

**Srđan Dvornik**

## **The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Croatia – the First Five Years**

The post-communist development in Croatia started in 1989/1990, when the country was still a part of the SFR Yugoslavia. The first political parties started forming, at first as associations, in 1989, and the first free multiparty elections for the national parliament (Sabor) took place in April and May 1990. However, this at least formal democratic shift was not a result of a struggle between a strong democratic movement and the old regime. After a few symbolic actions of several newly formed political associations, the leaders of the Communist Party decided to legalise political parties and call for direct elections for Sabor (unlike the previously valid 'delegate system', heavily controlled by the Communist Party). Among those political associations, there was only one, which was not aspiring to power, and did not transform itself into a party: the Association for a Yugoslav Democratic Initiative (UJDI). It was also the only political group that advocated democratisation on the federal level, that is, free multiparty elections for the lower house of the Yugoslav Federal Assembly (while the upper house would remain the body representing federal units).

As is well known, the democratic transformation never took place on the level of Yugoslavia, and the country fell apart through ethnic conflicts. Slovenia and Croatia, followed by Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia, opted for secession. The Yugoslav army, having been left without any political control (after the federal Communist Party effectively fell apart between 1989 and 1991), and subsequently coming under the influence of Serbia, played the key role in transforming political conflict into armed aggression – first against Slovenia, then Croatia and finally and with most disastrous consequences, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

There was virtually no civil movement in Croatia under the communist regime. Apart from intellectual dissident groups, and feminist groups, which developed in the circles of social scientists and journalists, the only significant form of independent organising were environmental groups, which emerged in the late 1980s. Organisations that directly advocated political changes motivated by human rights, democracy and tolerance, started developing in the early 1990s, as a reaction to the developments related to the war and the growing aggressive nationalism. That is how organisations such as the Anti-War Campaign, the Civic Committee for Human Rights and the Croatian Helsinki Committee emerged. Women's organisation struggled against a re-patriarchalisation of the society and culture. Environmental organisations were also steadily growing. During the whole decade of the 1990s, many of those organisations tried to oppose the militarisation of society and defend victims of discrimination and violence. Since most violations were committed with the tacit agreement of the majority in the society dominated by nationalism and authoritarianism, the civic actors remained in a position of a marginalised minority. Nevertheless, they acquired experiences and developed skills that were very helpful in further development.

### **The beginnings of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Croatia**

The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung (hbs) was indirectly present in Croatia even before its own constitution: one of its predecessors, the 'Frauen Anstiftung', had already cooperated with the Women's Information and Documentation (Centre Ženska infoteka) and the Autonomous Women's House. There were other relations between the hbs predecessors and Croatian civil society organisations as well, for example with the Green Action, which continued when the hbs Croatian office was opened. At first, it was just a contact point ("Kontaktstelle"), attached to the Regional Office for South-Eastern Europe, based in Sarajevo, which was officially launched in June 1999. Apart from Croatia and, of course, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Regional Office was active in Serbia and Montenegro as well as in Kosovo and occasionally included participants from Macedonia.

The first direct action of the hbs in Croatia – and my first task in the five-year work for the foundation – took place in the autumn of 1999, just a few months after the Regional Office in Sarajevo was established and a few months before the contact office in Croatia was formally opened. Together with other German political foundations active in Croatia, the hbs carried out a joint project under the title "Ask and Choose/Vote" ("Pitajte i birajte" – "Fragt und Wählt"). It was designed as a contribution to the plethora of civic initiatives in the eve of the decisive national elections scheduled for the end of 1999 (due to the death of President Franjo Tuđman, they eventually took place on January 3, 2000). All these activities of Croatian civic actors were set against the background of the ten-year rule of one party, which had governed the country in a rather authoritarian way. The civic campaigns were designed to remove the spell of the seemingly unbreakable dominance of one party, which had been established despite the formal political pluralism and free elections. Their declared objective was not to favour another party or coalition, but to counter the political apathy and stimulate the people to pay more attention to various political options, make their choices, and eventually get out and vote. The "Ask and Choose/Vote" project focused on 'translating' political tensions and potential conflicts into a structured political debate. The project consisted of almost 70 candidate forums staged throughout the country – public panels bringing together representatives of different political parties, who had to answer the same set of questions from the moderator, and then from the audience, giving the people a chance to compare what the parties had to offer at the political market. That the forums were jointly organised by the five German political foundations<sup>1</sup>, was a message in itself: different political positions united by the common denominator of pluralism and free democratic debate.

