

Politics of hate widen Serbo-Croat divide

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In the Croatian village of Marjanci, anguished mourners file past the coffin of a national guardsman killed in fighting between Serbs and Croats last week

COMMUNIST: totalitarian. Non-communist: democratic. If the first half of that syllogism sums up East Europe for four decades after the Second World War, the other half has turned out to be less accurate. Some free elections have produced governments whose democratic credentials — if that includes the spirit of tolerance and compromise — are rather patchy.

Between the Yugoslav breakaway republics of Slovenia and Croatia, the contrasts are strong. In Slovenia, the government permits a variety of dissenting voices and it is easy to find people in Ljubljana who are prepared to criticise their leaders. The Slovenian weekly *Mladina* remains as disrespectful as ever. In Croatia, though, which likes to portray itself as being within the tradition of Western liberalism, the media is more monolithic.

Compared with Serbia, certainly, Croatia is a model of liberalism. Its President, Franjo Tudjman, a former Communist who was jailed for nationalism in the Seventies, does not abuse human rights in the shameless way that Serbia's Communist President, Slobodan Milosevic, has done, for example, among the Albanians of Kosovo province.

There are sceptics in Zagreb, too, which is one of the pleasures of the city. But these voices are rarely heard on Croatian television or radio. Foreign journalists who criticise certain aspects of Croatia's policy are publicly denounced. All criticism, it is implied, is probably part of a malicious

From Steve Crawshaw in Zagreb

conspiracy. Croatian television news coverage is almost as lapdoggyish as the Communist-run television in the old days. Then, it was forbidden to praise Mr Tudjman. Now he is difficult to criticise.

Mr Milosevic bears the lion's share of responsibility for the collapse of Yugoslavia. His intolerance and demagoguery have increased Slovenia's and Croatia's determination to break free. Still, Mr Tudjman has proved slow to build bridges. Croatia has 600,000 Serbs within its borders. If only for reasons of stability, Mr Tudjman might have been expected to try to accommodate their aspirations.

But he has not. Instead, he provides Serbia with propaganda coups. The Serbian media describe the Tudjman government as *Ustashe*, a reference to the puppet fascist regime which massacred Serbs during the Second World War. The charge is false: Tudjman was a Partisan, fighting the Ustashe, and he has shown no sign of wishing to cart Serbs off to concentration camps.

But instead of denouncing the Ustashe, Mr Tudjman and his ministers hedge their statements with qualifications. One minister, when asked if it would not be wise to criticise the Ustashe legacy more clearly, delivered a 10-minute reply which said little about the Ustashe, but included the statement that some of the minis-

ter's best friends were Jews. Now there are suggestions that the memorial museum at Jasenovac, site of the Ustashe's most notorious concentration camp, may be reduced or closed, for "lack of funds". Nothing could be calculated to enrage the Serbs more.

Croatian pessimists say that Mr Tudjman is playing to a hidden gallery. Even today you can meet people who insist that the Ustashe were merely "patriotic" Croats. You can see graffiti declaring: "NDH — God is with Croatia." NDH stands for "Independent State of Croatia", the official name of the Ustashe regime. If this were condemned as sharply as neo-Nazism is condemned by Germany's leaders, things would be easier. But it is not.

If Croatia sought compromise, then it could outflank Serbia, the undemocratic giant, without difficulty. But Mr Tudjman has so far sought only confrontation, as an easy way towards short-term popularity. In some places, that has already begun to backfire. In Plitvice, a tourist area whose income was devastated when violence broke out there earlier this year, the names of Tudjman and Milosevic were spoken with almost equal dislike.

At some point down the road, the aspirations of Serbs in Croatia — who are now virtually at war with the Croats with whom they live — must be addressed, if there is to be any hope of a stable future. So far, the omens are poor.

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