in central and southern Croatia. The second turning point was in 2000, when a pro-Western government under [Ivica Račan](#) took power after the death of Franjo Tudjman, putting an end to the latter's anti-minority policies. But the "most decisive moment", according to Pupovac, came in late 2003, when new Prime Minister [Ivo Sanader](#) – who had taken over as leader of Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) – decided to make EU accession his overall priority. Sanader realized that in order to bring his country closer to the EU he had to reach out to Croatia's Serbs. The new prime minister invited Pupovac's Independent Serbian Democratic Party to join his government. Although he had relentlessly blamed the HDZ for the postwar suffering of Croatia's Serbs, Pupovac accepted.

*"Not many people around me were happy with that. Some of them were people with whom I live, and with whom I share day and night ... but I said: 'It's our duty to free Croatia, to release Croatia from the Serbian-Croatian confrontation' ... I just figured out that I had to take part in that and accept that coalition. Just to do something that no one else can do ...*

*Until that moment the issues related to the Serbs as refugees, as returnees, as a minority, had been pushed away from the agenda, had been neglected and denied as irrelevant. So [the coalition] meant that those issues not only became part of the political commitments of the Stabilization and Association Agreement, but [were] also listed in the program of the new government. So these problems became official problems, recognized by the government, incorporated in the program of the government and being presented to the public."*

Briefly after taking office, Sanader attended an Orthodox Christmas reception of the Serbian community in Zagreb. In a short speech, he

used the traditional Serb Christmas greeting “Christ is born” (*Hristos se rodi*), becoming the first Croatian politician to do so. As Tudjman’s successor, his remarks carried a huge symbolical meaning.

Pupovac’s Independent Democratic Serbian Party (SDSS) participated in HDZ governments from late 2003 to 2011. (In 2008, Pupovac’s party colleague Slobodan Uzelac became deputy prime minister for regional development and return of refugees.) Pupovac says that Sanader, who is currently being tried for corruption, “was not easy”, but also that “it’s a pity that we have lost him.” He describes him as “in some aspects a very courageous man” and respects him as “a man who made an enormous contribution to Croatia’s accession to the EU and to changes in Croatia.”

The EU accession process spearheaded by Sanader changed the position of Serbs in Croatia’s body politic:

*“Serbs were not only a passive object of the implementation of the European Union criteria. Serbs immediately recognized ... the accession process as a chance to restore their political role in Croatia as a part of the Croatian political system, as a part of Croatian society. That meant an opportunity to switch from the position of the suppressed minority to an active minority, from a disadvantaged group of citizens to an active group of citizens that acts in the interest of the entire country.”*

Throughout Croatia’s negotiation process, the EU insisted on one key condition: that Croatia improve its relations with Serbs. This meant enabling refugee returns, restitution of property, and prosecution of war crimes against Serbs.

*“The pure concept of an ethnic state, as it has been imagined by [Serbian President Slobodan] Milosevic and Tudjman, as masterminds and also as warlords, the concept of the humanitarian exchange of the population, of ethnic cleansing as a legitimate tool of creating stability, in the state and between the states, have been challenged immediately as the process of international integration opened and the process of the accession to the EU started.”*

*“Without Croatian accession to international associations like the Council of Europe, NATO and particularly the EU, it would be very hard to imagine that these problems would be treated as they were.”*

Many problems of Croatia’s Serbs have been resolved. According to Pupovac, of some 250,000 Serbs who fled, 135,000 are registered as

returnees and of those, 70-80,000 permanently live in the places they have returned to. A significant number of the Serb houses damaged or destroyed in the war have been reconstructed. Minorities are guaranteed eight seats in parliament – three of which are reserved for Serbs. And while close to 60,000 Serbs have yet to recover their homes, a new law from 2010 is likely to expedite the process.

The changes go well beyond legal reforms, says Pupovac.

*“People are changing. It’s not any longer so simple-minded, one-sided as it was. It is quite plural now. When I’m walking the street – I’m walking all the time without any security – some people comment, in a positive way or in a negative way, but there is no longer the kind of atmosphere where I can’t walk. Of course, there are periods when tensions rise ...*

*Of course I’m not going to the stadiums where people are shouting ‘kill the Serbs, kill the Serbs!’ during soccer, water polo or handball games. But if I listen to that on TV, as it sometimes happens, and if I hear it clearly, the next day I will stand up in the parliament and raise the issue. And then my colleagues from other fractions join me. Unfortunately, sometimes it will stop only at that, at promises and commitments.*

*There are still grey zones where this legacy of the 1990s lives, where this legacy of World War II lives and where this typical central European combination of ethnic and religiously grounded nationalism still lives. That’s a fact. It is something where we have to be careful and active because we never know when and how strong it might be...”*

Even if some challenges remain, says Pupovac, the relationship between Croatia and Serbia has improved significantly:

*“What is missing is not co-operation. Co-operation is more or less OK. What is missing is facing up to the character of the war, the consequences of the crimes, and the victims. The policy towards victims is one-sided. If you go to Serbia and ask people, as one institute did in a recent survey, who was killed in Ovchara in 1991 [more than 200 Croat soldiers and civilians were killed there by Serb forces] ... If you ask common, ordinary Serbs, more than 60 per cent will answer: Serbs. If you ask an average Croatian about Serb victims in the Medak Pocket, where the Croatian army and police committed a slaughter in 1993 ... they will tell you that these Serbs were armed. As one Croatian politician said at the time, ‘but that elderly lady had been found with a Kalashnikov.’ This is something that has to be changed.”*

In 2011, as the European Commission informed that Croatia was not yet ready to complete membership talks, Pupovac, together with now Foreign Minister [Vesna Pusic](#) and two other MPs, visited a number of EU capitals to lobby for the end of negotiations. As a member of the Serbian minority, Pupovac's presence carried particular weight, particularly when it came to discussions on judiciary and fundamental rights (one of the negotiation chapters). Pupovac told European sceptics:

*"If we will not finish the process of negotiations, we will endanger what we have achieved, and we achieved a lot. I'm not telling you that we achieved everything we committed to, but we have achieved enough to continue. And if we don't continue as a candidate, as a candidate who finished negotiations, and who will be ready to sign the Treaty, then everything can be endangered ..."*

*Not finishing the process of negotiations will give a chance to those who advocated all along that we are giving a lot, that we are giving too much, that we are being blackmailed, that we are selling the country."*

On 30 June 2011, negotiations were completed. On 9 December 2011 Croatia signed the Accession Treaty to the European Union and is set to join on 1 July 2013.

#### **Further reading:**

- Milorad Pupovac, ["Gradimo svoje mjesto u Evropi i regiji"](#), Novosti, 14 January 2012.
- Tomislav Klauski, ["Nije lako biti Milorad Pupovac"](#), index.hr, 1 May 2011.
- Davorka Blazevic, ["Milorad Pupovac, emotivni pragmatik"](#), Slobodna Dalmacija, 23 April 2011.
- Index.hr, ["Jedini partner kojega Sanader nije uspio prevariti"](#), 22 January 2008.
- Danica Kirka, ["Serb Makes Himself Heard in Croatia"](#), Los Angeles Times, 5 November 1991. ■