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**FROM REGIONAL TO NATIONAL IDENTITY AND BACKWARDS: THE BI-
HAĆKA KRAJINA DURING SOCIALIST MODERNISATION**

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INTRODUCTION

In 1973 “Oslobođenje”, the daily newspaper from the socialist period in Bosnia-Herzegovina, published an article describing the radical changes that had occurred in Bosnia’s north-western corner, usually referred to as “Krajina”¹. The article was written to mark the thirtieth anniversary of the first liberation of the town Cazin, and its surroundings, during the Second World War. The “dark” past and the socialist present are contrasted in the following way:

“In hitherto Cazin “identification”, amongst the most distinct inclinations were: dawdling, partying, coffee-chatting, having several wives, etc. Passions: horse races. Vices: drinking, knife fights, blood feuds, splitting up families. Family relationships: it is a man’s duty to go to war and communicate with other people, and a woman’s duty to do, more or less, all the labour, like ploughing, cultivation, sowing, collection of the meagre crops, house work, looking after copious children. Economic characteristics: an area without any industry or ability for the development of industry. Motto: outlive the day! And tomorrow? Tomorrow – whatever will be. All of these indicate that the Cazin “characteristics” do not belong to only the people from Cazin. They are the characteristics of every area to which the providence and history gave an ingrate role of “bridge” between various empires, kingdoms, pashaliks or banovinas.

Today, those men are not so connected to their part of “sky and land” any more. There are 15,000 Krajišniks working outside of this region all around the country. Family life got stronger. It is not built on such shaky grounds like before, although it is not solid enough everywhere. Together with electricity in the thirty biggest villages of Cazinska Krajina came

¹ Bihaćka krajina is an area that comprises north-western Bosnia and Herzegovina and where Bosniak-Muslims are ethnically dominant. The area’s characteristic is border. During the Ottoman Empire, this area was formed as the first line of defence from Habsburgs and Venetians. The formation of the borderers’ mentality was closely related to this fact. As borderers, they used to be characterised by extreme combativeness, stubbornness and loyalty to the state and faith. Also characteristic of the area were the strong migrations which were pronounced from the middle of the seventeenth century till the second half of the twentieth century. Migrations prior to 1945 were motivated by mostly religious and partly by economic reasons, while in socialist Yugoslavia the causes were predominantly economic.

TV sets, radio, electric machines, and modern furniture. Where there is no electricity there are radios operated by cell-batteries. Ten times more students go to elementary school. Medical institutions are better. The most significant changes can be seen in the sphere of “economic particularities”. One or two years ago it would have been possible to say that this was a region with no industry. Now it can be written that there are ten significant industrial objects in existence: factories and mines. Multiple growths were experienced in industrial production and the number of workers. The GDP quadrupled. Management became domestic. Thus, borderers became politicians, engineers, technicians, professors, officers, and constructors etc.”²

A number of things may be concluded from this article written in 1973. The piece emphasized the social changes that had occurred as a result of the area’s economic growth, coupled with an intense and vigorous progress. The author attempts to take us through the dark corridors of history, which are even darker in Krajina, and yet narrower. He describes a typical borderer, giving him negative characteristics: lazy and violent drunk with several wives and responsible for the break-ups of families. Keith Richards a la balcanique! With the advent of industrialisation he evolved from being lazy to hardworking, loyal and manly. His unrestrained behaviour began to peter out as he experienced the advantages of the civic life-style. The broader socialist perceptions have tended to hold on to his earlier “essence” but have also admitted that finally, he did manage to transform. He went to bed as a borderer and woke up as a great enthusiast of Yugoslavia’s socialist workers’ self-management project.

This newspaper’s article, saturated with ideological digression, in fact tells us more about the time when the account was written than about the people it was referring to. Moreover, the author’s speculation about the changes experienced by Krajina peoples and society until the middle of the sixties of the twentieth century, along with the statement that these changes had really occurred, is more than questionable. After all, industrialisation in Bihaćka Krajina had been debilitated by World War Two and the authorities neglected this area because of the uprising that took place here in 1950.³ This article should be treated with great scepticism at the time when it was published in “Oslobodjenje” (1973). Indeed, Bihaćka Krajina experienced rapid economic expansion at the beginning of the seventies and this development altered previous lifestyles and enabled the social expansion of this area.

