From Catholic Church to Religious–Political Movements

Religious Populism's Coming of Age in Croatia

Zoran Grozdanov and Nebojša Zelič

Croatia gained its independence in 1991, which, along with the independence of Slovenia, marked the collapse of communist Yugoslavia, which had existed between 1945 and 1991. If we exclude the period between 1941 and 1945 when it was a satellite Nazi state, Croatia gained its independence for the first time in its history. Croatia constituted itself as a nation state, with a prevalent percentage of ethnically Croatian people. According to the census of 1991, 78% of Croatian people declared themselves to be Croats, of whom 76.64% were Catholics. In addition, in 1991, there was still a large population of Serbian people (12%, of whom 11% were Orthodox). However, as the consequence of the wars of the 1990s, the Croat population grew to 90.42% (of whom 86.28% were Catholics) in the 2011 census. As huge numbers of Serbs had left the country, in this census, only 4.34% of the population were Serbs, a number that has remained stable up to today (the overall number of Orthodox Christians was 4.44%, along with Bulgarian, Macedonian, and other ethnic minorities affiliated with Orthodoxy). Among other religious communities, there was a very small number of Protestants (0.34%), Muslims (1.5%), and members of the Jewish community (0.1%).

At the 1991 elections, the majority of people (41%) voted for the Croatian Democratic Party (HDZ), alongside 35% for the Social Democratic Party (SDP), which was the successor of the Communist Party of Croatia. For the past 30 years, the HDZ has ruled most of the time, except for two periods following elections won by the SDP (2000–2004 and 2011–2015).

During the period following 1991, Croatia went through a very swift process of desecularization. During the communist regime, the Catholic Church in Croatia (or, as it calls itself, the *Catholic Church among Croats*, which marks

the very strong ethnic component of the local church) had a marked presence in people's lives, and the regime was "repressive but more in the public than in everyday lives" (Šarčević 2013, 176). However, after the fall of communism, religion became the main marker not only of religious but also of national identity. In presenting the role of the Catholic Church in Croatian society, we should also keep in mind that Croatia is one of the most religious countries in Central and Southeastern Europe (along with Poland, Romania, and Moldova) (Ančić and Zrinšćak 2012, 26). The Church strongly stood together with the HDZ in its demands for state independence, advocated for the right of Croatian people to have their own state, and has, with a few exceptions, followed HDZ nationalistic politics during the past decades (Ramet 2008, 350). The emergence of NGO religious–political movements[1] after 2005 caused the alliance between the HDZ and the Church to break up around issues of sexual and gender rights and policies. In these processes, the Croatian Bishops' Conference, as a body of individual bishops, expressed strong support for the values promoted by the new religious–political movements.

These religious–political movements have marked a huge change in the Croatian political landscape. Although they emerged from NGO movements and initiatives, they have provided an impetus for the formation of political parties of the right, including MOST (the Bridge), which began in 2012 as an alliance of municipal leaders, and, very recently, Domovinski pokret (the Homeland Movement).

Church and state in Croatia in the 1990s

The analysis of the relationship between Church and state in Croatia requires special consideration of three essential features:[2] first, the special role that the Catholic Church has had in Croatian history, particularly in socialist Yugoslavia; second, the impact that the war had on the development of society, particularly the relation between national identity and religious affiliation;

1 In defining religious–political movements, we rely on the description of Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo (2017), who state that these movements are manifested "through multiple attempts to scrap the legislation and practices of both state and private institutions that are contradicting the value system of the Christian (Catholic) majority" (61).

2 On the problem of comparing the Croatian context within the European framework, see Zrinšćak (1998), 15–26.

third, Croatia had a period of economic transition from a collective economy to privatized market economics, which introduced many new areas of affiliation in addition to those associated with nation and religion (Zrinščak 1998, 15–26; Vrcan 2001). In this chapter, we provide a glimpse of the first two features.

