

Ethnicity, Nationalism and the Changing Status of Eastern Slavonia

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Introduction

Prior to the outbreak of conflict in former Yugoslavia in 1991 and the Serbian occupation of the Eastern Slavonia in eastern Croatia, this area was not perceived as a distinct, self-contained region. The territory in question was, however, treated as a separate region following the Serbian occupation. Between 1991 and 1995, the region was seen, depending on the viewer's perspective, as either occupied territory of the Republic of Croatia (the Croatian viewpoint), United Nations Sector East (the stance of the international community in general), or part of the Serbian Republic of Krajina (the Serbian perspective).

In late 1995 agreement was reached on the reintegration of the region into Croatia. As a result a two-years long process was undertaken by both parties to the conflict which has recently reached its conclusion. During this period, Eastern Slavonia was governed by a United Nations Transitional Authority.

The paper will trace the changes in the ethnic composition of Eastern Slavonia's population, trace the evolution of its administrative status between 1991 and 1998, and assess the success of the United Nations efforts to defuse ethnic and nationalist tensions and bring about dispute resolution through the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia into Croatia.

What and Where is Eastern Slavonia?

Historical background

The Croatian territory occupied by Serb forces in 1991 during the early stages of the disintegration of Yugoslavia is commonly termed "Eastern Slavonia". The region in question is defined by the limit of Serbian control rather than coinciding with a distinct, pre-existing administrative area. In fact, "Eastern Slavonia" is composed of parts of three larger historical regions: Slavonia, Syrmium and Baranja.

Following the Austro-Hungarian (re)capture in the 18th century, the term *Slavonia* came to be applied to the three easternmost counties of Croatia, broadly comprising the lands between the Drava, Sava and Danube rivers. *Syrmium*, or *Srijem* in Croatian, is a toponym traditionally subordinated to Slavonia. It refers to the easternmost part of Slavonia between the Vuka and Danube rivers to the north and east and the Sava to the south. Syrmium formerly extended significantly beyond the Danube line. Its easternmost point used to be the town of Zemun, today part of greater Belgrade. Following World War II historic Syrmium was divided into a smaller, western part which remained within Croatia and a larger eastern part, the majority of which fell within the (then) autonomous province of Vojvodina.

The region of *Baranja* is part of a historically larger entity which for centuries belonged to Hungary, and was traditionally organised as part of the County of Baranya with an administrative seat of government in the town of Pécs in modern Hungary. The region was politically divided after World War I. Since the population of Baranja was mixed, it was not possible to determine this border according to ethnic criteria. As a result, a considerable number of South Slavs, especially Croats around Mohács and Pécs remained in Hungary, while many Hungarians were left in the area included in the new Serb, Croat and Slovene state. This delimitation was justified from an economic and spatio-functional viewpoint, as Belgrade's claim to southern Baranja as the natural hinterland to Osijek was accepted by the peace conference.

That part of Baranja which was allotted to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes became a part of the Yugoslav federal republic of Croatia after World War II.

Croatian Baranja is a well-defined region which has a triangular shape framed by the Croatia-Hungary boundary to the north, the Drava river to the south and west and the Croatia-Serbia boundary to the east. The latter boundary has the Danube as its basis although the line does not exactly coincide with the river.

That part of eastern Croatia which was occupied by Serb forces in 1991 comprised almost the entirety of non-Hungarian Baranja, the easternmost part of Slavonia and the Croatian part of Syrmium. The area in question can therefore be accurately referred to as "Baranja, eastern Slavonia and western Syrmium." Given this rather cumbersome title it is perhaps unsurprising that the shorthand term of "Eastern Slavonia" came into frequent use.

The terms "Croatia's Danube Region" and "Croatian Danubeland" (*Hrvatsko Podunavlje*) have also been used, particularly by Croatian sources, as an alternative concise name for the region as this emphasises Croatian sovereignty as well as the pivotal role of the Danube in the area. It should be noted here that as far as the local Serb authorities controlling the region in the 1991-1995 period were concerned, the area was simply part of the internationally unrecognised "Republic of Krajina". United Nations peacekeepers officially referred to the region as UN Protected Area (UNPA) Sector East (see below).

The present-day international boundary between Croatia and Serbia was established following World War II in 1945. The question of the delimitation between Croatia and Serbia was the subject of intensive talks during the spring of 1945. In order to resolve the issue the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia appointed a special commission tasked with proposing a definitive Croatia-Serbia (Vojvodina) delimitation. The commission comprised five members headed by Milovan Djilas, one of Yugoslav leaders at that time, and was subsequently usually referred to simply as the "Djilas Commission".

