

CAFÉ EUROPE

Ending the age of heroes

Ivo Sanader and the battle for a European Croatia

Kristof Bender 4 April 2013



Ivo Sanader. Photo: Geyrhalter Film

Ivo Sanader took over the party of Croatia's war-time president Franjo Tudjman. When his party came back to power under his leadership, he abandoned practically all policies dear to Tudjman in order to follow EU and NATO membership of Croatia as his overarching political goal. Yet, this is not what he will be mostly remembered for.

On 20 November 2012 a man was sentenced to ten years behind bars by a court in Zagreb. He was not a typical criminal, but Ivo Sanader, a polyglot Dalmatian who as prime minister had led Croatia into NATO and to the threshold of EU accession.

According to the judgement, Sanader had accepted in 2008 a bribe of 5 million Euro from the Hungarian oil company MOL. In return, the

company got a controlling stake in Croatia's oil company INA. The court also found that in 1996 Sander, as deputy foreign minister, had accepted fees from the Austrian Hypo Alpe Adria Bank related to loans and easier entry into the Croatian banking market. Trials related to other corruption charges against Sanader are still ongoing in Zagreb.

Sanader's sentence is yet another dramatic turn in the remarkable, and ultimately tragic, political career of one of Croatia's most decisive leaders. Few politicians in South East Europe have been as successful in winning both elections and the support of the leaders of the EU. There were times when Sanader appeared to be able to walk on water: He was able to keep the support of war veterans, while also helping the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) locate and seize one of the most popular Croatian generals in 2005. He brought Croatian Serbs into his government, and yet managed to retain support from Croatian nationalists. Sanader also sponsored new legislation supporting the fight against corruption, on the basis of which investigations were launched that eventually led to his own downfall.

Today, Sanader is left with few friends and supporters in Croatia. His party, the HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), expelled him in 2010. Yet, even his detractors admit that he profoundly shaped post-Tudjman Croatia. It is very likely that without him Croatia today would be neither a member of NATO nor about to join the EU.

To appreciate Sanader's impact on Croatia's transformation, it is useful to compare his understanding of "Europe" to that of Franjo Tudjman, his predecessor as leader of the HDZ.

For Tudjman, Europe was an abstract idea. As a believer in Huntington's theory of the clash of civilisations, he regarded it the Christian home of his Croatian nation state. Looking for support when he set up the HDZ in the late 1980s, Tudjman embraced the right-wing diaspora in North America that had their origins with the political émigrés after the Second World War. Some North American Croats even returned to Croatia, most notably Gojko Susak, a Croat from Herzegovina (in Bosnia) who became Tudjman's defence minister and one of his most trusted associates.

Sanader, [born 1953 in the Dalmatian port city of Split into a deeply religious family](#), was at ease in 21st century Europe in a way the former Titoist general and later Croatian nationalist Tudjman had

never been. His father was a plumber, his mother a housewife who supplemented the family income by working as a cleaning lady. Supported by the Church, all of Ivo Sanader's [three brothers studied theology](#). One brother, Vinko, became a priest. Ivo's sister Danica became a nun.

While Ivo Sanader was rooted in Croatian Catholicism in a way the former communist general Tudjman never was, he also had a very different and personal experience of Western Europe. He first studied theology for two years in Rome: and this fluency in Italian would later be of use in his conversations with the Swiss-Italian prosecutor Carla Del Ponte. After a short period at the University in Split, where he met his future wife Mirjana, the couple moved to Innsbruck, Austria. There Sanader studied comparative literature and French, developing fluency in French and German. After working in Split at a publishing company in the 1980s, he moved back to Innsbruck in 1988 to try his luck in business.

Sanader thus belonged to a very different diaspora, more similar to the hundreds of thousands of Croats who had left Yugoslavia in the 1960s and 1970 for economic reasons, heading above all to Germany and Austria. Like Sanader, many of these Croats were politicised by the events surrounding the dramatic collapse of communist Yugoslavia. However, for them "Europe" was not an abstract idea about civilisation, but a real place – an affluent democratic community of nations.

In 1990, when Sanader entered politics at age 37 and set up an HDZ branch in Tyrol (Austria), he was a European in this sense, speaking German with an Austrian accent, at home in Rome, Paris and Vienna. For him "Returning to Europe" was about Croatia joining its Northern and Western neighbours – not defending the ramparts of Christianity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In an interview with ESI Sanader explained that he "wanted to be a part of this historic movement, to participate in this historic achievement, in this historic challenge for my country."