The Catholic Church has played an important role in strengthening the link between nation and religion since the 1970s, especially following the breakdown of Yugoslavia, and this factor has made possible the high politicization of religion. For example, on the eve of the multiparty elections in 1990, Catholic bishops issued a statement that made clear the Church's preference for parties on the right, stating that "it matters whether the Church will finally gain public legal status or whether a more or less skillfully formulated law on the legal position of religious communities and of the same community, i.e. citizens who are believers, will be kept under surveillance, controlling their development and activity as if they were a potential social danger" (Ramet 2008, 346).

Four agreements that were signed between the Holy See and the Republic of Croatia in 1997 and 1998 (known as the Vatican agreements) are important in regard to the formal status of the Catholic Church in Croatia.[3] These agreements certainly gave some privileges to Catholic over other religious communities who also signed agreements with the government (Marinović and Marinović Jerolimov 2012).

Thus, even if we may question the *de jure* privilege of the Catholic Church, as this is subject to various interpretations, it is unquestionable that it has *de facto* privilege in society and politics, while at the same time supporting the conservative and nationalistic politics of the ruling HDZ. This is particularly obvious if we look at the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, before the religious–political movements occurred in Croatia. During this period, cooperation between the Catholic Church and the HDZ really gave the impression of an alliance between throne and altar. The Catholic Church gave legitimacy to the HDZ's politics of national revival, not only historical legitimacy as the guardian of national identity but also transcendent legitimacy in its striving toward national sovereignty. As one sociologist of religion stated, "the religious resources of Catholicism in Croatia were the bases for political mobilization on the side of a precise political orientation, primarily an HDZ orientation" (Vrcan, 2001; see also Karabeg 2004).

---

3 Agreement on Spiritual Care in the Military and Police Forces; Agreement on Cooperation in the Fields of Education and Culture; Agreement on Legal Issues; Agreement on Economic Issues.

Even though there is a strong connection between the Church and the HDZ, according to some surveys, there is no expectation among religious citizens that the Church should deal with the politics of government. On the other hand, there is much expectation that the Church should deal with questions of abortion and same-sex relations (Ančić and Zrinščak 2012, 29). In their activities and political engagement since 2010, the new religious–political movements in Croatia have been relying heavily on exactly these expectations.

Religious–political movements taking the floor

From 2015 onwards, the Croatian political arena experienced a kind of new feature: the emergence of political parties that profiled themselves as more right wing than the HDZ, thus taking over the HDZ's rhetoric of being guardians of Croatian identity and Catholic values. We are primarily speaking here of the parties MOST (the Bridge), Domovinski pokret (Homeland Movement), and Hrvatski suverenisti (Croatian Sovereignists). Although we may specify pragmatic and ideological differences between these three parties, with MOST belonging more to the center-right spectrum and the other two to the far-right spectrum, their core ideology consists of supporting conservative and ultra-conservative values whereby religious belonging gives a framework for defining national belonging.

The short history of these parties dates to the years after 2005, when NGO religious–political movements started to rise. The great new feature was that the key actors of the political parties that were established after 2010 were very active in the social movements that were mobilizing at the level of civil society rather than through the organized institutions of the Catholic Church, as in the previous two decades. Moreover, it is easier to notice their connections with international organizations of the Christian Right than with the Catholic Church hierarchy, although they also enjoyed its support in their initiatives.[4] Even though they started as initiatives against a left-wing government, they are not connected with the HDZ, as the Catholic Church was, and they have even been critical of the HDZ when the government tried to pursue policies in line with EU directives (e.g., the ratification of the Istanbul Convention). These

4 On the international connections of ultra-conservative movements in the EU, which include organizations in Croatia, see Data (2018), 69–105.

new social movements were instead making alliances in the Croatian political landscape that can be described as *right-wing populist* or *conservative sovereignist.*

It is worth mentioning the iconography of these initiatives and movements. In the center of their religious (but also political) aspirations stands the figure of John Paul II, who is praised for his attention to keeping traditional values, his focus on evangelization of culture, and his strong emphasis on ethnic belonging (Grozdanov 2012, 149–163). Pope John Paul II is "our pope," so the iconography tells us, unlike Pope Francis, who in these religious–political movements is often described as the one who doesn't understand or support the clear path from religious convictions to political decisions or, even worse, as the Antichrist (R.I. 2019).

