

ON THE TRAIL OF A CROAT REQUEST TO RESTRUCTURE THE PUBLIC BROADCASTING SYSTEM: DISSATISFIED WITH THE STATE

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In late July, the Bosnian political and media public was thrown into turmoil by a request made by delegates from the Croat Democratic Union (HDZ), the strongest Croat party in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and its coalition partner the Croat Demo-Christians, to separate the public broadcasting system into three channels – one each in the Bosnian, Serbian and Croatian language. The request was made in the form of an amendment in a BiH Parliament session, during a discussion on the new Law on the Broadcasting System, but was rejected by delegates from all other parties.

The Croat request was followed by numerous negative reactions from different Bosniak and multiethnic political parties and associations. In these reactions, the HDZ was again assessed as a political force that is tearing up Bosnia-Herzegovina, this time by insisting on division of the public broadcasting system, which was generally labeled as being unreasonable and un-European.

For now, the public broadcasting system is composed of three televisions – RTV Republika Srpska (RTVRS), RTV Federation (RTVF), and RTV BiH, the BiH-wide channel. Most Croats are dissatisfied with the broadcasting system because they believe the two entity televisions are basically a Serb and a Bosniak channel, while the nationwide RTV BiH is Serb-Bosniak. For this reason, the vast majority of Croats do not pay the compulsory RTV subscription tax.

To illustrate, the difference between the three languages in Bosnia is like the difference between British, American and Australian English. Thus, it is clear that everyone in BiH absolutely understands all three languages. The request for a Croat-language channel is more of a political nature because the HDZ believes that in addition to purely Croat language, this channel will also express Croat political interests which, according to the HDZ, are now on the sidelines in the media. On Federal RTV and RTV BiH, which are multiethnic, each journalist speaks whatever language he or she wants.

However, the HDZ request should not be the least bit surprising and is only a result of long-time dissatisfaction of almost all Croat political parties, as well as the Catholic Church, with how Bosnia-Herzegovina is organized. The majority of Croats, namely, maintain that the Dayton division of Bosnia-Herzegovina does not give Croats an opportunity to exercise their cultural and ethnic particularities.

The Curse of Multiculture

Bosnia-Herzegovina, from 1943 when it was established as a republic within the former Yugoslavia, was nominated in the constitution as a state of its three equal peoples, Serbs, Croats and Muslims (Bosniaks). Since the state was centrally organized, they were constituent, both legally and in effect, in the entire territory. However, the war that broke out in 1992 was an ethnic conflict to a considerable extent. Particularly in the territories of the present Republika Srpska, mass expulsions of Bosniaks and Croats took place, ethnically pure territories were created, and Bosnia, once called a “leopard skin” due to the intertwinement of its peoples, became a state consisting of three ethnic territories.

The Peace Agreement reached in Dayton that ended the three-and-a-half-year war to a great extent recognized the actual situation. Two entities were created, the principle being that the Republika Srpska is an administrative unit of the Bosnian Serbs, while the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina is of Bosniaks and Croats. Although the Dayton Constitution Preamble says BiH is a state of three equal peoples, the entity constitutions derogated this through provisions saying that the Republika Srpska is an entity of the Serb people and the BiH Federation of Bosniaks and Croats. Indeed, this fact from the entity constitutions fully reflected the created situation.

Due to these discriminatory provisions, the Constitutional Court of BiH in 2001 passed a decision declaring full constituency of all three peoples in both entities. A year later, the entity constitutions were harmonized with the decision.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina's political reality, both Serbs and Croats have constantly accused Bosniaks, since they have the largest population, of aspiring to make BiH a unitary country in order to "rule." Croats are even more decisive when this issue is lowered to the level of the BiH Federation, alleging that they are completely marginalized by the more numerous Bosniaks. Taking this into account, one might wonder how come Croats are in the same entity with Bosniaks? I will be at liberty to say – miscalculation!