² Sovilj, S. 1973, ‘Zastarjela lična karta’, *Oslobodjenje*, 02.09.1973. p. 7.

³ Kržišnik-Bukić, V. 1989, *Cazinska buna 1950*, Svjetlost, Sarajevo, 10.

The story about “change”, especially when it refers to people from the borderlands, often involves the attention of authorities. The beginning of socialist rule brought forth the expectation that much should be changed, and this view was pronounced on all levels of the socio-political structures. Change was expected to be triggered by economic progress. The economic progress of Bihaćka Krajina was very dependent on the economic policies carried out by the Bosnian-Herzegovinian authorities. Similarly to the other “underdeveloped” regions of Yugoslavia, the development policies in the Krajina were closely linked to building huge factories with large labour capacities. Their strategic location in the Krajina region was deliberately planned.

From the perspectives of the socialist authorities, such a policy of development was able to show very soon significant positive results. Already at the beginning of the seventies, Husein Dupanović, a highly positioned regional politician, stated, for instance, that “the psychology and mentality according to which this area (Bihaćka Krajina A.M.) should be governed by someone else” was already overcome.⁴ Was there a view that the Krajina people could govern themselves and that their earlier mentality of Borderers was truly transformed? If yes, which factors transformed it and how did this process take place?

This paper deals with these questions of change and transformation and particularly focuses on the process of imposing a national identity on a society where regional sentiments are strong and which has hardly any connection with “the center” (in this case the capital of the republic, Sarajevo). As we will see, infrastructure and also migrations played a crucial role in this process, very much along the lines of B. Anderson’s arguments about establishing “national belonging” in broader parts of a society (Anderson 1991).

Integrations

At the beginning of the seventies of the twentieth century, Bihaćka Krajina was imbued by processes that brought the inhabitants of this area into new socialist realities existing in the other parts of the Yugoslav federation. By building the famous “AVNOJ Road” (from Jajce to Bihać), this area became connected with the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina and thus, for the first time, integrated by means of a more modern road system. In addition to this “internal traffic integration” also took place. At this time important regional roads were built like that one from Bihać to Cazin and Velika Kladuša or the road

⁴ Oslobodjenje, 19 Novemeb 1972.

from Bihać to Bosanska Krupa and Bosanski Novi.⁵ As a result, the pronounced Krajina localisms began to be questioned, although differences and hostilities among certain towns and places remained⁶.

The previous situation of media isolation was “broken” by the installation of new and stronger transmitters of Radio–Television (RTV) Sarajevo, as well as by the opening of an informative and business centre (IPC) of “Oslobodjenje” in Bihać. This media connection with the republic was intensified over time. The official strategy of the Bosnian authorities to strengthen the republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina and its position within the Socialistic Federal Republic Yugoslavia (SFRJ) was clearly present in Krajina too. After a certain period of time, those who owned TV sets in Krajina were able to watch RTV Sarajevo instead of Zagreb television. These processes could be viewed as a part of the process of building Bosnia and Herzegovina as a republic inside the Yugoslav federation, but also as a part of Muslim nation building as well.

The burning problem of the lack of higher education institutions however remained. It was stressed that the nearest university centre was 200 kilometres away. Until the 1970s, without proper road connections, this was a huge distance to travel, which meant that very students ever received a further education. Most of those who decided to go to university would go outside Bosnia and Herzegovina. I was often told during my interviews in the region that people were going to Zagreb and Ljubljana mainly because Sarajevo was too far away. In general, the West was much closer for former borderers of Krajina. People from this region were turning their eyes much more towards Zagreb, Ljubljana, Graz and Trieste, and less so towards Sarajevo.