The influence of these movements in the social and political arena, with the support of the highest authorities of the Catholic Church in Croatia, started in 2005, with the question of introducing health education in primary and secondary schools in Croatia. This influence continued with the constitutional referendum of 2013 on defining marriage as a union between a man and a woman, which had the aim of prohibiting same-sex marriage. It had its peak in 2018, with the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, which is widely known as the Istanbul Convention.

2006: Introducing health education in schools

Two major keywords appeared during these *cultural wars*, as the then prime minister of the Social Democratic Party, Zoran Milanović, named this political activism (Krasnec 2013): tradition and family values.

In 2006, the conservative NGO GROZD (Glas roditelja za djecu/Parents' Voice for Children) started to openly object to introducing sexual education in schools, which was part of the curriculum for health education in the school system. The leader of GROZD was Ladislav Ilčić, who is now an MEP (for the conservative party Hrast) and president of the European Christian Political Movement, an alliance of marginal right-wing Christian parties. Their public actions—press conferences, public protests, and lawsuits in the Constitutional Court—in the following years caused one of the first secular/liberal polarizations in Croatian society. However, GROZD's program had strong overtones of Catholic moral theology. In it, "GROZD promotes a particular value system that is in accordance with the Catholic doctrine and not with the socially accepted values of the Republic of Croatia, such as freedom and gender equality"

(Bijelić 2008, 332). Within just a few years, controversies around sex education (which was just one module within the health education program) became the focal point of contention between not only secular and religious convictions but also the Government of Croatia and the Croatian Bishops' Conference.

One of the loudest voices rejecting governmental sex education was Vice Batarelo, the then Chief of Staff for Pastoral Care of the Family in the Zagreb Archdiocese and leader of the ultra-conservative NGO Vigilare. Vigilare is part of a transnational socially conservative network of around 50 organizations in 10 European countries, based on the teachings of Tradition, Family, Property (TFP). Within the TFP network, it is strongly connected with Poland's Ordo Iuris Institute for Legal Culture (Datta 2018, 81–82). Prominent bishops, such as Croatian Cardinal Josip Bozanić and Deputy Bishop of Zagreb Valentin Pozaić, used an even harsher rhetoric, with the latter claiming that "the Nazis came to power through democratic elections, then abused the legitimacy of their mandate and imposed a dictatorship," adding that a governmental sex education program indoctrinates children "with the ideology of homosexuality and eroticism" and "destroys human beings" (Hedl 2013). The struggle for health education began in 2005 as a social movement, but in 2012, it became a major political issue. The campaign by GROZD was a huge success. The Ministry of Science and Education abandoned the introduction of health education, including the *controversial* module on sex education, in schools.

2013: The referendum to change the definition of marriage

The success of the campaign against sex education in public schools corresponded chronologically with the constitutional referendum that was organized in 2013 with the aim of constitutional change regarding the definition of marriage. The referendum came as the continuation of NGO pressure on political decision makers to promote conservative values in the public and political arena. At that time, the only strong political partner of the NGOs that started the campaign was the HDZ, which supported their claims. The referendum was initiated by the newly founded organization In the Name of the Family, led by Željka Markić, who was also active in the previous campaign against introducing sex education in schools. The main burden of opposing them was placed on those liberal NGOs that were most active in disclaiming the demands of the referendum organizers.

In addition to the broad definition that "marriage and legal relations in marriage, common-law marriage and families shall be regulated by law," the

referendum aimed to constitutionalize the definition of marriage as a "union between a man and a woman" (Art. 61). This campaign, along with the previous one, was organized during the rule of the Social Democratic Party. The relationship between the SDP and the Church in Croatia has had a very harsh history, as the SDP is the legal successor to the Communist Party of Croatia. This fact is especially important, as all of the opposition to governmental politics regarding same-sex marriage and sex education was politically organized around the HDZ.