Sanader first met Tudjman at an HDZ party gathering. A few months later, when the HDZ won the first free elections in spring 1990, Sanader moved back to Croatia and was put in charge of managing the National Theatre in his home city Split. In 1992 he was elected to the Croatian parliament and appointed minister of science, technology and information. Thanks to his fluency in German, Italian, French and English, he was at ease talking to representatives of foreign states and

institutions. Before too long he became deputy minister of foreign affairs. Except for a stint as head of Tudjman's office from late 1995 to mid-1996, he remained deputy foreign minister until 2000.



Tudjman's grave. Photo: Geyrhalter Film

In April 2000, after Tudjman's death and the HDZ's defeat at parliamentary elections, the party held a congress to elect a new chairman. At the gathering Sanader proposed "to open the party towards the international community, to regain a [positive] image within the international community and to become a member of the EPP, the European People's Party." He also suggested opening the party towards other parties in Croatia: "in the 90s we were too self-centred. The party was not able to make any coalition with other parties."

[Sanader was elected party leader](#) with a huge majority of 1,370 votes. Ljerka Mintas-Hodak, formerly Tudjman's minister for European integration who stood for a continuation of Tudjman's policies, received only 274 votes. Branimir Glavas, a former war-lord from Eastern Croatia, even less with 130.

Capturing the party mood, Vladimir Seks, a senior HDZ official, told the weekly [Nacional](#) later why he voted for Sanader:

"I saw him as a man who could be an integrative factor in the party ... as a democrat and pro-European he had a good reputation in international political circles. Finally, I judged him to be a man with the decisiveness to transform the HDZ."

In reality, the struggle over the soul of the HDZ had hardly begun. The party wing loyal to Tudjman's legacy regrouped, unwilling to give up control. Sanader saw them as "an old clique in the party, which wanted everything to remain the same." This was more than a clique – there were many in the HDZ who felt this way.

Scuffles behind the scenes turned into an open showdown at the HDZ party congress on 21 April 2002. The reactionary wing put forward Ivic Pasalic as their candidate for the party leadership. As President of the HDZ's powerful executive board and Tudjman's adviser for internal affairs from 1993 until his death, he had been one of the late president's most trusted followers. Asked later about his working relationship with Tudjman, [Pasalic told the ICTY](#) in The Hague that he must have had "thousands" of individual meetings with Tudjman and that he was present at "hundreds" of Tudjman's meetings with other people. He also had lunch with Tudjman every day "in a close, intimate circle of associates." He sold himself as his direct heir and successor – the opposite of a reformer.

This applied to foreign policy above all. Born in the Bosnian municipality of Tomislavgrad, Pasalic was part of the "Herzegovinian lobby", a group of Croats from Bosnia led by late defence minister Gojko Susak. They had long worked to bring a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina under Croatian control. Despite being formally disbanded in 1994, Croatia continued to support and finance both the political and military structures of an ethnic Croat statelet in Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Herceg-Bosna*) until Tudjman's death. Pasalic and people around him wanted this to remain rock-solid policy. On the eve of Tudjman's death, [the Economist called Pasalic](#) "supposedly the second-most-powerful man in Croatia."

Worse still, Pasalic engineered the suppression of free media, in particular by plotting the (eventually unsuccessful) revocation of independent Radio 101's broadcasting licence in 1996 and [bringing the daily Vecernji List under control of a company close to Tudjman's HDZ](#). According to audio recordings found after Tudjman's death, Pasalic had told him: "I have created a big smokescreen around the whole [takeover] because we must not let it appear ... that this has anything to do with us."

He was also a hawk on the battlefield. In December 1998 foreign minister Mate Granic defied an order of Tudjman to confront international troops over a small piece of land claimed by both Croatia and Bosnia. Pasalic stood out among members of the Council for

Defence and National Security as the only one to support armed confrontation. Pasalic was also [on record stating](#) that

“If Croatian generals will really be called to The Hague, it is entirely sure that our patience will be brought to an end. That will certainly bring into question Croatian cooperation with the Hague Tribunal to the point where the act on cooperation with the Tribunal might be annulled.”

The bottom line was that in 2002, [Pasalic still publicly defended the legacy of “Tudjmanism”](#). Polls [suggested a victory for Pasalic](#).

In order to defeat him, Sanader’s decisive move was to secure the support of Branimir Glavas, then the strongman of the Slavonian town of Osijek. Having stood for election for party president himself in 2000, this time [he worked to ensure Sanader’s victory](#). This went as far as Glavas bringing a “security company” from his hometown to “guard” the ballot boxes. Another confident of Glavas was put in charge to oversee the vote counting. Eventually, Sanader won by a narrow margin of 1,005 votes against Pasalic’s 912.

