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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

The Tempting of Tudjman by Chandler Rosenberger

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Dear Peter,

ZADAR, CROATIA -- Not many historians have a chance to make history and Croat president Franjo Tudjman was clearly enjoying his. As the ferry taking his entourage up the Dalmatian coast slipped through the warm Adriatic evening, Tudjman mused about the boat's name.

"This ship used to be called the *Vuk Karazdic*," he said to a small circle of journalists. "The man who said the Croats didn't exist. But today it is named after Bartol Kasic, who was writing in the Croat language 300 years before Karazdic was born!"

By Tudjman's own reckoning it had been an historic day. In defiance of the United Nations and the Serbs occupying a third of Croatia, Tudjman had opened a bridge and an airport near the coastal city of Zadar.



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The two became crucial links between Zagreb and southern cities, such as Split and Dubrovnik, after Serbs in the Krajina region of Croatia had cut off the major road and rail links running through their territory.

But the reopenings also had wider political significance, Tudjman had told the crowd gathered outside the airport's shattered terminal. "This is the first step in the establishment of constitutional rule on the territory of Croatia," he said, "which has been delayed by Communist aggression."

Despite the pomp, it was hard not to sympathize. Tourism along Croatia's spectacular coast had been wiped out by shells the Serbs lob from the "demilitarized" U.N. Protected Area of Krajina. While the U.N. had rung its hands, Tudjman had made a gesture to Croats under daily threat from Serb attacks. The moves reassured his countrymen that their president hadn't forgotten that it was a Serb onslaught that had broke up Yugoslavia and that he was willing to remind the world.

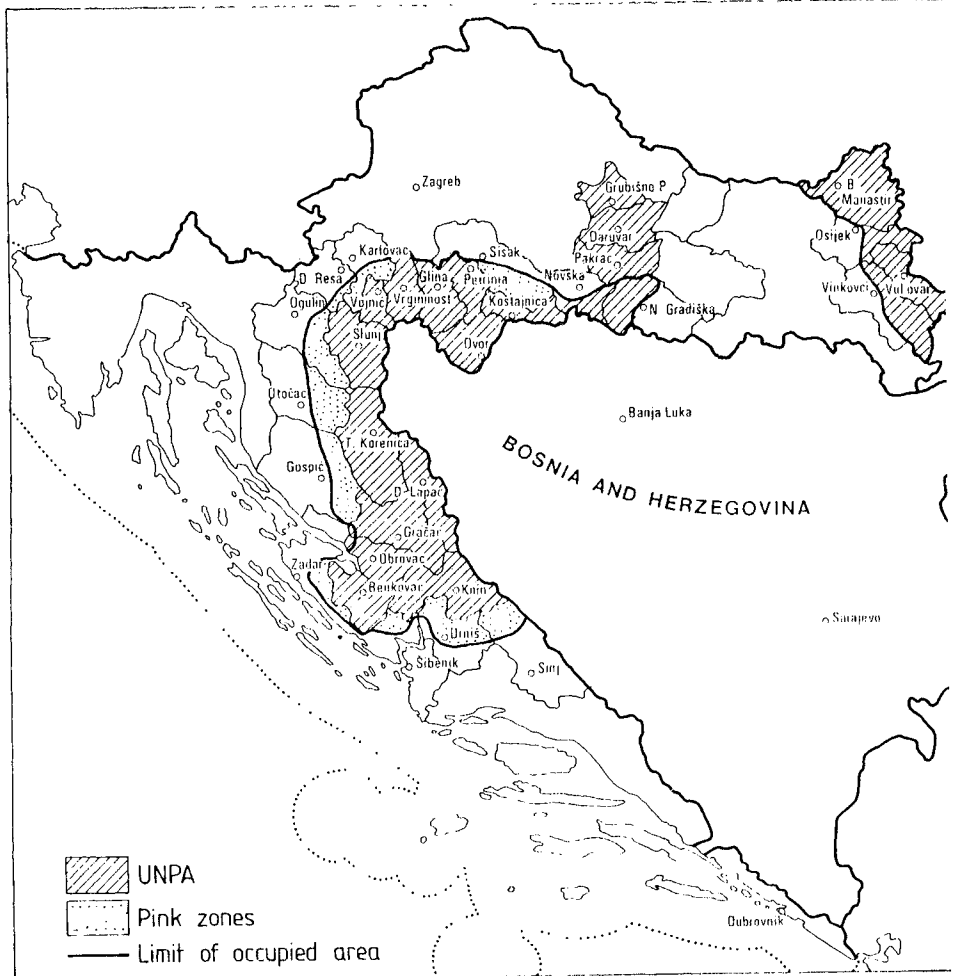
Unfortunately, the president's gesture to drive out the Serbs was mixed with signs that he was dealing with them. Although Zadar had been shelled all week before the bridge opened, the guns in Krajina fell silent the day Tudjman turned up. Accompanying him over the pontoons was Mate Boban, the leader of the Croats in Bosnia and man who has co-operated with Serb forces to get a piece of that battered republic for a "Greater Croatia." Later, as the Bosnian ambassador to Zagreb sat alone on the deck of the *Barka Kavic*, Tudjman's cronies sang songs celebrating Croat victories over the Muslims. Despite Tudjman's commitment to protecting their republic, many Croats have begun to wonder if Serb president Slobodan Milosevic has led their own leader to imitate him.