Namely, after a bloody war between Bosniaks and Croats, the BiH Federation was created under US pressure as a territorial unit of Bosniaks and Croats who were supposed to resist jointly the militarily stronger Serbs. This succeeded from a military point of view and the war was ended by the Dayton Agreement, which gave Serbs a territorial unit. As a result, a new BiH was created, composed of three constituent peoples, but two entities. Croats renounced aspirations for their own territorial unit primarily due to the insistence of Croatian President Tudjman, because the judgment that the BiH Federation would enter into confederal relations with Croatia prevailed. However, after the war, Bosniaks did not accept this sort of union, wanting Bosnia-Herzegovina to be independent to the greatest extent possible, without particular institutional ties. Relations between Croat and Bosniak politicians started to stagnate and then regress, resulting at the beginning of the new century in a Croat request to tear up the BiH Federation and create a third, Croat entity. Taking energetic action, the international community and the central government put a stop to these efforts (some of the creators of the third entity are now in prison), but the dissatisfaction remained.

Imposing the Public Broadcasting System

Now to go back to the media issue, which is essentially generated by this political story. The Office of the High Representative, an international institution with supreme authority in BiH and almost protector-like powers, is guiding the process of transformation of the broadcasting sector. Last year, the Office proposed a new Law on the Public Broadcasting Service bringing many novelties and it was initially received negatively, both by the television in Sarajevo as by the one in Banja Luka. However, the substance of their opposition is different. RTV Republika Srpska in Banja Luka is bothered most of all by a solution in the Law according to which, out of the formerly three separate broadcasting services, **one** is being created composed of three parts. This is mostly

reflected in that there will be one Steering Board for all three services (this was not the case before), which, among other things, will coordinate the work of Programming Councils and pass crucial business and programming decisions. Although the entity broadcasters will maintain relative independence, this solution in the new law basically inflicts a blow to separatist tendencies in the Republika Srpska, which wants to hold onto exclusive political power over radio and television. In Sarajevo, on the other hand, they are desperate because of provisions in the new law envisioning the sale of a large and nonfunctional building and construction of new ones in Sarajevo and Banja Luka. RTV employees in Sarajevo find it incomprehensible that what was their, Sarajevan property until yesterday is being sold in order to construct a building in Banja Luka (by the way, RTV Republika Srpska really does not have its own building).

Of course, Bosnian-Herzegovinian politicians (who are supposed to enact the law), as well as the managements of the broadcasting services, in the end had to reconcile to the internationally-proposed solutions. It is interesting that for pragmatic and petty political reasons, each side explained to the public its acceptance of these decisions as its own victory.

A large donation of 1.5 million euros was approved by the European Commission and the BiH side committed to enact the new law. However, the deadlines have been breached and the Law is still in parliamentary procedure. Delaying the law could distance BiH from the European Union since passing a contemporary law on the broadcasting system is a condition for the start of association talks.

However, regardless of the Law, the BHT public television, a nation-wide service, will start broadcasting all-day programming from August 13 via its own transmitters and frequencies. This date, deliberately chosen due to the start of the Olympics which this TV will broadcast, finally ends the first stage of development of the public broadcasting system in BiH. Namely, up until now BHT has been a "guest" with one news program and individual sports events on the entity televisions, which gave it airtime on their own frequencies. According to the new schedule, BHT programming will have three big news programs, a lot of sport and entertainment contents, and it will also open its doors to independent production. The terrestrial network consists of 142 transmitters and repeaters covering 91 percent of BiH territory. The biggest donors for the construction of the network are the European Commission, BiH Government and the entity televisions

which relinquished some of their transmitters. Satellite programming will be launched on August 30.

Constant Croat Dissatisfaction

Now we go back to the Croat request from the beginning of the story. The already mentioned HDZ amendment on the creation of three channels in three languages did not pass the so-called first reading in parliament. An amendment phase is ongoing now which will last until September 10, by which time the amendments passed are supposed to be built into the Law or rejected. Croat representatives have expressed hope that they will “push through” their request by that time. In case this does not happen (and it is almost certain that it will not), Croat representatives in the House of Peoples, where decisions are passed by ethnic consensus, will probably stop the final enacting of the law. Croat representatives in the BiH Parliament have also announced that if their proposal is ignored, they will appeal to the Human Rights Court in Strasbourg because, as they say, their rights to cultural and language diversity, as well as ethnic identity, are being violated.

