

AN INTERVIEW WITH CROATIAN HERITAGE FOUNDATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS HEAD MILAN KOVAČ



'We need a ministry to cover emigrant Croatia'

Milan Kovač was born in Posušje, in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina, in 1953, where he attended elementary and secondary school. He graduated from the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Economics and Business in 1978. The transition to a democratic system that began in 1989 saw him participating in the committee to set up the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and as one of the forty-eight who took part in the party's founding assembly on the 17th of June 1989 in Zagreb's Jarun quarter. At the assembly Kovač was elected to the post of treasurer and as a member of the presidency at the proposal of party chairman F. Tuđman. Beginning in 1990 he served four terms as a member of Croatian Parliament. When parliament convened for its inaugural session on the 30th of May 1990 he was chosen to head its committee on administrative affairs. By 2000 he had sat as a member of a number of parliamentary committees, and from 2000 to 2003 served as the chair of the parliamentary committee on emigrant affairs. He has twice served as a minister in Croatia's government – as minister for privatisation from 1996 to 1999 and for relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina in the course of 1999. Franjo Tuđman – Croatia's first president after it gained

its independence – conferred top national decorations on Kovač. He was appointed on the 8th of June 2016 by Croatian Government to head the Croatian Heritage Foundation's board of directors.

In the nascent Croatian democracy of the early 1990s we were all convinced that there would never again be any large-scale emigration from the homeland. Quite the contrary – we all thought that a significant number of emigrant Croats would return home. We are, however, witness to a new wave of emigration that gained impetus with our accession to the EU and is seeing Croats move to the developed countries of Europe and the world. How and when will we put an end to this?

The three core postulates or doctrines put forward by Franjo Tuđman and adopted at the founding assembly of the Croatian Democratic Union party in 1989 were (1) to create an independent and autonomous Croatian state, (2) to achieve integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions, i.e. the EU and NATO, and (3) to see emigrant Croats return home, to stop this ominous spiral of Croats leaving their homeland, with Croatia's then future government required to implement all measures necessary to ensure that these people return home and that those inclined to leave do not do so. I can recall him saying that 'It's an unhappy nation that has more crosses than cradles.' Even then our demographic trend was negative, and we are, unfortunately witness now to the continuation of this ominous trend, and that the progression is geometric. In terms of population loss, Croatia loses a mid-sized town every year, and every government in Croatia must recognise this fact and must put the resolution of this problem at the top of the list of national interest priorities. That is why every government in Croatia must see in this and comprehend this as an issue of supreme national importance. You've asked me how this is to be tackled; I am of the opinion, and have been repeating this over and over, that what we need are greater bonds between homeland and emigrant Croatia. Just as the defence ministry was critical in the period from 1991 to 1995 in the defence and liberation of Croatian territory, so too in 2017 is it equally important that we set up a ministry to cover emigrant Croatia, demographic renewal and the return home of emigrant Croats. I trust that the current and any future Croatian Government will comprehend that this is the only way to prevent the collapse of Croatia as a state – bereft of its population, above all in rural areas and, as we can see, with our cities also being deserted.

Your native Posušje is a typical example of a small town from which many have emigrated. Can our town and villages in Herzegovina survive on the long term under such intense pressure from emigration?

Up to the age of ten I lived with my family in a broader household of eighteen members shared with my uncle and his family. More than half left in search of work for various destinations around the world, from Australia to America and Europe. Some, happily, have

returned home, while others still live abroad, from Chicago to Frankfurt. The emigration trend among the Croatians of Herzegovina and other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina where they still survive continues, unfortunately, unabated. What is left after the latest round of Greater Serbian conquest in Bosnia-Herzegovina, followed by Bosniak expansionism in the area of the current Federation that is home to Croatians, will be hard pressed to survive in the current inequitable structuring of Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the Serbian-controlled Republika Srpska there are practically no more Croatians, while in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina numerous amendments to the constitution and election law has reduced Croatians for all intents and purposes to an ethnic minority. What we face now is to at all costs seek amendments to the constitution and election law that would structure Bosnia-Herzegovina in such a manner that all of its nations will be constitutive and equal in all aspects. This can be achieved through the federalisation of the country, as has been put forward in a resolution of European Parliament. Those of ill intent and the uninformed say that this is the path to the division of Bosnia-Herzegovina, forgetting that it is presently *actually* divided. A federal unit for each of the three constitutive nations is a guarantee of the survival of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an unified and functional state, which will ensure peace and freedom for each one of its citizens and can, as such, turn to the future, economic progress and membership in European and Atlantic associations.

Republika Srpska president Dodik constantly repeats that Bosnia-Herzegovina will fall apart sooner or later. What will happen with the Croatians of Bosnia-Herzegovina if the Republika Srpska entity moves towards complete autonomy? Does Croatia have a plan for this contingency?