The Krajina card

Croatia needs Serb-held Krajina. If one thinks of the oddly-shaped republic as looking like the hood ornament of Rolls Royce, then Krajina represents most of the winged spirit's torso. All the major roads south down its body run through Knin, the largest city and now capital of the self-proclaimed Serb republic. Before the bridge near Zadar was rebuilt, all supplies had to be brought in via ferry, then down a winding road over the island of Pag. Last winter's storms often closed the sea route off for days at a time. Ten-hour black-outs were commonplace. Serbs dug in just two miles from Zadar terrorized the city.

None of this was supposed to be possible, according to a peace plan the U.N. brokered in 1991. Croats were supposed to have access to the vital links running through Krajina. Serbs living there, the plan said, would be disarmed and Croats driven out would be allowed to return safely. But the U.N. has not only failed to enforce the settlement; it has condemned the Croats whenever they, in frustration, have taken matters into their own hands. When, last January, the Croatian Army drove the Serbs 10 miles back from Zadar and re-captured the Maslenica bridge, the Security Council demanded withdrawal. The Croats, like the Krajian Serbs before them, ignored the plea.

When it comes to Krajina, U.N. condemnation of "unilateral" steps still fall on deaf ears. When Cedric Thornberry, U.N. Protection Force's deputy chief of mission, warned of the consequences of re-opening the Maslenica bridge, Croat journalists accused him of being impotent and, worse, of giving the Serbs a cover for retaliation. "I don't see,"



United Nation's Protected Areas and "pink zones," (those areas held by Serbs but unoccupied by the U.N.)

one said, "why building a bridge is an act of war."

A trip down to and along the Dalmatian coast shows the grip the Krajian Serbs hold over Croatia, especially if one travels at a time the Serbs feel like showing off. The safest route takes one directly west to the coastal town of Riežka, then down a shore-hugging road. It can take eight hours. If, as most Croats do, one

instead cuts a little closer inland, one can save an hour and a half but must pass between the Serb positions and towns, such as Ogulin, that the Serbs regularly strike.

We pulled into Karlovac, not 40 miles out of Zagreb, a few hours after the morning's shells had fallen. There *Štobrodna Dalmacija* columnist Danko Plevnik showed us the nineteenth-century garrisons, now refugee shelters, that had been hit. The doorstep of a smashed home near an army hospital was, despite signs of scrubbing, still stained with blood. The Serbs had not yet fired on the town's largest refugee camp, a mobile home park accommodating 2,500 Croats from Krajina in brightly-painted trailers. But the daily attacks on the rest of the town had thrown residents into a panic, one camp director said.