The question that comes to mind is whether Croats truly have reason for dissatisfaction with the present public broadcasting service solutions. I would say they do. Still, the HDZ's political assessments that BHT is a Serb-Bosniak television, and FTV a Bosniak television, lack sufficient arguments and are exaggerated. The only thing that is true is that TVRS is Serb – and this is a problem, particularly from the standpoint of balancing ethnic interests, which is a political constant in BiH. Anyhow, the HDZ is exaggerating, but this does not diminish the fact that there are a lot more Bosniaks and Serbs on BHT, and even on Federal TV which, by the logic of the population structure in the Federation, should have a dominant Bosniak-Croat component. There are a number of reasons for this. First, Croats are the least populous people in BiH (17%, as opposed to 31% Serbs and 44% Bosniaks). Next, Croats are in majority in the south in western Herzegovina, and in a small part of the Posavina in the north. This is relatively far from Sarajevo, where there are almost none. This means that if someone wants to work in the central newsroom, they must move to Sarajevo. This is an expensive, and sometimes from a psychological aspect a complex operation for an individual. But, the biggest problem is Croat journalists' refusal to accept the public service as it is. Many of them believe that

they would drown into some sort of a Bosniak environment and that they would not be able to articulate themselves enough professionally and politically.

This stand of chiefly the Croat politicians in BiH, but also of some of the Croat journalists, was affected to a degree by a Communication Regulatory Agency decision from 2000 abolishing the TV network Erotel, which was created during the war. This television station covered a considerable part of mostly Croat populated territories and it was supposed to serve as the public service of the never created, third, Croat entity. Erotel, at least technically speaking, integrated into the then created RTV of the BiH Federation, but its staff did not. Most of Erotel's journalists did not want to move to Federal TV in Sarajevo, or even work in its correspondent network. An exception is Erotel's former editor Marija Topic Crnoja who has been holding the position of FTV news program editor-in-chief over the past years. Also, the RTV BiH general director is Drago Maric, a journalist, and during the wartime and postwar years a politician. Although these two people came from a purely Croat environment, from Herzegovina, they had to blend into the multiethnic ambiance of the newly-created services and they could not, or perhaps did not want to promote Croat interests the way the HDZ wanted. The situation is similar with a couple of other Croat journalists at these two TV stations in Sarajevo.

Maybe to someone outside Bosnia-Herzegovina, so much insistence on the ethnic origin of journalists seems unusual. However, the generally accepted logic that programming should be produced by those who know how to do it has still not been accepted by a considerable number of people. The multiethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina functions according to the principle of ethnic quotas and the effort to hand over the program to those with know-how, regardless of their ethnicity and other characteristics, has not been accepted, at least not by Croats. However, on the other hand, jobs at the public broadcasting services have not been given just to those who know something; there are also some people there who do not meet even the basic professional criteria. But this is a result of the war and a situation of many years in which the journalist staffing structure has been ruined. Some of the journalists have left BiH for good; some are not doing this work because of low salaries, but are instead working for international employers; while new people with relevant qualities rarely appear.

The Croat request for a separate channel dates back to the time of creation of Federal TV in 2000. It had been planned at that time that federal TV would broadcast two programs – one in the Croatian and the other in the Bosnian language. This solution was based on the already mentioned fact that the BiH Federation was an entity of two peoples – Bosniaks and Croats. However, as it was becoming more certain that constituency would be given back to Serbs in the Federation, and as the awareness prevailed that the public service should be everyone's medium, rather than just a roughly divided ethnic proving ground, the idea of two channels in two languages was given up. Due to pressure from the international community, Croats reluctantly accepted this. At that time, I made an interview with FTV Director Jasmin Durakovic who, explaining the concept of a single FTV, said this television station will be a channel for everyone and will primarily be concerned with programming quality and diversity, but will not strictly be concerned with language and employees' ethnic composition. I think that Durakovic at that time was genuinely enthusiastic about building a quality television. But, regardless of occasional brilliance in the sense of programming quality and insistence on ethnic equality, both in programming (content) and staffing terms, it is evident that Croats have not accepted either the federal or later the cloaked ethnic television.