The Djilas Commission undertook fieldwork, held meetings with the local representatives and submitted a report. According to Djilas himself: "*We went from village to village trying to determine which nation had a majority. The Politburo ordered us to stick to the ethnic principle beforehand.*"

The Commission proposed a delimitation line in June 1945 and after some minor corrections¹ this was accepted as the republican boundary in the newly established Yugoslav federation. Subsequently, on the 1 September 1945, the Parliament of Serbia passed a *Law on Establishment and Organisation of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina* in which the boundary with Croatia was described as follows: “*The boundary follows the Danube river from the Hungarian border to the town of Ilok.*”² The remainder of the boundary cut through the Srijem region and was described by the villages proposed to belong to Croatia or Vojvodina respectively.³

The boundary between the Yugoslav federal republics of Croatia and Serbia (Vojvodina), was therefore delimited in detail in 1945-46 and could be said to be well established by the time it was elevated to the status of an international boundary with the break up of Yugoslavia. The only boundary dispute as such between the two sides relates to pockets of territory belonging to either state which have ended up on the ‘wrong’ side of the river as a result of the meanderings of the Danube.

Geographical and demographic background and significance

Serb-held Eastern Slavonia comprising the easternmost part of Croatia along the Danube river had an area of 2,580km² amounting to 4.6% of Croatia’s state territory. According to the last census prior to the conflict which engulfed the region, that of 1991, the territory comprising Eastern Slavonia had a population of 193,513. Of this total Croats were the most numerous inhabitants numbering 86,086 (44.5%) but the population was clearly mixed one. Serbs represented the second most numerous ethnic group in the region, accounting for 67,676 inhabitants (35%). Other nationalities and those who chose not to declare a particular nationality (including Hungarians, Ruthenians and those who opted to define themselves as “Yugoslavs”) comprised 39,751 people (20.5%). The Hungarian community was concentrated in Baranja, while a small Ruthenian population was settled in the villages Petrovici and Miklu{evici near Vukovar.

In economic terms the Danubian portion of Croatia undoubtedly represented the most significant “gain” the Serbs made in the course of the 1991 Serbo-Croat war. In contrast to the sparsely inhabited and economically peripheral nature of the Krajina⁴ uplands, lowlying eastern Croatia was heavily populated and developed boasting light industry and the most productive agricultural land in the country on the floodplains of the Danube. The area also borders Croatia’s fourth largest city, Osijek, stifling its development. Moreover, in Srijem, near Djeletovci, Serbian forces occupied the largest oil producing region in former Yugoslavia. In the late 1980s the production of oil from these fields amounted to approximately 5,200 barrels per day.

Strategically, the Serb-occupied area currently provides Serbia (Yugoslavia) with a buffer zone and bridgehead on the western side of the major physical obstacle to a Serb offensive against Croatia (or vice-versa) - the Danube. Indeed, Serb forces have placed at least two pontoon bridges across the river in order to better supply and reinforce their garrison in eastern Croatia. The Serb occupation also amputated Croatia’s Danubian character (through the port at Vukovar) and thus access to Europe’s largest inland waterway system. In addition, as the site of the heaviest

fighting of the 1991 conflict the reintegration of Eastern Slavonia acquired great symbolic importance for Croatia.

The Occupation of Eastern Slavonia and International Intervention

Eastern Croatia is the only part of Croatia which shares a border with Serbia (Vojvodina). Because of this proximity to Serbia proper, this region, Eastern Slavonia, suffered the brunt of the Serbian offensive from July 1991. This offensive was conducted by a combined force of local Serbs, volunteers from Serbia and the Serb-dominated Yugoslav Army. The region experienced some of the most intense fighting of the Croat-Serb conflict during which makeshift Croatian militias defended the region tenaciously and the town of Vukovar was besieged for three months before finally falling.

Prior to the conflict Serbs were a minority in all five border municipalities. This soon changed. As a result of what is now commonly termed 'ethnic cleansing', the vast majority of the non-Serb population, in excess of 100,000 people, was forced to flee. This campaign of ethnic cleansing was somewhat less severe in Baranja than in Slavonia and Syrmium, nevertheless the impact was significant. This is illustrated by a registration of Baranja's population conducted by the occupying authorities between 27 January and 5 March 1992.⁵

According to this survey the population of Baranja was 39,482, composed of 23,458 Serbs (59.4%), 7,689 Croats (19.5%) and 6,926 Hungarians (17.5%). A comparison with the results of the 1991 census is revealing. In 1991 the total population of Baranja was recorded as 54,256 including 22,740 Croats (41.9%), 13,851 Serbs (25.5%) and 8,956 Hungarians (16.5%). Thus, in less than a year at least 15,000 Croats and 2,000 Hungarians had been expelled from the region while in excess of 10,000 Serbs from elsewhere had settled in Baranja - despite the fact that a more limited campaign of ethnic cleansing was conducted there than elsewhere in Eastern Slavonia.