There was another important factor that turned people from Bihaćka Krajina more towards the West – that of emigration. A large number of workers in the mid sixties set off to work in Germany and Austria. At one point in time, there were two times more workers from Bosanska Krupa, Cazin and Velika Kladuša municipalities abroad than there were in their home working organizations.⁷ The people from this region abroad formed tight groups with significant influence. Even official policy people placed great hopes in the influence of the émigrés from Krajina. For instance, the socialist authorities included them into the economic development programs for the Bihaćka Krajina and the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina. By paying closer attention, it becomes evident that the position of the people from Bihaćka Krajina abroad was very difficult. Even those men who went

⁵ Oslobodjenje, 7 January 1971.

⁶ And again were bloodily deepened during the war of the 1990s.

⁷ Oslobodjenje, 11 November 1971.

to work to Slovenia, lived very frugally.⁸ Without their families, in improvised houses in the suburbs, they were working hard to earn enough to support their families in Bosnia and themselves in Slovenia. Very few were able to achieve anything more than this, although the state considered most of them to be successful in economic terms and expected support from them. When it became apparent that this was a misconception, an important politician from Bosnia and Herzegovina stated that the “programme of our people’s going abroad to work was not understood correctly, neither was it implemented correctly.”

Despite this “misconception”, however, Krajina *gastarbeiters* played an important role in this society’s transformation. Many attitudes and practices which were accepted by a large number of people in Krajina were introduced precisely by the Krajina émigrés who also had significant effects in changing psycho-social behaviour. People changed their perceptions to a certain extent and also their system of values, and thus became “Bosnian westerners”, which was not only a geographical change. They compensated the model of superiority and the agony they had experienced as a cheap working force in western European countries, by imitating the West in their district. What they could not be in the West, they attempted to be in their own towns or villages. This, for instance, is clearly visible in the architecture, whereby the small Krajina houses, which often resembled an object of fortification, began to be replaced by new houses in “Alpine” style.⁹

In addition to the migration from Krajina abroad, there was intensive migration from other parts of Yugoslavia towards Krajina. Namely, experts, who were chronically lacking in Krajina due to the afore-mentioned reasons of lack of a higher education. They were needed in this area as important segments in the process of modernization and industrialisation of this area.

Other than economic experts, a large number of military personnel settled in Krajina, especially in Bihać too. This group of people was mostly attached to the military airfield Željava and the Yugoslav Peoples Army (JNA) barracks that were situated in this area. Their arrival provoked a confrontation of local population with the social norms and practices brought by the military personnel stationed in the area. “Partisan identity”¹⁰ formed during the Second World War, which was originally accepted by only a fraction of the population was now spreading across the whole population. Slogans like “Broth-

⁸ See for instance the interview with Alija Alešević, who went as a student to work in Slovenia. Interview published in *Velika Kladuša*, 09.11.2006. From the author’s archive.

⁹ Uzelac, M. 2005, *Ono malo istine*, Bosanska pošta, London-Sarajevo, p.66.

¹⁰ Uzelac, M. 2005, p. 24.

erhood and Unity” and “Worker’s self-management” became omnipresent in everyday life. The discourse on the so-called “People’s Liberation War” became widespread in Krajina affecting social life in the area heavily. Given that for the Yugoslav Communist Party, resp. later League of Communists, The People’s Liberation War was the key moment that everything prior to that was dismissed as irrelevant and regressive.

The contacts the people from Krajina with those who had left the area and later returned but brought new experiences, and those who arrived in the area as professionals or military personnel, reconfigured this region which was considered to be shaped by centuries of Ottoman rule. Their “backwardness” and “poverty” was soon to be erased by socialist progress and their future seemed to open up to new horizons.

At the beginning of the seventies all these processes had a strong influence on the people living in the towns and villages of Krajina. Although economic progress was anticipated to bring a better future for former borderers - the people once “destined for agony”¹¹ – for socialist ideologists it was still hard to distinguish them “ideologically” from their military past. According to some of the main socialist ideologists, in the past the Krajina people were not able to think about anything else but survival in the face of the constant state of war. The military past, which was associated with the defence of the border (of the Ottoman Empire) and closely linked to the borderer’s attachment to the – in socialist thinking – “foreign Ottoman occupier” was not a desirable “heritage”. Therefore they set off to producing a new iconography for the region: Bihaćka republika¹² as the territory, and Hamdija Pozderac¹³ as its main character. This way, the tradition of regional identity was not compromised. Although different ideological convictions were established, the Krajina society functioned in the very same way as it had functioned before.