We continued south, past a few wrecked farmhouses east of Ogulin, then turned towards the coast and away from the front lines. After a quiet hour's cruise along the Adriatic we pulled off the main highway at Prizna and into a three-hour line. The produce trucks, army jeeps and assortment of VWs and Yugos were all waiting for passage over the narrow thread holding Croatia together, a ferry service to the stony island of Pag. We were not, we discovered, home free even after pulling down the ramp on the other side. After a fifteen-minute drive down the desolate isle's spine we saw signs forbidding photography, then the black needles of anti-aircraft guns defending the thin steel arches of a bridge. A gunboat slid back and forth beneath it.

Once in Dalmatia we could feel the weight suspended from this narrow tie. The Zadar's waterfront "Hotel Zagreb," an Austro-Hungarian wonder, had obviously faded years earlier. But its tawdry foyer was now full not of bargain-hunting tourists but of refugee children. No one walked the narrow alleys of Sibenik, a town bombed daily by the Serbs in the run-up to Tudjman's visit; the only voices to be heard came from behind closed, peeling wooden shutters. Life only returned to normal once we reached Split, where a wedding party poured out of a church built from the remains of Diocletian's palace and into cars adorned with the Croatian shield.

As bad as it seemed, an editor at *Štobrodna Dalmacija*'s assured us that it had been worse in the winter, when high winds had closed the Prizna ferry crossing and the frontlines had been closer to town. "We used to go without food or electricity," Nenad Vertovsek said, "and every drunk Chetnik could throw a shell at us from just two kilometers away."

The situation had only begun to improve, Vertovsek said, once Tudjman had authorized an offensive last January to drive the Serbs back from Zadar. The surprise strike had two effects, according to another editor at the paper who asked not to be named. It made it more difficult for the Serbs to shell the coastal towns. And it had also bolstered support for Tudjman's party, the Croatian Democratic Union, in the run-up to February elections.

The re-opening of the airport at Zemunik and the Maslenica bridge was a natural extension of the January offensive, the editor said, since, like that attack, it was merely an implementation, if unilateral, of the 1991 agreement allowing free passage through the U.N. Protected Areas. But the re-opening would prove much less popular if done under a deal that required the removal of Croat forces from the land they had occupied. "To get these things," he said, "many, many people wer killed. And now it seems we are going to have to give all that up. It will be very, very difficult."

Triumph of the will

The Zemunik landing strip is now no more of an airport than any relatively straight piece of highway with an abandoned gas station off one ramp. The terminal, shattered by shelling, remains an empty steel husk. Sharp-shooters, not air traffic controllers, peered out of the tower. But the personnel was in place on Sunday afternoon; stewardesses stood chatting behind a roped-off "gate" while security guards in electric blue berets clutched their compact machine guns.