The collapse of the former Yugoslavia in 1991 seemed to take international community by surprise.⁶ Despite this handicap, the international community tried to mediate in the conflict. Attempts to mediate started with European Community efforts in mid-1991 whereby a fact-finding mission of observers was dispatched to the scene of the crisis. As the conflict developed so the international community's involvement increased. In early 1992 the first contingent of UN peacekeepers was deployed in Croatia. The spread and escalation of the conflict swiftly saw the additional deployment of UN forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia.

A proposal for a UN peace-keeping operation in Croatia was published as Appendix III to the Secretary General's report from 11 December 1991. The plan had been devised by Cyrus Vance, the personal envoy of the UN Secretary General, and Marack Goulding, Assistant Secretary General for political issues, and became widely known as the *Vance Plan*. The UN peace-keeping operation, officially named the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) was intended as an interim arrangement with the main aim of

creating conditions for political negotiations and the overall solution of the post-Yugoslav crises through those negotiations.

According to the Vance Plan UN troops were stationed in parts of Croatia designated as UN Protected Areas (UNPA). It was stated explicitly that UNPAs were areas *“in which Serbs constitute the majority or substantial minority of the population and where inter-communal tensions have led to armed conflict in the recent past.”*

UNPAs were to be demilitarised (*“all armed forces in them would be either withdrawn or disbanded”*) and the role of UNPROFOR was to ensure that the areas remained demilitarised. UN police monitors were proposed to supervise the work of local police force, *“formed from residents of the UNPA in question, in proportions reflecting the national composition which lived in it before the recent hostilities.”* UNPROFOR, together with the humanitarian agencies of UN, would also ensure safe and peaceful return of displaced persons to their homes within UNPA. The entire area under the UN protection was divided for operational purposes into four ‘sectors’ (East, West, North, South). Eastern Slavonia was designated UNPA Sector East.

The ‘Cypriotisation’ of Croatia

On 12 January 1995 Croatian president Franjo Tudjman announced that UNPROFOR’s (United Nations Protection Force) mandate in Croatia would not be renewed after its next expiry date on 31 March and that the UN force would therefore have to leave Croatia by the end of June. This radical Croatian move was brought about by what Croats perceived as major failings on the part of the UN force. Croatian criticism of the UN’s peacekeeping performance was clearly summarised in a resolution passed by the Croatian parliament on 23 September 1994. According to that resolution the UN operation was judged to be unsuccessful because it had failed to secure:

- disarmament and disbanding of all armed groups operating on occupied territories of Croatia;
- safe return of all displaced persons;
- guarantees for the safety and protection for all those who inhabited presently occupied territories before aggression;
- immediate installation of Croatian government control in ‘Pink zones’⁷, and later on the rest of the occupied territories in accord with the 1991 Constitutional Law which provides autonomy for the Serbs;
- control of Croatian boundaries towards Serbia and parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina under the control of Bosnian Serbs.

The ambiguous nature of the Vance Plan concerning the role of the UN peacekeepers and future of the UNPAs was at least partially responsible for this failure.

UNPROFOR was caught between the Croatian interpretation of the plan - that the UN’s role should be to assist the Croatian authorities to reassert their control over the Serb-occupied areas, to disarm the Serbs and assist in the return of Croatian refugees to the UNPAs - and the Serb view, that the UN force was there to protect the Serb-held areas and ensure their autonomy. UNPROFOR therefore suffered from the unenviable position of attempting to supervise an agreement which it had neither the

mandate or the resources to enforce, and ultimately was even unable to extend its own authority throughout the UNPAs which remained under the control of the local Serb authorities.

As a result UNPROFOR in Croatia was regarded, with some justification, as merely helping to preserve an unsatisfactory *de facto* situation analogous to the UN operation in divided Cyprus. The Croatian fear of this process, inelegantly referred to as 'Cypriotisation', resulting in a permanent institutionalised partition of Croatia was the main factor prompting President Tudjman's ultimatum to the UN and reflects widespread frustration in Croatia at the UN force's lack of progress on the issue of reintegration or on Croatian Serb calls for full independence and union with the self-styled Bosnian Serb Republic and Serbia proper. Indeed, in his letter to the UN Secretary General relating to Croatia's decision not to renew UNPROFOR's mandate President Tudjman specifically cited the lack of progress over resolution of the Krajina issue stating that:

...although UNPROFOR has played an important role in stopping violence and major conflicts in Croatia, it is an indisputable fact that the present character of the UNPROFOR mission does not provide conditions necessary for establishing lasting peace and order in the Republic of Croatia.

In a statement issued on the same day the UN Secretary General stressed that while he was "...painfully aware of the frustration of the Croatian people that a final political settlement has eluded us", he was also "gravely concerned about the risk of renewed hostilities should UN peacekeepers be withdrawn from Croatia." The Secretary General's earlier report to the Security Council on 17 September 1994 clearly indicated UNPROFOR's shortcomings, however (UNPROFOR, 1994). In that report he stated that original mandate had proved difficult to implement, and that demilitarisation of the UNPA, the restoration of Croatian authority in the pink zones and the establishment of border controls and assistance for the return of displaced persons remained unfulfilled. The four points stressed by Secretary General were exactly what Zagreb perceived as the key failings on the part of UN force.