In 2013, their campaign succeeded, with the collection of more than 700,000 signatures calling for the referendum. A crucial factor that helped initiate the referendum was the initiative In the Name of Family, led by Željka Markić, which was connected with, among other organizations, the Spanish ultra-Catholic organization Hazte Oir and its platform CitizenGo, which uses online petitions as a form of internet activism for the promotion of conservative values.[5] The referendum was strongly backed by the Croatian bishops (almost without exception), the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the majority of protestant churches. The only two religious communities that were against the referendum were the Lutheran Church in Croatia and one of the two Jewish communities in Croatia, whose leader said that "although we don't support same-sex marriages in our religious community, we respect the right of the individual and minority group for their self-determination" (Tportal 2013).

The referendum led by In the Name of the Family demanded that "traditional values of Croatian society must be protected through enshrining the traditional, heteronormative definition of family" (Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo 2017, 61). Moreover, they framed their claims around the idea of the necessity of preserving traditional family and religious liberty (Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo 2017, 67), which was complemented by their future efforts to sustain the *right to life* and criminalize abortion. Again, even more than in the sex education campaign, they were supported by the Croatian Bishops' Conference, which issued a statement "In Defense of the Marriage and the Family" (Košić 2013), in which it "invited all of the believers, as well as people of good will, to join the referendum and mark the answer Yes at the referendum question: 'Are you in

5 According to WikiLeaks, Croatia's funding was prioritised in 2013 (the year when U ime obitelji initiated the referendum against same-sex marriage). See Šimičevič (2021). For more on U ime obitelji, see Šljivić and Mlinarić (2016) and Petričušić, Čehulić, and Čepo (2017), 61–84.

favor of the constitution of the Republic of Croatia being amended with a provision stating that marriage is matrimony between a woman and a man?'" adding that such a vote would be "in accordance with the humanistic and gospel values, as well as with millennial tradition and culture of the Croatian people and majority of the Croatian citizens" (T.V. 2013).

The referendum was successful, with 66% of the voters approving the amendment to the Croatian Constitution. This not only showed that "citizens can be successfully mobilized on their social conservative value orientations" (Petričušić 2017, 62); it also created a huge cultural gap between secular and liberal citizens, on the one hand, and conservative, right-wing, and religious actors, on the other.

2018: The ratification of the Istanbul Convention

The third case study of the influence of ultraconservative religious actors and right-wing NGOs relates to opposition to the so-called Istanbul Convention. As a member of the EU, Croatia had to put the ratification (or rejection of ratification) of this convention on the parliamentary table. This ratification process, which was postponed by the Social Democrats who ruled up to 2015, was started in 2017 and completed in spring 2018, during the rule of the conservative HDZ.

The main rhetoric used in the official statements of the Catholic Church against the ratification concerned *gender ideology*. The opponents of the ratification claimed that the Convention, although needed for regulating and decreasing violence against women, contains a definition of gender "as a social construct and variable that is independent of sex, of biological reality" (Džeba 2017). Furthermore, they claimed, the consequences of this definition of gender included "creating the belief that the human being is born as a neutral being that can later on decide whether he/she will be a man or a woman, or some other among many genders (homo, gay, lesbian, queer, trans)" (Istina o Istanbulskoj n.d.). Warnings against the introduction of gender ideology in the Convention were not new among the NGOs and Church leaders who were campaigning against the Convention. Already in 2012, Croatian Cardinal Josip Bozanić, speaking against health education in schools, emphasized in his Christmas sermon that in this education plan, "gender ideology is saliently introduced" (Živković 2017).

The actors who were campaigning against ratification were gathered around the initiative Truth about the Istanbul Convention. This initiative

gathered many NGOs, mostly (Catholic) religious organizations that were previously unknown in the Croatian public sphere.[6] In addition, organizations that were very active in the referendum on marriage and the campaign against sex education, although not officially part of this initiative, stepped into the public arena with the same arguments as this initiative.