### **The 'first appearance of the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Croatia**

In the 'division of labour' amongst the five foundations, the hbs was responsible for the 5<sup>th</sup> electoral district (the Southern half of the region of Slavonia, from the town of Ilok on the eastern border of Croatia, to Daruvar in the west). As the newly hired representative of the hbs in Croatia, I organised ten panels. The moderator of all panels was a well-known political journalist from Osijek, Drago Hedl, and the events were organised in close cooperation with local civil society organisations (most notably the Project of Civic Democratic Initiative from Vukovar).

The district in question was the one where right-wing parties were the strongest. As the then ruling party, Tuđman's HDZ (Croatian Democratic Community\*), was losing political ground, more radical right-wing small parties saw their opportunity. They advocated a more intransigent kind of nationalism than HDZ, which was potentially explosive in the ethnically mixed area. Our activities were taking place less than two years after the peaceful reintegration of eastern Slavonia, which had been previously occupied by self-styled Serb authorities. Some of the places where we held the candidate forums – Ilok and Vukovar – had been under occupation for seven years, having suffered destruction, plunder and ethnic persecutions. Many others, from Županja, through Vinkovci, to Slavonski Brod, were exposed to almost constant shelling for many years. Still others, like Nova Gradiška, were still full of refugees. In short, the conditions were often hard; the tolerance to different political views or different ethno-national backgrounds (like in the case of the Independent Serb Democratic Party) was hardly existent and political disputes were sometimes on the edge of violent conflict.

Nevertheless, the action was a success: all events were well attended by the local inhabitants, and the people got the sense of how the public sphere could work as an arena of expressing and peacefully discussing political differences. Furthermore, in many places it was the first occasion for people to relate to politicians as the ones supposed to answer to the public.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Fridrich Naumann Stiftung, Hanns Seidel Stiftung, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, and Heinrich Böll Stiftung.

\* The English version of their official name avoided the word 'community' and used 'union' instead.

This first appearance was significant in two respects. On the one hand, it indicated what was mainly at stake in the late 1990s and early 2000s: the basic tenets of democracy and rule of law, which had been granted by the Constitution of 1990, but were seriously jeopardised during the first decade of authoritarian politics under Tuđman and his HDZ party. That was the common issue, which brought together the five political foundations despite their different political backgrounds. On the other hand, the content of the action indicated the nature and limits of a possible intervention by foreign civic and political actors in a given society: while ideas and resources may come from outside, it is ultimately the participation of members of the local society that makes the real difference. We were able to stage the forums, but it was up to local politicians and citizens to turn them into a real political debate on substantial political issues, which is what happened.

### **Strategic framework and political agenda**

Strategically, the hbs worked on three fields. Naturally, from the outset to the present day the first field has been the environment protection and sustainability of the living conditions given the impact of human activities. The focus was not so much on scientific and technological aspects as on social and political ones. What are the social and economic causes of threats to the biosphere? What interests and ideologies are involved, and how are they formed? How to put the environmental issues and sustainability on the public agenda and what political impact can civic actors have? Therefore, issues such as active citizenship, advancement of democracy and human rights complemented the environmental concerns.

In a society whose recent past was marked by the communist regime till 1990 and the war from 1991 to 1995, achieving equality in rights and democratic control over the institutions of power was never a matter of a mere learning and implementation of models and principles. The development of autonomous societal structures takes a long time and cannot be significantly facilitated by external actors such as political foundations. However, such actors can help by sharing experience and knowledge about the relevant issues and, even more important, they can support civic groups and organisations dealing with such issues in society itself.

Within this strategic framework, as a political foundation, hbs pursued its own clearly stated political agenda, which was defined on the regional level. However, being aware that a change in any given society could only be brought about by actors belonging to that very society, the hbs put a great emphasis on supporting and strengthening such actors. Thus, the activities followed two tracks: firstly, various kinds of support through cooperation with Croatian and regional organisations of civil society in their continuous activities or single projects; and secondly, raising public awareness and setting agenda with panels, roundtables, publications and other kinds of public discourse.