Consolidation by Force

For more than three years UNPROFOR maintained a traditional peacekeeping role fulfilling a 'disengagement' mission by patrolling lines of confrontation and reporting incidents between opposing forces (Boutros-Ghali, 1992). However, the UNPAs were by no means demilitarised, no discernible progress was foreseen on the return of refugees in the Serb-occupied areas, no sincere talks on reintegration of the UNPAs into Croatia proper had taken place. This unfavourable situation did not essentially change even after alterations to the peacekeeping mandate in April 1995. Following Croatia's diplomatic offensive and threat to eject UN forces, the Security Council finally voted through resolutions by which UNPROFOR was divided into different operations.

The original name was kept only for the UN operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina (UNPROFOR). The operation in the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia was

renamed in UNPREDEP (UN Preventive Deployment Force), while the operation in Croatia was renamed UNCRO (UN Confidence Restoration Operation in Croatia). The Croatian government insisted not only on a new name but also on new tasks for peacekeepers. However, Resolution 981 did not propose any essential changes in the mandate but defined UNCRO as an interim arrangement tasked with creating the conditions conducive to a negotiated settlement consistent with territorial integrity of Croatia. Instead of effective control of international boundaries, as Croatia insisted, the Security Council authorised UNCRO only for “*help in controlling, by monitoring and reporting, the crossing of military personnel, equipment, supplies and weapons.*”

The new name did not resolve existing problems. To be fair to the UN peacekeepers and negotiators, it became abundantly clear over three years of fruitless negotiations that the Krajina Serbs, having achieved their aim of effective (if unrecognised) independence, were simply not interested in remaining part of Croatia, whatever form of autonomy they were offered. This was particularly clear when the so-called “*Z-4 Plan*”, drafted by international mediators, which proposed a status of a “*state within the state*” for the Knin region was summarily rejected.

The existence of major Serb-held areas, particularly the self-proclaimed “Republic of Krajina”, in the heart of the state, virtually slicing the continental and coastal parts of Croatia in two, was a critical obstacle to the country’s prospects for political and economic security. Not only did the large Serb-occupied areas pose a significant military threat, forcing the Croatian armed forces to defend an extremely long line of confrontation, but these region’s unresolved status deterred international investment and virtually precluded viable economic development. For example, a revival of the once significant Dalmatian tourist industry was negated by the threat of Serb shelling.

As a result of this unsatisfactory state of affairs coupled with a very significant enhancement in the capabilities of Croatia’s armed forces since 1991, Zagreb changed tack, essentially taking the matter into its own hands. Croatia launched two offensives against the Serb-held areas. In May 1995 in operation codenamed *Flash* Croatian forces regained Serb-controlled part of Western Slavonia. Following another round of abortive negotiations in Geneva, Croatia then, in August 1995, launched another offensive, *Operation Storm*, with the aims of breaking the siege of the UN safe haven of Bihac in Bosnia and establishing Croatian government rule in former UN sectors North and South.

The demise of the Serb-occupied parts of Croatia in Western Slavonia and the Krajina slashed the Serb-held proportion of Croatian state territory from around one quarter to under 5%.

The Reintegration of Eastern Slavonia

After the fall of self-proclaimed Krajina and Serb-held part in Western Slavonia (former UN Sectors North, South and West), Eastern Slavonia (UNPA Sector East) was the only occupied part of Croatia remaining. These events, coupled with the successes of Bosnian and Croatian forces in western and central Bosnia, strengthened Zagreb’s negotiating position over Eastern Slavonia considerably.

Despite reports of military forces of both sides moving towards the frontline in eastern Croatia in the immediate aftermath of *Operation Storm* the tense situation was defused by a local ceasefire agreement in late August. The peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia is based on an agreement reached in November 1995 between the Croatian government and the local Serb leadership which can be considered to be one of the outcomes of the Dayton negotiations.

The key mediator in achieving this breakthrough was the US Ambassador to Croatia, Peter Galbraith, supported by International Conference on former Yugoslavia (ICFY) co-chairman, Thorvald Stoltenberg. Initial agreement was reached on 3 October when the *Guiding Basic Principles for Negotiations on a Settlement of Eastern Slavonia, Southern Baranja and Western Sirmium* was concluded. This document was signed at the Eastern Slavonian village of Erdut and swiftly became known as the *Erdut Agreement*. The Erdut Agreement consisted of 11 points which in generalised terms proposed a transitional authority, demilitarisation, joint police forces, the return of refugees, protection of human rights, compensation for lost property, an international presence and local elections.