We are witness to the growing involvement of Belgrade and Moscow in the Bosnia-Herzegovinian political theatre, protecting the status of the Republika Srpska and the Serbian national component, a striking example of which was the recent statement from the current president of Serbia Nikolića to the effect that it is only a question of time before Serbia and Republika Srpska are united as one state. We are also witness to the involvement of Turkey and other Arab countries in the efforts of the Bosniak people to achieve a unitary Bosnia-Herzegovina. Croatians, unfortunately, as the least populous of the constitutive nations are the most vulnerable and everything depends on whether the leadership of the Croatian people in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the official policy of Croatia will have the wherewithal to oppose these policies and, with the help of the EU and the USA, ensure the equality of the Croatian people. That is why I repeat that federalisation is the only path to the survival of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent and sovereign state.

Croatia has slashed the number of MPs representing the diaspora communities, from twelve to three. Do you see this as an acceptable solution?

A great injustice was committed with the amendments to the Croatian constitution in 2010. The election of deputies to Croatian Parliament was reduced to all of three seats for

Croatians living abroad and voting was restricted (for the 11th electoral district) to embassies and consulates, which is a blatant violation of basic human rights, since everyone must have access to polling stations on election day. In my opinion we need urgently to amend article 10 of the constitution and give Croatians outside the homeland their own election district, which would have the same attributes as an election district in Croatia. That means that they would elect fourteen members to parliament as in the other electoral districts in Croatia, under the condition that amendments to the election law allow for absentee voting. On the average every electoral district in Croatia comprises some four hundred thousand voters, while the number of Croatians living abroad with the right to vote is greater.

We often say that our emigrant communities have massive potential, especially in the business sector, and that they have not been even close to fully tapped. What is being planned in this regard?

From what has come out of our Government I see good will and good intentions to provide our people the opportunity to return home as soon as possible. For this reason precisely we need to facilitate the efforts of people to return, to open companies and to invest. I am afraid that without setting up the cited ministry and the education of other state officials, from the diplomatic and consular offices to the very last employee in the national administration system, this will be difficult to pull off. This is an issue on which we need to achieve a consensus among all the political actors in Croatia, otherwise we face continued emigration among Croatian youth, which would in the end lead to the collapse of the system and even bring into question the survival of the Croatian state.

You serve as the current president of the CHF board of directors. What future do you foresee for the oldest institution whose work is focused on the Croatian diaspora?

I was truly delighted when Government appointed me to the post of head of the CHF board of directors, one of Croatia's centrepiece institutions, an institution of particular national importance. I know how much has been achieved over the past decades to provide Croatians living outside the country, born abroad and of the second and third generations, the opportunity to learn the Croatian language, culture, folklore – all those things that make a community rich. I had though that the Croatian Heritage Foundation might cease its activity; that the role it played would no longer be required – the trend in emigration unfortunately makes the need for this institution ever greater. The state needs to secure greater funding from the budget and other sources so that we might reach every Croatian around the world. But that is just the first part. Other institutions in Croatia need to assume further work with these people and create the groundwork for their return. The role of the CHF is, then, massive and there is a great weight of responsibility. So far it has done its job professionally and with heart and I hope that we, as the new leadership, will continue down

this path and contribute to building even better bridges between the homeland and Croatians living abroad.

It has been ten months that the CHF has had an acting director. Why are we waiting so long for the appointment of a director to a full term?

Yes. The appointment of a director has dragged out as a result of the turbulence in the political theatre. Aware that acting director Piskulić is doing a good and conscientious job Government has turned to other priorities and not rushed with a proposal for the directorship. I hope to see the issue of a director appointed to a full term resolved by mid-July.

You recently announced you would sue Croatian TV, the host of the Sunday at Two show Aleksandar Stanković and Rajko Dondur for, as you say, lies told on the show to the effect that you received a bribe 23 years ago from the Vindija company ahead of their takeover of Varaždin-based Koka.

Yes, I have filed a claim against the monstrous and satanic lies uttered by a common – as he described himself in the show – criminal, Rajko Dondur, whom I have never met before in my life. He claims to have given me, as president of the Croatian Privatisation Fund, twenty thousand German marks in November of 1994. I was appointed to the post of president of the privatisation fund on the 7th of June 1995. The real question, however, is why Stanković, for the first time since his show has been broadcast, introduced a second guest and provided him with a stage from which to spout his nebulous lies. The answer is simple. The episode was broadcast the day ahead of the court hearing at which I was summoned as a witness in the defence of Večernji list daily newspaper journalist Milan Ivkošić, sued by [former president] Stjepan Mesić for a column he wrote in which he accused him of high treason for his illegal handing of documents from the Office of the President to the Hague tribunal and the coup he attempted in 1994 with accomplice Josip Manolić when they sought the ouster of then President Tuđman. As the sole witness for the defence it was necessary that someone try to compromise and scare me ahead of the hearing. The act was intended to demonstrate how strong and alive the structures of the former secret police and the neo-communist clique feels itself to be. The saddest part is that Croatian TV, as a public service, served as a venue for this monstrous slander and lies. I am confident that the court epilogue will be speedy and that the verdict will be read in the same show, still led by Mesić's old friend Aleksandar Stanković.

Interview by: Hrvoje Salopek