Among the local organisations of civil society, there were three that played prominent roles: the Green Action (Zelena akcija), the Women's Information and Documentation Centre (Ženska infoteka) and the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (Hrvatski helsinški odbor). The hbs supported some focused campaigns of the Green Action, as well as the annual seminars for young environmental volunteers and activists. In the case of the Women's Information and Documentation Centre, the hbs provided support for the annual conferences under the common headline of "Women and Politics", including the publication of books with the conference papers. Among the activities of the Croatian Helsinki Committee, the focus of cooperation was on the schools of human rights for high school students, which took place twice or three times every year.

Apart from such continuous cooperation, the hbs cooperated with these and other partners in topics of strategic interest. For instance, one of the most relevant issues in the efforts to master the legacy of the post-Yugoslav wars of the 1990s was the command responsibility, or, to put it more comprehensively, the responsibility of the superior. The Croatian Helsinki Committee, with

support of the hbs, organised a great international conference on this issue, followed by a book with the conference proceedings<sup>2</sup>.

In another topic: gender equality of rights, the hbs organised a roundtable in cooperation with the Women's Information and Documentation Centre (Women's Infoteka), where two draft legal acts were proposed, both originating from nongovernmental groups (a group of young experts from the Law School of the Zagreb University, led by Siniša Rodin and the association for women's human rights (B.A.B.E.). The roundtable debate was subsequently published in *Bread and Roses (Kruh i ruže)*,<sup>3</sup> the journal published by the Women's Infoteka. (Two years later, the Croatian Parliament actually adopted the Act on Gender Equality, which included many points of those two civic initiatives.)

Dealing with the past was also a matter of the hbs' own commitment. We staged a roundtable debate on "The Other Side of the War. How it was for the civilians", and printed the book of presentations and discussions<sup>4</sup>. Another event of that kind, followed by a book, was dedicated to the assessment and evaluation of the political change of early 2000 (when Tuđman's HDZ lost elections for the first time after ten years), one year later. It took place in Berlin in February 2001 and the book was published bilingually (in Croatian and German).<sup>5</sup>

We paid a great attention to other issues of the post-communist transformation of the society and the state, particularly in the context of Croatia's approaching the EU. Several public panels and roundtables were dedicated to these topics.

The hbs also supported a number of publications by other partners, relevant for dealing with the past and for the environment protection. They include the collection of documents of Croatia's involvement in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the attempts to take parts of the territory ('Stenogrami o podjeli Bosne' by *Feral Tribune*); the documentation of public reactions to the Božidar Knežević's documentary film 'Storm over Krajina' on the war crimes committed during and after the military operation 'Storm' in August 1995 (*Oluja nad Hrvatskom* by 'Factum'); and the novel *Totenwände* by Daša Drndić.

The publications relevant for the environment protection include the translation of the book 'Politics of the Environment' (Ideas, Activism, Policy) by Neil Carter (*Strategije zaštite okoliša*); an introduction to global ecology by Vjekoslav Glavač ('Uvod u globalnu ekologiju'); a comprehensive elaboration of cultural and historical botany, 'Stablo i čovjek' by Nikola Visković; and a handbook on using solar power in the region of Slavonia.

It is also worth mentioning that cooperation between *Zarez*, fortnightly for culture and the hbs resulted in the 'Workshops of Cultural Confrontation' (*Radionice kulturne konfrontacije*), the first public practice of the forum theatre (upon the method of Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal) in the 'Exit' theatre in Zagreb and in several towns throughout Croatia.

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<sup>2</sup> *Zapovjedna odgovornost* (proceedings of the conference, Trakošćan, March 23 and 24, 2001), Hrvatski helsinški odbor za ljudska prava, Zagreb 2003.

<sup>3</sup> No. 18 (2002), pp. 2-14.

<sup>4</sup> *Druga strana rata – kako je (bilo) civilima?* : okrugli stol, Zagreb 8. i 9. 12. 2000., saopćenja i diskusije, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Zagreb 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Bodo Weber, Srđan Dvornik (eds), *Hrvatska, godinu dana nakon promjene – prva bilanca* (konferencija, Berlin od 23. do 25. 2. 2001., dokumentacija) / *Kroatien ein Jahr nach dem Umbruch – erste Bilanz* (Fachtagung, Berlin 23. bis 25. Februar 2001, Dokumentation), Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Zagreb 2001.