The Dayton process resulted in the drafting of a further document, the *Basic Agreement on the Region of Eastern Slavonia, Baranja and Western Sirmium*, of 12 November 1995. This agreement, consisting of 14 points, proposed a staged peaceful reintegration of the region into Croatia within one year, with the possibility of an extension of not more than a further year. All refugees from the region would be allowed to return, while the pre-existing Serb population would be able to remain.

The agreement was accepted and confirmed by UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1025 of 30 November 1995. On 15 January 1996 UNCRO's prolonged mandate in Croatia expired and on the same day the Security Council adopted Resolution 1037 establishing the UN Transitional Authority in Eastern Slavonia (UNTAES) for an initial 12 month period. Retired US General Jacques Klein was appointed as Transitional Administrator and took up his duties on 11 February. The headquarters of UNTAES were established in Vukovar and a parallel office was set up in Osijek, eastern Croatia's largest town where the Croatian government opened an Office for the Reintegration of Danubeland.

The military component of UNTAES, comprising 5,000 troops, was made up of the Belgian, Russian and Slovak troops already present in the region as part of the defunct UNCRO mission, together with additional contingents from Jordan, Ukraine, Norway, Indonesia and Argentina. On 6 February Belgian General Jozef Schoups was nominated as commander of the UNTAES's forces.

January-September 1996

The UNTAES mission can be readily divided into several stages. The first stage, lasting roughly up to September 1996, involved initial meetings of 'executive committees' tasked with addressing various infrastructural problems in fields such as telecommunications, road and rail traffic, agriculture and municipal and health services. These committees consisted of Croatian and Serbian technical experts, assisted by international mediators. Although these negotiations were by no means always

harmonious, they did take place as scheduled and this step-by-step approach ultimately yielded significant results. One of the first major indications of progress on the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia and a return to normality between Croatia and Serbia was the 7 May reopening of the motorway between Zagreb and Belgrade a 7km-long section of which runs through the UNTAES-controlled area.

One significant problem related to informing the local population of developments in order to the promote peaceful reintegration of the region. UNTAES took on this task with General Klein leading the way with forthright statements directed at Eastern Slavonia's Serbs such as:

Gentlemen, there are two ways out, the easier and the more difficult one. The path that I propose to you is the easier one. If you will be willing to cooperate with me, I shall do my best to sort out your position with the Croatian authorities. If you rebel again, you will have played all your cards and will lose the game. If you do not help me, you will have taken the more difficult path. I will then go away and the Croats will complete the job themselves.

Plans for the demilitarisation of the region were agreed upon on 15 April and on 21 May General Klein announced the start of a 30-day demilitarisation period. According to UNTAES sources, when UN forces took control of Eastern Slavonia, they found around 14-18,000 Serbian troops equipped with more than 100 tanks. Most heavy weapons were, however, withdrawn across the Danube before the UNTAES demilitarisation programme got under way. These demilitarisation efforts met with qualified success - the concentration of weapons in the region certainly decreased significantly but the collection of small arms remained incomplete.

The demilitarisation campaign was followed by the deployment of a Transitional Police Force (TPF) from July 1996. The TPF was a mixed Croat and Serb force trained at a US police academy in Budapest. Initially the TPF consisted mainly of Serbian members but over time the number of Croats increased. Croatian government payments to the region's pensioners, whatever their nationality, were also introduced, paid in Croatian *kuna*. In addition, in August, the Croatian national petroleum company, INA, took over responsibility for production from Eastern Slavonia's oilfields near Djeletovci.

September-December 1996

The second phase of UNTAES's activities lasted roughly from September through to the end of 1996. The main actions undertaken in this period related to the full reintegration of public services. From September onwards the Croatian government started opening offices in the region so that Croatian documents could be issued to the local inhabitants. By the end of the year, 21 offices had been opened. This process was not without hitches, however, as on several occasions such offices were closed as a result of Serb protests over the fate of Eastern Slavonia and Serb rights once reintegration with Croatia was completed.

The autumn of 1996 also saw the start of Croatian demining efforts, initially concentrated on villages close to the former division line. As a result Croatia was able to resume control over five villages in the so-called 'Sirmium triangle' (Nijemci,

Lipovac, Podradje, Donje Novo, Selo and Apševci) on 31 October, making these the first settlements to be reintegrated. As soon as Croatian control was reestablished, displaced persons were allowed to start returning.

December 1996-June 1997

Tensions ran high in Eastern Slavonia in early 1997 ahead of local elections scheduled for 16 March as the Serb population prepared itself for the region's reintegration into Croatia due on 17 July 1997. There were also widespread fears of a Serbian exodus from the region on transfer to Croatian control.