¹¹ Dzafic, R. 1997, *Antologija krajičke proze* NIP Unsko-sanske novine, Bihać, p. 6.

¹² In 1965, a scientific congress was held in Bihać, and articles and address-papers were published in two volumes under the title “Bihaćka republika”. The editor was Branko Bokan. Bihaćka republika was free territory controlled by KPJ and partisan movement, both of which were created in wider areas of Krajina during the Second World War

¹³ Hamdija Pozderac (1924-1988) was considered one of the most influential and powerful politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the communist era. He held various high positions in the government of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 80s and exerted considerable influence on the politics of the communist party. His perhaps most important position was as the president of the Federal Constitutional Commission of Yugoslavia which he held for nearly 20 years. His political ascendance began with economic revitalization of the Krajina region. Pozderac provided the political backing to Agrokomerc at the time a small local food manufacturer which would later become one of the largest food manufacturing corporations in former Yugoslavia. Agrokomerc proved to be the key to the economic prosperity of the Krajina-region.

In regional weekly newspaper "Krajina", there were frequently feuilletons about Hamdija Pozderac, like those in 1979 and 1983. In addition to that, articles that positioned Hamdija Pozderac as an unquestionable authority were frequently published in many other publications as well.

The process of building and developing of the Yugoslav identity¹⁴ in Bihaćka krajina was not an unusual process. Other areas of Yugoslavia were also subjected to similar transformations. This was most drastically demonstrated in the 1981 census when the number of those who declared themselves Yugoslavs increased considerably. An important factor that contributed to this was the death of J. B. Tito. Moreover, Yugoslavism was particularly emphasized and exercised among the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁵

Revisiting One's Own Regional Identity

The return to the regional identity of this area intensified in particular during the so-called "Agrokomerc Affair". This affair was analyzed in-depth in a book with the title "Velika Kladuša throughout Centuries" and was published by Aleksandar Ravlić in 1987. This book glorifies the history of the Krajina area and tried to prove that this area was no longer marginalized. On the contrary, there were things in Krajina to be proud of. This book claims that the people from Krajina, especially those from Kladuša and Cazin, wanted to confirm that they were equal and identical with the rest, and that they could write down their "glorious past" the same way it was done by the others. In the region meanwhile, an important event announced the forthcoming dissolution of Yugoslavia: the so-called Agrokomerc affair in 1987. This affair had severe economic, financial and political connotations. Most of all in the Krajina area itself it played a strong role in deepening the distinctions between "us" and "them".

Agrokomerc was one of the leading agricultural enterprises in SFRY and was established in the Krajina area. Most of its capacities were placed in the Velika Kladuša and Cazin municipalities. As such, it was the symbol of the progress of this area and it represented more than a plain agricultural entity. Throughout the rise of Agrokomerc, many people experienced it to be the "development" of Bihaćka Krajina. Agrokomerc was seen as a crucial factor for "enlightenment" of Krajina by the Party and many other officials. When big structure was opened in Velika Kladuša in 1971, it was received as a possibility that would educate and modernize people.¹⁶ People's identification with Agrokomerc was immense. Vice versa every slogan of Agrokomerc was created in the name of "people's

¹⁴ Supranational identity does not imply imposition of Yugoslavianism and repression of Serbianism, Croatism, Muslimism, etc. Even though many declared themselves as Yugoslavian, that identity was equal to other identities and was not supreme. However, Yugoslavianism as a product of the Second World War and post-war development was above the other identities and in some way represented a higher level of consciousness. It is this psychological level where it should be considered as supranational identity.

¹⁵ Kržišnik-Bukić, V. 1997, *Bosanski identitet (između prošlosti i budućnosti)*, Bosanska knjiga, Sarajevo: 44.