Now Sanader consolidated his leadership. Two months later, he pushed Pasalic out of the party. Glavas ruled Slavonia until April 2005, when he, too, was expelled from the HDZ. The following year he was indicted for war crimes. Croatian courts sentenced him to eight years imprisonment for torturing and murdering Serb civilians during the war.

His opponents destroyed, Sanader set out to reunite his party. He also sent populist signals that were easy to misinterpret. As opposition leader Sanader opposed the ratification of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, stating that:

“The Stabilisation and Association Agreement is bad for Croatia because it does not guarantee to Croatia EU accession on an individual basis. It does not guarantee avoiding institutional linkages with the countries of the region.”

Nationalists interpreted the walkout of the HDZ as strong opposition; in fact, however, Sanader insisted that his real interest was Croatia’s full EU membership, and that he opposed the agreement because “it says nowhere that the objective of the agreement is Croatia’s full EU membership.”

An even more delicate issue was cooperation with ICTY. For almost all Croats the “homeland war” of the 1990s had not only been defensive but also legitimate. Tudjman’s supporters reasoned that Croatian forces could thus not have committed war crimes. Regardless of Zagreb’s logic, the EU demanded full co-operation with the tribunal. It criticised the government led by social democrat [Ivica Racan](#) (2000-2003) for not doing enough. On 11 February 2001, at a rally in Split to protest against an arrest warrant for general Mirko Norac, [Sanader told](#) a crowd of over 100,000 people:

“No nation would abandon its heroes. Nor will the Croatian nation abandon the best of Croatia’s sons – and these are General Bobetko and all the other generals, including one who is not with us physically but who is with us in spirit – General Mirko Norac.”

Asked about his famous speech in Split, Sanader was later blunt about his intentions:

“It is the skill of a politician to always send the same message using different words. That was also the case at the meeting in Split. It was not at all against European values, it was not at all directed against cooperation with the Hague tribunal. It was directed against the Social Democrat government, which was against the generals.”



Poster of Ante Gotovina in front of the HVIDRA veteran association's office in Zagreb.

Photo: Geyrhalter Film

Once the HDZ won the parliamentary elections of 23 November 2003 and Sanader assumed power as prime minister, he moved swiftly –

but in a very different direction. As he explained to ESI: “One has to make clear to citizens that there are difficult decisions. They have to be taken, and eventually the country will benefit.” EU and NATO membership became the overarching goals of Sanader’s premierships. He called this his “life time project.” In order to achieve it, he was prepared to abandon practically all other policies dear to Tudjman.

Perhaps the biggest volte-face was in the delicate matter of refugee return and the treatment of Croatia’s minorities. Soon after winning the elections, Sanader brought the biggest Serb political party, the Independent Democratic Serb Party (SDSS), into his government. During his second mandate, in 2008, he even gave the SDSS the position of deputy prime minister. Under Sanader’s governments the legal framework facilitating return of minorities improved and assistance increased. [Milorad Pupovac](#), vice-president of the SDSS, told ESI that:

“Issues related to the Serbs as refugees, as returnees, as a minority were absent from the agenda until that moment. They had been neglected and rejected as irrelevant. Now these problems became official problems, recognised by the government, incorporated into the programme of the government and presented to the public.”

Sanader also sent symbolic messages. Barely two weeks in office, in early 2004, he attended the traditional Orthodox Christmas ceremony in Zagreb. [Pupovac](#) recalls the event as follows:

“Sanader was late by more than half an hour ... The room was packed. Sanader asked me: ‘So, what is next?’ I explained: ‘Now the priest will make a short ceremony, I will say something and then you will say something.’ He said: ‘Well, this is a reception. I am not talking at receptions.’ ... After I spoke, I turned my head to where he was standing. I recognized that he accepted my non-verbal invitation. I said ‘the floor is yours’ and he started to speak. He made a speech. He finished by saying: ‘As Mr. Pupovac said, “Hristos se rodi” [Christ is born].’”

These words are the traditional Orthodox Serb Christmas greeting. Having it pronounced by the prime minister and party leader of the HDZ at an official ceremony of Croatia’s Serbs was a powerful gesture. Sanader later explained:

“This was important for Croatian society at that stage. The 1990s were behind us. The war was behind us. The peaceful reintegration of the Eastern Slavonia region was behind us, and the defeat of the HDZ was

behind us, after January 2000 when the Social Democrats won the elections. I was thinking that at that point of our history the most important issue was to send a strong message towards the minorities and towards the international community: that Croatia is a country whose people live with European values, that we share these values."

Other steps signalled the new approach of the HDZ leadership. In August 2004, Sanader's government ordered the removal of the memorial plaque of Ustasha chief propagandist and education minister Mile Budak in the village of Lovinac. Numerous streets bearing Budak's name were renamed. Also Ustasha commander Jure Francetic's plaque in the small town of Slunj was removed.