In an effort to reassure the Serb population and the UN that any such exodus would not be their fault, on 13 January the Croatian government presented a document to UNTAES head, Jacques Klein outlining the Serbs' future rights. The proposals, which went far beyond existing agreements, guaranteed that ethnic Serbs would be exempt from military service with the Croatian army for two years after reintegration, allowing a long-term strategy to be agreed; reserved two seats for Serbs in Croatia's upper house of government; promised advisory positions for Serbs in the interior, justice, education and culture ministries; cultural and educational autonomy; and full voting rights to all Serbs who obtained Croatian papers. While the proposals seemed to have met with most of the demands issued by Croatian Serb leaders, and were endorsed by the UN, they did not grant the Serbs full local autonomy, which both Zagreb and the UN had rejected. Local Serb leaders were apparently "*very disappointed*" with the UN Council's decision to support Zagreb's *Memorandum on the Completion of Peaceful Reintegration*.

A rash of violent incidents beginning over Christmas 1996 highlighted the increasing tension. On Christmas Eve itself, 50 Orthodox Serbs were reported to have laid siege to 200 Roman Catholic Croats, who had been displaced from the region in 1991, as they attended Christmas Eve Mass in the town of Ilok. The Serbs were reported to have vandalised the Church after the service. A month later on 28 January, another group of about 50 Serbs in the town of Borovo Selo stoned local Croatian civil servants and police and the next day prevented access to offices distributing Croatian pensions in Borovo Selo and Trpinja. The incidents were condemned by local Serb leaders, who turned down UN offers of help and promised to deal with the situation themselves. Nevertheless, a Belgian UN soldier was shot and killed on 30 January, although this was later described as a "*criminal rather than political act*." Then on 1 February a recently reopened railway connecting the region to Croatia was damaged by an explosive device, and a hand grenade was thrown at the Croatian pension office in Jankovci. On 3 February, there was an explosion outside the office that distributed Croatian identity papers in the town of Tenja.

On the political front, on 4 February it was reported that the UN Council had endorsed a Croatian move to hold the local elections in Eastern Slavonia simultaneously with elections throughout Croatia, its only condition being that the Zagreb authorities must complete the issuing of citizenship and identity documents to the Slavonian Serbs to allow them to vote. UNTAES meanwhile urged the Serbs to "*cooperate for their own sake*," a call which moderate Serbs seemed to be heeding. Unfortunately, radical Serb leaders continued to threaten a Serb exodus, comparable to that of the Krajina Serbs in 1995. Opinion on whether such an exodus would occur was divided, but tellingly, the

UN made it clear that anyone who voluntarily left their home would not be regarded as a refugee by the UNHCR. Nevertheless, it was reported on 14 February that a total of 15,000 Serbs had left the area by that date, out of a peak wartime population of 130,000. Meanwhile, the 'Union of Refugees of Croatia' called on Zagreb to ensure that the Croats who had fled the area at the start of the conflict were given their full rights, and demanded that only those Serbs who had lived in Eastern Slavonia before the war be allowed to vote. The Croatian refugees feared that the Serbs might try to concentrate their votes in Eastern Slavonia to strengthen their demands for territorial autonomy.

Serbian protesters responded to these Croatian moves with a march through Vukovar on 18 February. 5,000 gathered in a bid for local autonomy, demanding that Eastern Slavonia become one county, that Croatia have an open border with Serbia and that they be granted dual Croatian-Yugoslav citizenship, many of them saying that they would rather leave the area than stay under Croatian rule. Nevertheless, and perhaps giving grounds for some cautious optimism, UNTAES' Jacques Klein reported that over 40,000 Serbs had in fact obtained Croatian citizenship, ensuring their right to vote and that they would retain their property and jobs. A number of moves were then undertaken in an apparent effort to reassure the Serb population. On 18 February the UN's special envoy for human rights, Elisabeth Rehn, called for the international community to maintain a strong presence on the area to ensure peace, while Klein requested that the Croatian government publish a complete list of those it considered 'war-criminals', so that those not on it would know that they could stay in the area. The Croatians published their list on 18 March, with the names of 150 who would not receive amnesty for their activities during the war.

On 10 March, it was announced that local elections in the region would be held on 13 April, with voters to register by 25 March. This evoked a storm of protest among the Serbs, who claimed that this did not allow them enough time to prepare. It was also reported that Serb leaders had announced their intention to hold a referendum on the issue of the division of Eastern Slavonia into two counties, on 6 April. However on 11 March, the UN reported that over 37% of the Serbian population had applied for Croatian citizenship, suggesting that Jacques Klein may have been at least partially correct when he said that: *"those who will leave are Serb nationalists who simply cannot live in a Croatian Catholic State – and they include war criminals, and people with guilty consciences."*