On the eve of the ratification of the Convention in the Croatian Parliament, the Croatian Bishops' Conference issued a public letter to the parliamentarians in which it stated that it was their duty "to mention to all the members of the Catholic Church, belonging to various political organizations, and who must say Yes or No to the ratification of the Convention, that it consists of ideological elements that correspond to 'gender theory' and which is also in contrast to fundamental values of Christian faith and culture" (Biskupi HBK 2018). The Convention was finally ratified in the Croatian Parliament in 2018 by the HDZ. The campaign against the Convention clearly revealed an alliance of the movements against ratification with new right-wing populist parties, particularly MOST, which claimed to be defenders of Catholic culture and traditional family values, as well as with minor parties that later joined the political parties Domovinski pokret and Hrvatski suverenisti.

Conclusion: Populism fueled with religious identities

All these initiatives that were led by more or less the same actors have left huge traces in Croatian political as well as religious life. As the aforementioned processes suggest, the alliance between the major political party (the HDZ), the NGOs, and the initiatives that strongly advocated for politically and religiously oriented conservative values was broken on the eve of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. However, despite this broken alliance, the influence of these actors and their ideas has not diminished. Their rhetoric and the values that they advocate resemble those of the ultra-conservative initiatives described above: the struggle for the criminalization of abortion and the fight against same-sex unions. However, they have also developed new agendas in recent years, particularly hardline politics against immigrants, in which they have great resemblances to Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and anti-EU souverainism. We are witnessing old wine in new bottles, with a renewal

6 A full list of the members can be found at http://istinaoistanbulskoj.info/gradanska-inicijativa.

of the inseparable connection between religious conservative values and chauvinistic nationalism. In the 1990s, this was monopolized by the HDZ and the Catholic Church, but it has now been taken over by internationally connected religious–political movements and a group of right-wing populist parties.

These processes have also affected the religious scene in Croatia. At the beginning of the activities of the initiatives and NGOs, the highest Church authorities uncritically accepted their rhetoric and positioned themselves not only as a religious player but also as a politically influential body that gave a blank check to the rise and establishment of conservative values in the already conservative Croatian society.

This uncritical support lasted up to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, but somehow this happy marriage between lay movements and the official Church has started to dissolve regarding issues of politics toward immigrants and, very recently, attitudes toward epidemiological measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lay religious–political movements, along with some political parties (MOST and Domovinski pokret), have taken a strong stand against immigrants as well as against vaccination, while the official Church in Croatia, with the very minor exception of an individual bishop, has followed the line of Pope Francis on these two issues.

All these processes that have here been briefly described pose a great challenge for the political future, in which populist movements may experience a huge rise and pose serious challenges to liberal democratic arrangements.

References

Ančić, B., and Zrinščak, S. (2012). "Religion in Central European societies: Its social role and people's expectations." Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe 5(1), 21–38.

Bijelić, N. (2008). "Sex education in Croatia: Tensions between secular and religious discourses." European Journal for Women's Studies 15(4), 329–343. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506808095273

Biskupi HBK. (2018, April 10). "Izjava HBK o ratifikaciji 'Istanbulske konvencije.'" Hrvatska biskupska konferencija. https://hbk.hr/dokumenti-hbk/izjava-hbk-o-ratifikaciji-ratifikaciji-istanbulske-konvencije/

Datta, N. (2018). "Modern-day Crusaders in Europe. Tradition, Family and Property: Analysis of a transnational, ultra-conservative, Catholic-inspired

influence network." Političke perspektive 8(3), 2018, 69–105. https://doi.org/10.20901/pp.8.3.03

Džeba, I. (2017, October 30). "Inicijativa'Istina o Istanbulskoj konvenciji': Potpisivanjem Konvencije narušava se hrvatski nacionalni, kulturni i vjerski identitet." Bitno.net. https://www.bitno.net/vijesti/hrvatska/inicijativa-istina-o-istanbulskoj-konvenciji-potpisivanjem-konvencije-narusava-se-hrvatski-nacionalni-kulturni-i-vjerski-identitet/

Grozdanov, Z. (2021). "From incarnation to identity: The theological background of national–populist politics in the Western Balkans." In U. Schmiedel and J. Ralston (Eds.), The Spirit of Populism: Political Theologies in Polarized Times. Brill: Leiden, 149–163.