When I think more deeply, I wonder if it is possible at all, at a time of tremendous political pressure on all segments of society, to create a program that will be accepted by everyone. The latest example caught my eye earlier this month in the Blaskic case. Former Croatian army commander in BiH Tihomir Blaskic was sentenced in The Hague for war crimes to 45 years in prison. When he appealed against the verdict, after new evidence was presented, his sentence was reduced to nine years. Since he had already served almost that much time, he was instantly released. FTV covered this fact quite extensively in its third news program (at around 22.00 hrs.). However, two items are striking. The first shows the reactions of Bosniak victims of war, who do not agree with the new Blaskic sentence, while the second shows those who are celebrating Blaskic's release. However, the contents of the two items spoil the picture of equal presentation of the two sides. The first item contains sound-recorded statements given by those who lost their dearest during the war, while the second is just a piece of information with footage, with the footage being problematic – two Audis and a BMW circling around the town of Vitez carrying Croat flags. We are at liberty to conclude that this picture associates of Blaskic being celebrated only by thieves and nationalists (most people

associate Audis and BMWs with foul dealing, while waving a Croat flag associates Bosniaks of nationalism). Now, to compare the same event presented on Croatian TV in Zagreb. There we have a number of statements by Croats from Vitez who are happy about the court verdict and who say that what they already knew was proven – that Blaskic is not guilty. On the other hand, the position of Bosniaks who are not satisfied is mentioned, but only through an agency item. There should be no dilemma that this issue would be presented the same way on the Croat-language channel that Croats are insisting on. The gist of the matter is the emphasizing of Croat interviewees, issues and interests.

On this note, as we have already mentioned Croatian Television from Zagreb, let us tie into the story a few sentences about it. Eronet had been re-broadcasting this TV station's all three channels and then Federal TV partially started doing that, but only until its second channel was launched. Many Croats subscribed to coded cards for digital reception of Croatian Television in their homes. But, a cheaper option soon appeared – cable operators who offered all three Croatian Television programs in their packages. Zagreb TV remained number 1 among Croats and all other citizens of BiH, due to the language they understand and the program quality and diversity, accepted it as a parallel public service.

A couple of months ago, Federal Television filed a complaint with the Communication Regulatory Agency asking it to prevent the broadcasting of terrestrial programs from neighboring countries via the cable network. Federal Television, namely, maintains that TV stations from other countries have bought rights to movies and sport events only for their own territories, but they are also airing them in BiH via cable operators. Croats in BiH were particularly irritated by the Federal TV request, believing that behind it lies a request to remove the programs of Croatian Television and TV Nova from Zagreb, which would prevent Croats from watching good programs in their own language, thus creating lingual, as well as political majoritarianism.

Political Substance of the Issue

And now two major global reasons why Croats are not succeeding in exercising bigger influence on BHT and FTV. Today's public service concept (one state broadcaster, two entity broadcasters) is too complex and costly for the limited economic, technical and creative resources. Meanwhile, there is still no domestic or foreign capital (or frequencies) to build large commercial radio and television networks. We have already mentioned that BHT, after two years of work, is only now launching some sort of all-day programming. But it is not clear at this moment with what staff and what money. The Croat request envisions the abolishment of the three current broadcasters and introduction of a single one with three ethnic channels. Therefore, seemingly, from an economic point of view, nothing particular would change, except that Croats would also get their own pure channel. But, to destroy something that has been built for years and that has already grown is expensive and in the present political constellations impossible.

The second global reason is purely political. The chief problem is that the frontman of the request to restructure the public broadcaster is the Croat Democratic Union, a party that is not thought of highly by the international community, and that both Bosniaks and Serbs are repelled by. The party's hardline policies offer no guarantee that a potential Croat channel would be journalistically autonomous. It is likely that it would become a public service of a political party or of ethnic interests of one people. Thus, the story of a purely cultural and lingual channel is fog. But, this tendency to control the media space is not just a desire of the HDZ; it is a desire of all political parties in BiH.

Therefore, it is unlikely that the Croat request will pass. But, this should not give pleasure to Bosniaks or Serbs or to the management of the present broadcasting system. It is devastating that a constituent people does not feel the public television as its own. Political factors, as well as the broadcasting service management, should do all they can to change the Croat attitude. It is not enough just to lecture, with platitudes about the creation of a modern European service, the damage and the bad economy of ethnic division, and trying to prove that this service is also Croat. Perhaps it is, but Croats do not feel it that way.

Bosnia-Herzegovina's fundamental problem is that none of its peoples are satisfied with its present organization. From 1995 to this day, the key laws creating BiH as a state have been imposed by the international community. In practically all segments of life, one of the constituent peoples in BiH is not satisfied. Problems appear in waves and the Croat dissatisfaction with the public broadcasting system is just another story from a state that will be trying to resolve its internal contradictions for a long time to come.

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