Late March also witnessed agreement between senior Croatian and UN officials on cooperation towards the *"two-way"* return of an estimated 150,000 people displaced by the war in Croatia. This would allow around 80,000 Croats to return to their homes in Eastern Slavonia and 60,000 Serb refugees to return home to western Croatia. On 25 March Croatian President Franjo Tudjman stated that the Serb minority in Croatia would be guaranteed rights and protection if they accepted Croatian citizenship saying: *"We have to open our arms to Serbs who have not committed war crimes...Serbs who stay here will be protected."*

Voting in Eastern Slavonia on 13-14 April as part of Croatia's local elections with the local Serbian leadership deciding their parties would participate at the last minute. General Klein pronounced the voting *"free and fair"* despite irregularities resulting in

the polls being open longer than planned and stated that this represented “*a victory for reconciliation [refugees’] return, and a better future.*” The election results provided some indirect information on the ethnic make up of the population then present in Eastern Slavonia - there being no reliable figures available during the UNTAES period (January 1996-January 1998).

Eastern Slavonia’s population, it was observed, voted along clear ethnic lines. The Serbs for a coalition of Serbian parties, the SDSS, and the Croats primarily, but not exclusively, for the ruling HDZ. The elections were held within the framework of the Croatian counties of Vukovar-Syrmium and Osijek-Baranja, both of which stretch beyond the UNTAES-controlled zone. In that part of Eastern Slavonia within Vukovar-Syrmium county there were 37,125: 34,402 for SDSS candidates, 2,077 for the HDZ and 646 for other Croatian parties. In that part within Osijek-Baranja County there were 29,777 votes: 24,406 for the SDSS and 5,231 for the HDZ and other ‘Croatian’ parties. Displaced persons were, however, able to cast their votes at polling stations outside Eastern Slavonia and this resulted in Croatian parties securing 16 out of Eastern Slavonia’s 27 districts to the SDS’s 11.

This was followed in early July by an announcement that Croatian refugees had begun to return to their old homes in Eastern Slavonia with as many as 40,000 expected to return to their homes by the end of the year.

July-December 1997

On 14 July 1997 the UN Security Council voted to extend the mandate of UNTAES for a further six months to 15 January 1998. This was to prove the final extension of the UN mission’s mandate. UNTAES head, Jacques Klein took the opportunity to claim a large measure of success for the mission, pointing out that Eastern Slavonia had been reintegrated into the Croatian electricity and telephone networks, local elections had been completed successfully, 98% of the region’s population had now accepted Croatian identity papers and a 776-man Croat-Serb joint police force had been set up in the region, with 700 Serbs involved. The following month it was announced that General Klein, moving on to assist the UN’s work in Bosnia, would be replaced by US diplomat William Walker.

The key event related to Eastern Slavonia which took place in late 1997 was the negotiation of a soft border regime between Croatian and Yugoslavia. The two sides signed six agreements in Belgrade on 15 September dealing with transportation, border regions, social insurance and legal aid. This was represented as the most significant step towards normalisation that the parties had taken. The hardest agreement to reach was that on cross-border traffic. Under the accord, citizens of both countries living in the border area will be able to cross the border with a special pass and will not need a visa. The final session of the talks was reported to have concentrated on the issue of “*reciprocity*”, whereby an equal area, and equal numbers of people, on each side of the border were included in the agreement.

Implementing the agreement has, however, proved problematic. Introduction of the soft-border regime has been repeatedly delayed and is, at the time of writing, still not in place.

The latter half of 1997 also witnessed international criticism of Croatia concerning its policies in Eastern Slavonia with the UN Security Council expressing its concern in September about Zagreb's *"lack of substantial progress"* towards creating conditions for the repatriation of Serbian and other refugees. The following month UN Secretary General Kofi Annan went on to say that Croatia had failed in confidence-building and reconciliation efforts in the region but still had time *"to comply fully with its obligations"* before the UN handover. UNTAES head William Walker also clearly linked the peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia with the integration of Croatia as a whole into Western institutions: *"how Croatia...completes [its] reintegration process will most likely determine whether and how quickly it takes its rightful place in its European home and in the international community of nations."* The run-up to the handover was also marred by a number of violent incidents including hand grenade attacks and bombs.

1998

It was announced on 5 January that Croatia would not deploy its army to the border with Federal Yugoslavia in Eastern Slavonia when UNTAES left. This was described as a gesture to help avoid an exodus of Serbian refugees across the border. However, the Croatian official made it clear that Croatia would have been within its rights to deploy the army to the Eastern Slavonian border because the FRY had refused to demilitarise its side of the border.

Ten days later, on 15 January the UN Administrator in eastern Slavonia, William Walker, presented a UN flag to Croatian Presidential aide Hrvoje Sarinic at Borovo Naselje as part of a ceremony marking the return of the region to full Croatian control. Croatian President Franjo Tudjman stated that his country would continue its policies aimed at peacefully reintegrating eastern Slavonia into Croatia and that international aid would be vital in achieving this aim. A UN police force stayed on for a further six months at the request of both the Croatian and local Serb authorities.