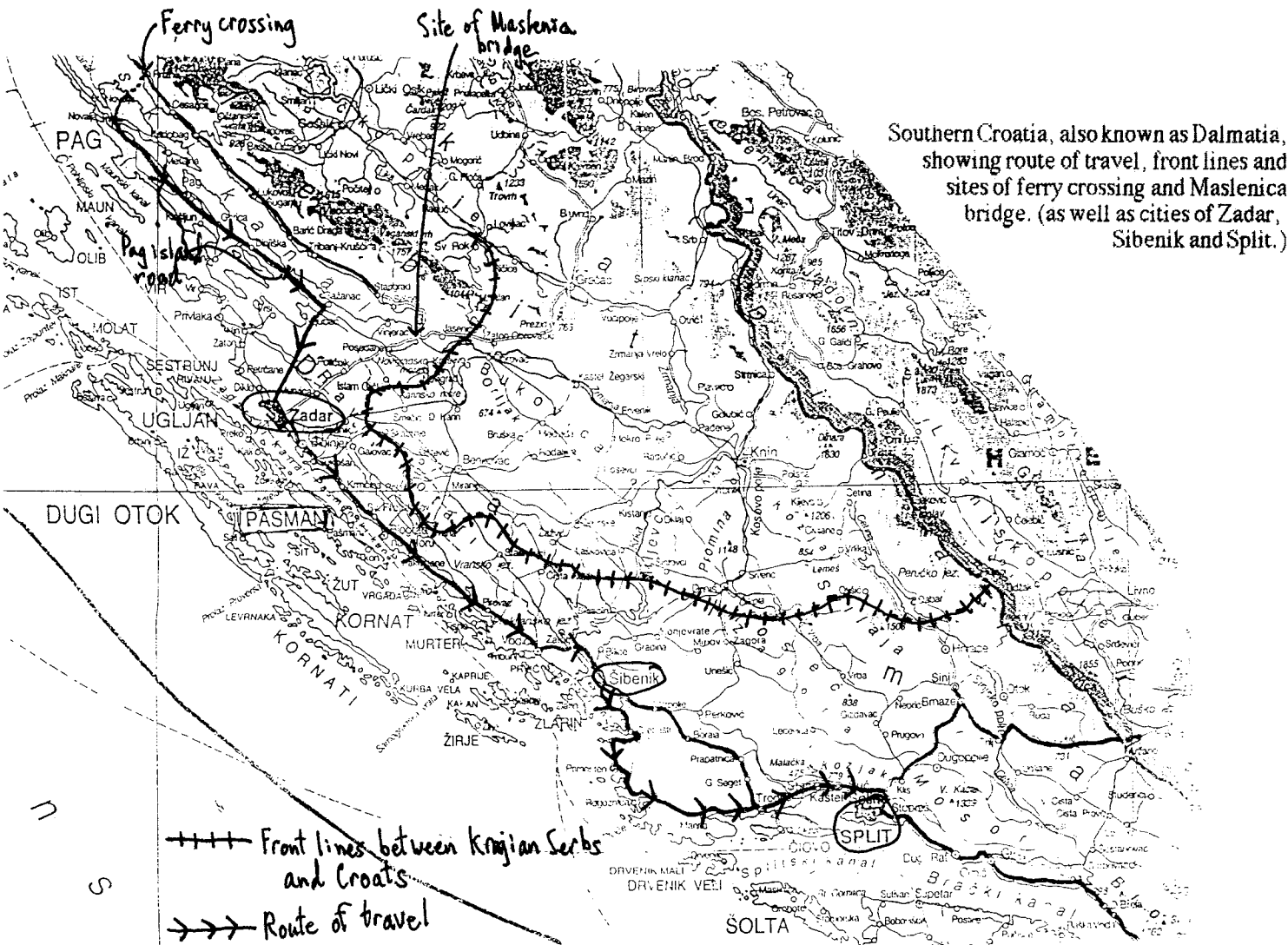
The first two planes, full of Western correspondents and diplomats and therefore dubbed the "guinea pigs" by Croat wags, proved as much a distraction as a test of Serb will. As Croat reporters waved to their Western friends clamboring down the rolling staircase and noted which ambassadors had showed up, a fleet of blue BMWs swept up from behind. Out stepped Mate Boban, leader of the Croats in Hercegovina, just in time to greet the other "foreign" delegates.

Boban quickly assumed his place in the welcoming committee next to a Croat army chaplain and Janko Bobetko, the Croat general who had orchestrated the January Maslenica offensive. A rather tepid round of handshakes was spiced up only by the effusive greetings that the bishop of Zadar offered the papal nuncio. The day before, the delegate from Rome had been the only invited guest to confirm.

All eyes now turned to a small unmarked beige jet drawing forward. The band struck up "My Croatia, My Home," as Tudjman and his war cabinet trotted out.

At his side were Goyko Susak, the Minister of Defense, and Vladimir Seks, the deputy premier. With the kingpins of Croat government and war machine gathered on an open piece of tarmac a few miles from Serb guns, the Croat journalists began to strain their ears for the sound of artillery. The jet's engines, one noted, were still running.

The Serbs, Susak later admitted, had delayed the party. The Maslenica bridge was meant to have been in place the previous day, but the Serbs had shelled its pontoons right up until the agreement with Milosevic was signed the previous



Southern Croatia, also known as Dalmatia, showing route of travel, front lines and sites of ferry crossing and Maslenica bridge. (as well as cities of Zadar, Šibenik and Split.)

evening. Once Milosevic gave his approval, however, the guns had fallen silent. The victory tour could go ahead in safety.