Hedl, D. (2013, February 4). "Sex education in Croatia: The war between the Church and goverment." Osservatorio Balcani e Caucasio Transeuropa. https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Croatia/Sex-Education-in-Croatia.-The-war-between-the-Church-and-government-129226

Istina o Istanbulskoj. (n.d.). "Neprihvatljivo u Istanbulskoj konvenciji." Istina o Istanbulskoj. http://istinaoistanbulskoj.info/neprihvatljivo-u-istanbulskoj-konvenciji

Karabeg, O. (2004, October 7). "Razgovor sa Srđanom Vrcanom i Milanom Vukomanovićem." Zarez. http://www.zarez.hr/clanci/razgovor-sa-srdanom-vrcanom-i-milanom-vukomanovicem

Košić, V. (2013, November 28). "Izjava – U zaštitu braka i obitelji – o obitelji i prvo-prosinačkom referendumu." Hrvatska biskupska konferencija. https://hbk.hr/izjava-z-zastitu-braka-i-obitelji-o-obitelji-i-prvo-prosinackom-referendumu/

Krasnec, T. (2013, May 23). "Milanović: Agresivna grupa vodi kulturni rat u Hrvatskoj." 24sata.hr. https://www.24sata.hr/news/milanovic-agresivna-grupa-vodi-kulturni-rat-u-hrvatskoj-316032

Marinović, A., and Marinović Jerolimov, D. (2012). "What about our rights? The state and minority religious communities in Croatia: A Case Study." Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe 5(1), 39–53.

Petričušić, A., Čehulić, M., and Čepo, D. (2017). "Gaining political power by utilizing opportunity structures: An analysis of the conservative religious–political movement in Croatia." Croatian Political Science Review 54(4), 61–84.

R.I. (2019, May 15). "Desničarski Hrvatski tjednik Papu proglasio Antikristom." Index.hr. https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/desnicarski-hrvatski-tjednik-papu-proglasio-antikristom/2085912.aspx

Ramet, S. (1996). "The Croatian Catholic Church since 1990." Religion, State & Society 24(4), 345–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/09637499608431749

Šimičević, H. (2021, August 20). "Umrežena desnica." Novosti. https://www.portalnovosti.com/umrezena-desnica

Šljivić, D., and Mlinarić, M. (2016). "Sexual othering and democracy in post-Yugoslav societies: A comparison of Dveri and U ime obitelji." In S. Goll, M. Mlinarić, and J. Gold (Eds.), Minorities under Attack: Othering and Right-Wing Extremism in Southeast European Societies. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 103–128.

T.V. (2013, November 19). "Poslali pismo: Evo što biskupi poručuju prije nadolazećeg refrenduma." Dnevnik.hr. https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/hrvatski-biskupi-pozvali-da-se-na-referendumu-zaokruzi-za---311775.html

Tportal.hr. (2013, November 15). "Židovska općina Zagreb protiv referenduma o braku." Tportal.hr. https://www.tportal.hr/vijesti/clanak/zidovska-opcina-zagreb-protiv-referenduma-o-braku-20131115

Vrcan, S. (2001). Vjera u vrtlozima tranzicije. Split: Glas Dalmacije.

Živković, I. (2017, November 10). "kako se kalila rodna ideologija – politička drama u tri čina." Libela.org. https://www.libela.org/sa-stavom/9099-kako-se-kalila-rodna-ideologija-politicka-drama-u-tri-cina/

Zrinščak, S. (1998). "Crkva i država: Europski kontekst i postkomunističko iskustvo." Revija za sociologiju 29(1–2), 15–26.