Among the actions that the hbs implemented on its own, two deserve to be singled out the forums on sustainable development and a series of debates and workshops on green politics (both owing to the initiative of 'energy sociologist' Vladimir Lay).

The forums on sustainable development brought together top experts, activists, and journalists; they encompassed a series of topics: agriculture, energy, transportation, water management, cultural heritage, tourism, etc. Through such different fields and confronting different approaches, the debates tried to find the most plausible definition of the very concept of sustainable development and to detect the key challenges to a long-term protection of environment, reconciled with economic development. The first year of the forums was presented in a book.<sup>6</sup>

As one of the outcomes, these debates showed that there was a missing link between the insights achieved in discussing the problems of environment and sustainability in various areas and the implementation of such ideas in relevant policies of the government and public institutions. In many debates, one question kept popping up: "What can we do to improve or change the relevant policies?" This underlined the importance of the political dimension of the 'green' commitment. The hbs started to deal with this issue in the early days of its presence in Croatia, by organising a three-day seminar whose title literally mirrored this question ('Political Dimension of Environmental Commitment'), which brought together activists of a dozen most prominent environmental civic organisations. Some of those organisations, notably the Green Action and some others, already had a rich experience in public action with occasional political impact, while many others mainly focused on direct protection of environment or on education.

The focus of this effort was on exploring the scope of possible public impacts (including political impact) of the organised activities in environment protection. The objective was to demonstrate concrete ways of exercising such impacts, which covered (a) public awareness, (b) legislation and policies and (c) control of implementing practices of the public authorities. All together, these three aspects cover the whole political field insofar as it is accessible to civic actors. The participants learned that politics is not an exclusive area reserved for political parties and that they, as non-party actors, can make a difference in that area as well, without having to become similar to parties and enter the competition for power. Since they stand for values, which could be generalised, i. e. that could positively affect the whole society, they could play an important role in keeping political authorities responsible for securing acceptable living conditions for the society.

### **The beginnings of green politics in Croatia**

Still, given the general deficit of accountability of government and political elite toward society in Croatia, the question frequently appeared whether civic activists could and should strive for a more direct political impact, in the form of an alternative party. Could there be a party, which would serve as a representative and an advocate of all those citizens engaged in environment protection, human rights, gender equality, peace and reconciliation, etc.? The Green parties from western and northern Europe immediately came to mind as models, particularly Bündniss 90/Die Grünen in Germany. However, at the very first glance it was obvious that the Croatian polity, including the 'civic scene', was very far from such models.

In preliminary discussions, we detected two main obstacles: first, the antipathy among civic actors towards political parties in general, and the lack of both skills and willingness for political organising. Second, a relatively high number of small groups already trying to act like 'green' political parties, but without support from the relevant parts of civil society and without cooperation. Moreover, it seemed that the higher the number of such tiny 'parties', the less they were ready for a

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<sup>6</sup> *Forumi o održivom razvoju. Interkulturalni dijalog akterā o održivim razvojnim usmjerenjima u zaštiti okoliša u Hrvatskoj i regiji* (Forums on Sustainable Development. An intercultural dialogue of actors on sustainable developmental directions in the environment protection in Croatia and the region), edited by Srđan Dvornik and Veedran Horvat, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Zagreb 2004.

dialogue, let alone to cooperate or form alliances. That is where an outside actor as a foreign foundation with a 'green' affiliation could step in and play a catalyst role. That is how we got the idea to initiate a series of events dedicated to debates on green politics. They included panels, roundtables and workshops for a circle of selected participants.

The debates on green politics, which were taking place for one year – from Spring 2003 to Spring 2004 – engaged activists of several green parties, civic activists from non-party associations and experts. They showed that the high number of 'green parties' that exist in Croatia stood (and still stand) in the reverted proportion to their strength: at a certain point, there were as many as nine of them, without a single deputy in the national parliament or in regional assemblies. Furthermore, these debates brought to the fore that the environmental associations do not recognise such parties as their political advocates; moreover, the most advanced associations were able to effectively advocate in public their own positions. Nevertheless, without a strong green party the civic initiatives and demands could not achieve a desired impact, nor could a green party emerge without development of political capacities and commitment of civil society organisations.