After Tudjman's brief words, the assembled guests climbed into stuffy buses for a the trip to Maslenica on the peninsula's northern side, until that moment forbidden territory. To my amazement, the villages, for the most part pulverized, were still partially inhabited. Flocks of babickas in black skirts and men in half-open Hawaiian shirts held the Croat flag outside bullet-ridden stucco hotels still advertising their "Zimmers frei."

Shortly before reaching the channel the buses veered to the right, down away from the cliff from which the old bridge had hung, to the water's edge. Before lay Tudjman's accomplishment -- five deep green pontoons strung together, reaching across to the mainland. A crew of oil-stained construction workers looked down on our entourage from the deck of their floating crane. In the harbor, those pleasure boats laden with well-wishers honked while those bristling with rifles pattered silently in circles.

Tudjman now seemed in more of a hurry than ever. He strutted across the bridge, his feet sinking into the freshly-laid asphalt, before climbing onto a jury-rigged podium on the deck of a ferry company's abandoned office (the ferry rested half-submerged before us.) This time he didn't even speak, but let the archbishop bless the "bridge of peace" before clamboring back down into an awaiting Beamer. Croatia's show of strength hadn't run a feature film's length. As we walked back across the new bridge I looked to opposite side of the bay, the only-Serb held territory I would see. Had Tudjman really silenced the guns poised there permanently?

Back in the hotel, the government's press officer hoped not. According to the previous evening's agreement, he said, Croat troops would have to turn the area around around the bridge over to U.N. troops before the end of the month. Given the U.N.'s performance so far, he said, Zadar residents like himself would view any such concession with deep suspicion. Better to hang onto the territory, even if that meant earning U.N. disapproval and sacrificing the newly-built bridge to renewed Serb shelling and another Serbo-Croat war.

Opinion polls show that most Croats agree with the press officer from Zadar; 57 percent of them now say they would favor another attack to silence the Krajian Serbs for good. "I don't believe in these guarantees," Dusko Topalovic, a geographer who writes about Croatia's strategic needs, said. "None of them have

been fulfilled. We should look for a firm solution."

The Serb's apprentice

Should Croatia strike and hope still to keep the west's support, its government needs to remind the world that the Yugoslav "civil war" has from the beginning largely been a campaign for "Greater Serbia" (despite my argument in CRR-3). It was Serbia 1989 assaults on the rights of Albanians in Kosovo that prompted Slovenia and Croatia to seek autonomy, then independence. Serbia responded by arming and radicalizing its communities outside its own border. Krajina was key to the strategy of subduing Croatia. The Serb-dominated Yugoslav military armed the self-proclaimed "Serb Republic of Krajina" and used federal MIGs to turn away Croatian helicopters trying to re-establish control. According to the London-based historian Branka Magas, the army's own counter-intelligence service produced terrifying faked films purporting to show Croats leaders planning assaults on Krajina Serbs

The Croatian government therefore badly needs to distinguish itself from the Serbs morally. What did the Krajina Serbs have to fear, they can argue, when, after the 1990 elections, Tudjman offered their party the vice-presidency and their regions cultural autonomy and collective political rights? If Serbia's campaign has been to abuse its own minorities and expand beyond its border, Croatia's, it could be argued, has been the opposite -- to include its minorities and secure its own borders.

But Croats of all political persuasion now fear that Tudjman, by agreeing with Milosevic to carve up Bosnia, has thrown away the crucial moral card. "If Croatia has the right to be independent within its boundaries, so does Bosnia," Plevnik, the left-leaning *Slobodna Dalmacija* columnist from Karlovac, said. Any deal with the Serbs over Bosnia threw Croatia's own border into question, according to Bozo Kovacevic, a leader of the center-right Croatian Social Liberal Party. "When you open the possibility of trading territories, you cannot see the end of the negotiations."

Heedless of this danger, Tudjman has sided with Milosevic in U.N.-sponsored negotiations, where both have insisted on a "confederal" (that is, partitioned) Bosnia. And, although Tudjman denies it, it is an open secret in Dalmatia that the Croat military has often gone to the aid of Bosnian Croat forces fighting the Muslims around Mostar. Vizna Tokovic, the Bosnian ambassador to Croatia, was quietly disgusted. "The Muslims feel even angrier about the Croats than about the Serbs," she said, "because the enemy behind your back is much worse than the one

Why does Tudjman do it? Under the influence of a strong Bosnian Croat lobby led by his defense minister, Tudjman appears to think he can get it all, a unified and "greater" Croatia. Milosevic, he assured the journalists sailing with him, was a reasonable man who was merely waiting for the right moment at home before handing Krajina back to Croat control. Despite his defiant rhetoric, Tudjman opened the bridge with Milosevic's personal approval, earned at one of their now-frequent negotiating sessions.

