



NATO Foundation  
Defense College

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### **The harsh diplomatic clash between Serbia and Croatia**

In the last days three controversial episodes have shown the emerging new tensions in Serbo-Croat relations. Once again, the chance to start a new quarrel between the two countries was given by the politicization of their history which still has considerable impact in the present political arena of both countries.

The first of the three episodes refers to the decision taken by a Croatian court in Zagreb to revoke the sentence pronounced in 1946 by the Supreme Court of the Popular Republic of Croatia against the catholic cardinal Aloysius Stepinac. The cardinal was sentenced to 16 years of forced labour because of his alleged support at the Croatia's pro-Nazi Ustashe regime during the Second World War. Stepinac, who died in 1960 due to the consequences of an attempt of poisoning while in jail, was also accused to have helped the Ustashe regime in its massacres of Serbs, Rom and Jewish.

This sentence was revoked because, according to the Croat tribunal, it was based only on political charges and the process was carried out without the respect of any rule of law principles. A war criminal for the Serbs, a nation hero for the Croats, the figure of Aloysius Stepinac has always been debated in the two countries: the new sentence adds fuel to the fire.

The second event that has triggered Serbian protests was the lack of public condemnation by the Croat government of the turmoil that took place in Srb on the 27<sup>th</sup> of July. In the village of Srb, located in the Croat region of Lika, sympathizers and activist of a far-right and pro-Ustashe party (Autohtona Hrvatska Stranka Prava, Autochthonous Croatian Party of Right, A-HSP) caused incidents during the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Croatian anti-fascist uprising by interrupting speakers and insulting the participants. The Serbian Foreign Minister Dačić has said that the protesters seen in Srb were "the heirs of the Ustashe and of Ante Pavelic" and decided to send a formal protest note to the Croat government, which replied that this diplomatic act was insulting.

Thirdly, last Sunday in the Croat village of Drage, a newly-erected statue of Miro Barešić was unveiled in a ceremony attended by two ministers of the Croat governments together with a considerable number of nationalist and far-right parties' supporters. Miro Barešić was a far-right Croat nationalist convicted to life sentence by a Swedish court due to the murdering of the Yugoslav ambassador Vladimir Rolović in

Stockholm in 1971. He was then released thanks to an exchange with the hostages of a hijacked airplane and moved first to Spain, then to Paraguay. With the support of the Croatian government, in 1991 Miro Barešić returned in Yugoslavia where he took part to the Croatian war of independence until his death in the summer of 1991.

These disputes have escalated to an official diplomatic clash between Croatia and Serbia that quickly reached a danger level, as proven by the harsh declarations stated by both the governments. The current quarrel seems deeply influenced by domestic political factors (in particular the latest as well as the forthcoming elections), nevertheless Serbo-Croatian relations have never been so tense in the last years.

Furthermore, on the upcoming 5<sup>th</sup> August (XXI public holiday of the Victory Day) Croatia will celebrate its independence and the success of the “Operation Storm/Oluja”. The latter took place in 1995 defeating the self-proclaimed government of the Serb entity in Krajina (Republic of Serbian Krajina). As widely predicted, the celebration in Knin (differently from the one in Zagreb) raised serious controversy due to its ultra-nationalistic and sometimes Ustashe-nostalgic character.