The debates did not result in a direct practical outcome, but they triggered some processes. Some of the small parties that existed only on paper or consisted only of small leading groups without any significant membership, decided to abolish themselves. A group of activists, journalists, artists and intellectuals, gathered around an idea of a new, more inclusive and ambitious party, at first called the Greens for Zagreb, later renamed into the Green List. In the beginning, they had some achievements, such as deputies elected in several local districts in Zagreb and some municipal councils in other parts of the country. The party also won support from the European Green Party and was approved as an observer in the EGP. However, it stumbled over an obstacle typical of all Croatian parties, including the biggest ones: internal democracy. A small leading group developed and maintained control over all major decisions and a gap soon grew between activists who tried to keep an open relationship between civic activism and party commitment on one side and those who were able and willing to dedicate all their time and energy to run the party. The latter managed to push the others from all party bodies and in the course of a few years the party was reduced to just one among many insignificant groups that call themselves 'green parties'. Although this was an instructive experience for activists, showing how important it is to develop skills necessary to endure the typical political power games, it does not seem that such conclusions were consciously drawn.

The issue of political impact of civil actors and more generally their role in the post-communist transformations of the post-Yugoslav countries was the topic of a research project, which resulted in my book 'Actors without Society'.<sup>7</sup> It shows that the traditional concept of civil society as Locke and Ferguson developed it in the modern age implied autonomous market economy, while what was understood with the same name in the post-communist 'revolutions' had an opposite meaning. The commitment of dissidents and civic activists was based on their pure will for change and not on interests founded in socio-economic positions of various social groups, because an autonomous society simply did not exist under the communist regimes. Therefore, in many countries they became marginalised after the implosion of the communist regimes and the 'revolutions' that established the multiparty parliamentary political systems. However, in countries like Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia, where ethnic conflicts and wars had fossilised authoritarian political structures for a long time, it was those civic groups that countered the hatred, discrimination and violation of human rights. Thus, their impact was often just symbolic and nevertheless they played an important role as the sole defenders of civic values.

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<sup>7</sup> Srđan Dvornik, *Actors Without Society. The role of civil actors in the postcommunist*

*transformation* (translated from Croatian by Hana Dvornik), Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Berlin 2009. Available at <http://www.boell.de/downloads/Actors-without-society-i.pdf>.

In all those activities, we were implementing a regional approach, based on common issues among Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia as well as on the similarity of problems and experiences of civil society organisations. This included the issues of green politics,<sup>8</sup> systemic corruption,<sup>9</sup> regional security and human rights<sup>10</sup> and the problem of pluralism in weak societies.<sup>11</sup>

The experience of the first five years of active presence of the hbs in Croatia could be summarised as follows. In Croatia's civil society, there were competent partner organisations for cooperation in the relevant issues of the environment protection and sustainable development, democratisation and human rights, and gender equality. The post-authoritarian developments from the early 2000 on posed new challenges; they were primarily related to newly opened opportunities for policy initiatives and to the process of EU accession. While it was still necessary to deal with the legacy of authoritarian politics and military conflict of the preceding decade (primarily the ethnic and gender discrimination and the systematic denial of rights of refugees and returnees), which meant a defence of the basic rights, there has been a growing need to tackle more complex issues. That required not only expertise, but also an advanced political competence of the relevant actors – both civic organisations and a potential green party. These challenges are still present.

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<sup>8</sup> Alida Čović and Srđan Dvornik (eds.), *Uvod u zelenu politiku nevladinih organizacija* (Introduction into Green Politics of Nongovernmental Organisations), Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Sarajevo 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Amela Sejmenović, Srđan Dvornik, Milan Podunavac (eds.), *Korupcija u odsustvu vladavine prava* (Corruption in the Absence of the Rule of Law), Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Sarajevo 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Amela Sejmenović, Milan Podunavac, Srđan Dvornik (eds.), *The Rule of Law, Security in the Region, and Human Rights*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Sarajevo 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Srđan Dvornik and Vedran Horvat (eds.), *Slaba društva i nevolje s pluralizmom* (The Weak Societies and the Troubles with Pluralism), Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Zagreb 2005.