Milosevic is certainly a reasonable man -- one far too reasonable to use reason if it doesn't suit him. Before Croatia began its campaign in Bosnia, Serbia was the only former Yugoslav republic making contradictory claims to territory, using "historic boundaries" one minute and "ethnic unity" the next. He has now apparently convinced his Croat opposite number to do the same.

As Tudjman begins to behave like his Serb counterpart, Zagreb begins to look more like Belgrade. A year ago, the town's main square was adorned with a monument to the victims of the war at which both the Bosnian and Croatian flags hung. Today, the Bosnian flag is gone. The crowd gathered next to the memorial when I last walked past was listening to young supporters of the radically nationalist "Croatian Party of Rights." Dressed in short-sleeves and thin ties and speaking through a squawking bull-horn, they harangued the Tudjman regime for allowing in so many Muslim refugees. Not to fear -- after a months-long assault on refugees in the official press, Tudjman sealed the border with Bosnia the following week.

The Croatian economy is beginning to show all the traits of being run by the kind of war mafia that lives well in Serbia. Inflation runs at 25 percent a month or over 1,000 percent a year, according to Ivo Bicanic, an economist at the University of Zagreb. The government has rejected opposition demands for a transparent privatization program, such as the "coupon" scheme used in the Czech Lands; instead, the government has sold firms directly to recipients of government loans. "The granting of loans," Bicanic wrote for *Radio Free Europe*, "has relied on the 'old boy network' (few managers were replaced by the 1989 changes, and many merely switched parties) and on a network involving an unexpectedly large number of government officials and politicians and their families. (as scandals reported in the press indicate.)"

"It's a problem of the close connection between the top politicians of the Croatian

Democratic Union, banks and managers," Kovacevic, the opposition leader, said. "It's not possible for me to get such credit -- only people who are close to the top powers."

The tragedy of Croatia's descent into a one-party economy, according to historian Drago Roksandic, was that it reduced the chances for a peaceful agreement with the Krajian Serbs. If Croatia strived to maintain a sturdy economy and currency, the radical leaders of Krajina might well one day be tossed out by moderates who remembered that it had been perfectly possible to live with Croats in the past. I proposed that, if there was no difference between the way the Serb and Croatian economies were run, the Krajian Serbs would have no reason to abandon their backers in Belgrade. Roksandic, himself a Serb, agreed.

But for all their similarities of late, Tudjman and Milosevic remain very different men in very different circumstances. For Tudjman, the historian, maps of Balkan nationalities point to a "historic settlement" that is his end. For Milosevic, the populist, nationalities are fields of historic grievances, means to his own end of power for its own sake. He has, for the moment, lured the Croat leadership into playing his game and, according to his rules, Krajina is still up for grabs.

Tudjman may have thought he had achieved a historic settlement by reopening links with Dalmatia but few in Zadar did. "So we open the bridge this week," one resident said. "And if it doesn't suit them, the Serbs will just blow it up again." Serb shelling of the bridge and airport two weeks later in protest of Croat tardiness in withdrawing seemed to prove his point. It's not yet clear whether Tudjman intends to honor the agreement that allowed him to open the two in the first place. If he drags his feet over removing Croat troops, he'll have the support of his country.

But Croats seem much less interested in Tudjman's other obsession -- the division of Bosnia. Ordinary Croats, especially Dalmatia, are eager for a more stable solution to the Krajian problem and doubt that Tudjman's ambitions in Bosnia help. "It is a very dubious policy to co-operate with the occupiers of of your own country to divide a third country," Kovacevic said. Unless Tudjman stops imitating Milosevic and gets back to business of securing Croatia, the next elections may leave him back writing history rather than making it.

Yours,