Croatia's policy towards Bosnia had already changed under Ivica Racan in 2000 when Croatia stopped supporting the Bosnian Croat parallel structures there. Sanader deepened this policy:

"My idea was that we needed a sustainable Bosnia and Herzegovina with territorial integrity, no partition or division of Bosnia and Herzegovina; but at the same time equal rights and an equal position of all three constituent people in Bosnia: the Croats, Bosniaks and Serbs. I think this was a very strong and very clear message, not only towards Croatian domestic politics but also towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and the international community."

Yet the most painful issue facing him was co-operation with the ICTY in the Hague. On 12 January 2004, Croatian journalist Ines Sabalic asked Sanader, only three weeks in office, if he had promised to EU officials that he would send Ante Gotovina, the most wanted Croatian General indicted for war crimes, to the Hague. According to Sabalic, the leader's response was curt: "What do you think? Absolutely. You will see that I am not talking hot air."

Gotovina was apprehended on the Canary Islands in December 2005 as a result of telephone surveillance carried out by Croatia's authorities. With this, all Croats indicted for war crimes by ICTY had been handed over to the tribunal. Sanader recalls:

"From a human perspective it was a difficult moment for all of us. But politically it was a moment that had to come. And this, I think, people in Croatia understood, and therefore there were no big protests."

Sanader said it was a matter of legality:

“There is this constitutional law which commits us to work together with the ICTY. That means, everyone who is indicted has to appear in front of the court. And we did nothing more than to respect this law. And I told my party: ‘If someone is indicted, he has to appear in front of the court.’ It was of course a difficult political question. It was not easy. But eventually the party understood.”

Sanader did not see any contradiction between this position and the one he had held as opposition leader. As he told ESI in 2012:

“Look! At a certain point you have to assume power. You have to win the elections in order to be able to make the best policy for your country.”

When Sanader unexpectedly resigned on 1 July 2009, handing over his premiership and the party leadership to his deputy Jadranka Kosor, Croatia already had made huge strides. It had finally become a member of NATO on 1 April 2009. But crucially, the HDZ was accepted throughout Europe as a normal centre-right party.

Sanader clearly felt more comfortable with the pragmatism, consumerism and materialism of modern, unheroic Western Europe. If one looks for regional comparisons, his vision of Europe was similar to that of former Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic. Both were willing to take political risks. Both also cut corners. The wily pragmatist Djindjic knew modern Europe like Sanader. But he was killed on 12 March 2003. Soon after the nationalist and ideological Vojislav Kostunica took charge in Serbia. While Croatia advanced under Sanader’s leadership, Serbia suffered another lost decade.

It was under Sanader’s leadership that the country consolidated its transition away from Tudjman’s “heroic” age of warriors. Sanader bought hundred of thousands of veterans with generous benefits. Sanader envisioned Croatia as a normal European country, like Hungary or Slovenia. He convinced his party that history was moving in this direction ... and that both the country and they as leaders would benefit by following it.

At the time there was a lot of speculation about Sanader’s reasons for resigning. Some refer to alleged pressure from major EU leaders because of corruption. Sanader gave no reasons at first. Later he claimed that he stood down as a result of his failure to resolve the blockage of Croatia’s EU accession negotiations by Slovenia over a bilateral border dispute.

Nevertheless, Sanader tried to recapture the party leadership in early 2010. Yet he failed and his rivals [promptly expelled him from the party](#). In October 2010 he regained his parliamentary seat as an independent. On 9 December 2010 the Croatian Parliament lifted his immunity and an arrest warrant was issued. He was [arrested on 10 December 2010 by Austrian police](#) close to Salzburg and extradited to Croatia in July 2011.

Sanader now faced five different charges related to corruption. He was released on bail during the early proceedings. In November 2012 he was sent back to prison. His appeal and additional court cases are ongoing.

Whatever sentences the court will hand down, Sanader will remain a key – and controversial – figure in Croatia’s transformation, capturing many of its most telling characteristics. [Vesna Pusic](#), today Croatia’s foreign minister and one of the most ardent opponents of Tudjman and the HDZ, told ESI that without doubt Croatia would be a different country if Sanader had not changed the HDZ’s positions on key political issues in 2003:

“Without that we could not have advanced, we could not have made progress on this road towards Europe, and in particular we could not have made progress towards these reforms that we have undertaken in the meantime.”



Ivo Sanader interviewed for the [“Return to Europe”](#) documentary series. Photo: Geyrhalter Film

This portrait draws, in addition to many articles and books, on two long interviews by ESI with Ivo Sanader, conducted in August 2010 and in April 2012. ■