US President, Bill Clinton observed at the time of the handover that Croatia had *"acknowledged that it could not be whole and united unless it was also tolerant and diverse"*, and that he expected *"Croatia to fulfill its responsibilities to guarantee equal treatment and full protection of the rights of all Croatia's citizens."*

Substantial international diplomatic pressure was subsequently brought to bear on Croatia to facilitate the return of Croatian Serb refugees to their homes and to prevent the Serb population of eastern Slavonia from fleeing to Yugoslavia. For instance, the 11 ambassadors monitoring the reintegration of eastern Slavonia issued a statement on 16 February noting the *"growing feelings of insecurity in the Serbian community."* A few days later, the number of Serbs leaving Eastern Slavonia was put at 25-30 per day and Croatia was heavily criticised for its policy on Serb refugees with Germany's chief of refugee affairs going so far as to raise the prospect of sanctions against Zagreb on 23 April if the situation persisted.

In May, however, the US Ambassador to Zagreb stated that Croatia had yielded to all the criticism made by the international community related to the return of Serbian refugees. Croatia's revised plans for the return of refugees, guaranteeing "all citizens" the right to return home, was approved by the Croatian parliament on 26 June. The

plan envisages as many as 220,000 people returning to their homes inside and outside Croatia by the year 2003 with 24,000 ethnic Serbs expected to return to Croatia in 1998 alone. The new plan was welcomed by the leader of the Serb community in Croatia, Vojislav Stanimirovic, in early July 1998.

Conclusions

The conflict between Croatia and Serbia and indeed the disintegration of former Yugoslavia as a whole has been characterised as being driven by nationalism and a desire to match ethnic to political boundaries. Although Eastern Slavonia saw extensive ethnic cleansing and a radical change in the region's ethnic composition, the final outcome has been a gradual return to the pre-war situation. This represents a compromise for the nationalist governments involved, particularly Croatia's when it appeared in 1995 that Croatian forces were poised to retake the region by force. Furthermore, the two sides have agreed to a soft border regime along their Eastern Slavonian boundary - a further compromise in their sovereignty, undermining each party's nationalist ideal of absolute sovereignty within the confines of national borders. Why should this be the case?

An examination of the progress of the dispute and its resolution reveals that this turn of events was in large part due to external political pressures exerted by the international community on both Zagreb and Belgrade. In particular, Croatia's desire for integration into Western political and economic institutions including, ultimately, the European Union, resulting in the international community's calls for compromise being remarkably effective. In some senses, therefore, it could be argued that the successful peaceful reintegration of Eastern Slavonia into Croatia without a massive exodus of the ethnic Serb population of the region, is the consequence of the forces of globalisation.

The success witnessed in Eastern Slavonia can also in large part be traced to the clear, achievable mandate of the UN mission in the region. In contrast to the general framework and vagueness of UNPROFOR's mandate, UNTAES had clear-cut goals and forceful leadership in the shape, primarily, of General Jacques Klein.

It is also worth noting that Eastern Slavonia should be seen in the context of former Yugoslavia and its disputes as a whole. All the actors concerned had an interest in the resolution of the Eastern Slavonia issue as resolution there provided the potential for trade-offs elsewhere in the region. Furthermore, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Serb population of Eastern Slavonia ultimately chose to remain as the region is fertile and has significant economic potential.

The key challenge faced by the region in the aftermath of reintegration into Croatia remains the success or failure of the refugee return programme.

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¹ The only difference between the Djilas Commission proposal and ~~the~~ *Law on Establishment of Vojvodina* concerns the town of Ilok. The Commission provisionally proposed that Ilok form part of Vojvodina, while the Law clearly placed the town within Croatia. According to certain sources (Boban, 1993: 55; Fontes) some sort of referendum was organised in which the citizens voted, presumably, in favour of joining Croatia.

² Boban, L. (1992) *Hrvatske granice (Croatian Borders) 1918-1991*, Zagreb, Skolska knjiga, 56.

³ Two minor boundary changes were enacted in 1946 but otherwise the boundary has remained unaltered.

⁴ The term "Krajina" has in recent years been employed to refer to the Serb statelet centered on the town of Knin which existed from 1991 to 1995. In Croatian the word is equivalent to "frontier" in English and is associated with the Habsburg-era military defensive belt or "military border" known as *the Vojna krajina*.

⁵ This survey was later published by Serbian geographers ~~Ar-i}~~ and Kico{ev in a book called *the Development of the Population of Baranja*.

⁶ A detailed analysis of the lessons to be learned from the inability of the international community, and European Union/Community in particular, to forestall or halt the conflict is provided by historian Mark Almond (1994).

⁷ The so-called “pink zones” were those areas beyond the limits of the UNPAs but which remained under Serb control after the cessation of hostilities in January 1992. The most extensive pink zones were located around UNPA Sector South.