¹⁶ Oslobođenje, 20 February 1971.

needs and for people's good." Just how strong that identification could later be seen during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995), when in 1993/94 Bihaćka krajina was proclaimed to the Autonomous province of Western Bosnia. Its autonomy spread exactly on that territory which had Agrokomerc's objects and factories.

The affair that broke out in 1987 was due to the fact that Agrokomerc was issuing bonds without sufficient funds. It could be argued that the actual objective behind this affair was to overthrow the Bosnian leadership with Hamdija Pozderac, who was a borderer from Cazin. Having realized that this political and economic earthquake due to financial malversations with deep political background in Krajina is inevitable, Hamdija Pozderac, one of the most prominent politicians in Yugoslavia at that time, loudly exclaimed that he would defend Krajina.¹⁷ The controversial Fikret Abdić, Agrokomerc's director since the 1970s, even began to ask if the people would know "that borderers have weapons!"¹⁸ An important role in this borderers' return to "themselves" was played by the nationalist awakening of Serbs and Croats. The process of belonging and identification with the Muslim nation, as opposed to the Yugoslav, was growing stronger and stronger. The Agrokomerc affair was seen as an attack on Muslims.¹⁹ After a while, borderers felt that they were the only ones who suffered such a blow. It seemed as if they needed help and nobody was offering it. If we take a look at the essence of the matter, a similar outlook of the victimization of this region carries resemblance: from the 17th all the way till the end of the twentieth century, the people in the Krajina region seemingly had been "fighting against external forces" and "defending themselves against domination". A large number of the Krajina population presently views the period when others were helping them as a period of deception. Opening towards the others had been questioned and decreased, and the people from the border area were again looking at others and their assistance with certain reserve.

Conclusion

The complicated issue of Bosniak nation building can apparently seem even more complicated if we try to analyse certain very pronounced regionalisms. Set in the process of Yugoslav identification, especially in Bosnia and among Bosniaks, regionalism can be seen as a Gordian knot, although this matter is not unique to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

¹⁷ Uzelac, M. 2005: 151.

¹⁸ Ibid: 280.

¹⁹ This attitude was not far from true, but I do not want to detail the essence of the issue since it would take too much space.

Regional identity can be a highly-pronounced and widely-demonstrated way of self-ascription. This can be especially true for societies that experienced difficulties over longer time spans and different historical periods.²⁰ Historical perceptions and traditions are, in such societies, of importance for the formation of mentality and people's identification with the group. In the case of the Krajina, this process was particularly pronounced during the period of "socialist modernisation" that began in the early 1970s.

Participation in the nation-building processes of Krajina was very closely connected with Yugoslavism, although at the same time it was connected with the developing concepts of a Muslim nation in Bosnia-Herzegovina.²¹ In order to be as close as possible to an imaginary Yugoslavian mass and in order to fit in it, the Krajina "borderers" had to "give up" their old traditions, systems of values and ideals, since socialist modernism demanded such a "sacrifice." A relationship between these processes and the processes of large numbers of working people going to the West carried huge significance for social interaction within the region. Apart from accepting western habits, the Krajina émigrés based their socialisation abroad on the Yugoslavian identification - often through the existence of home-clubs.

The disruption of the process of turning Krajina people into Yugoslavs, above all was caused by the Agrokomerc affair. To some degree it "returned" the population of this area to the position they held fifty years ago. Poverty and misery were once again an integral part of their everyday life. Resistance towards the centre grew again stronger and local heroes were becoming more important. To be a borderer became again to be seen as an ill fortune, but a great honour too. Pride again began to play a role in defining the character of these people. Going back to their roots of being "borderers" again entailed to proudly defy all the adversities. As a Krajina epic says:

*Come on, I am well and I hope for better;
I did not dine, I will not sup..*

²⁰ Smith, D. A. 1998, *Nacionalni identitet*, XX vek, Beograd, p. 40.

²¹ Perception that they are part of the "Muslim body" in Bosnia-Herzegovina is no doubt as well strongly established in borderers self-perceptions. Moreover, activism in the field of Bosniak nation building is very immanent, among both intellectuals and among common people.

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