

CROATIA



# The repercussions of the war in Ukraine on Croatia's Far Right

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## Abstract

This report deals with the repercussions of the war in Ukraine on the national conservative parties, as well as the radical and extremist right, in Croatia. It focuses closely on these actors' attempts to draw parallels between the conflict in Ukraine and Croatia's war of independence in the 1990s, known as the "Homeland War" (Domovinski rat). It also seeks to place into context what, if anything, is so "specific" about the activism of this party family concerning the war in Ukraine – including any "dissident" stances in comparison to the political mainstream. This report covers the most established parties of the Croatian Far Right but focuses most closely on the national conservative Homeland Movement (Domovinski Pokret). This report clarifies how this party: 1) seeks to draw a linkage between the developments in Ukraine and the identity and memory politics of the Homeland War; and 2) utilizes this process in its endeavour to antagonize Croatia's ruling party, the Croatian Democratic Union.

**Keywords:** *national conservatism; Radical Right; Croatia; Ukraine; Yugoslav Wars; Russia–Ukraine war*

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## Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been generating shockwaves across Central and Southeastern Europe. Andrej Plenković, Croatia's prime minister and chairman of the ruling centre-right, conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), has pledged that his government will continue to demonstrate solidarity with Ukraine and provide material support to the Ukrainian refugees hosted in Croatia (Jutarnji, 2023). Opposition parties such as the centre-left Social Democrat Party (SDP) and the Green–Left coalition Možemo ("We Can!") have backed the government, asserting that the Croatian state should, within its capacities, provide Ukraine with the technological expertise and the logistical equipment required to withstand Russia's invasion (Pavelic, 2013).

This report concentrates on the repercussions of the war on the national conservative parties, as well as the Radical Right, in Croatia. It focuses closely on these actors' attempts to draw parallels between the conflict in Ukraine and Croatia's war of independence in the 1990s, known as the "Homeland War" (*Domovinski rat*). It also seeks to place into context what, if anything, is so "specific" about the activism of this party family concerning the war in Ukraine – including any "dissident" stances in comparison to the political mainstream.

It begins by analysing the reactions to the conflict in Ukraine among the most established political parties of the Croatian Far Right, all of which claim to descend from Croatia's original Party of Rights, founded by two nationalists, Ante Starčević and Eugen Kvaternikin, in 1861—namely, the Croatian Party of Rights (HSP), the Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP), and the Authentic Croatian Party of Rights (A-HSP). The analysis also touches on minor parties like the Croatian Party of Rights 1861 (HSP 1861)—which, as the name suggests, also claims lineage from the original party—as well as grassroots and paramilitary actors. However, the principal focus is how the current war has been framed and interpreted by Croatia's national conservative Homeland Movement (Domovinski Pokret), which emerged as the third-largest party in the Croatian Parliament (the Sabor) after the June 2020 elections. The report asks how and to what extent this party: 1) seeks to draw a linkage between the developments in Ukraine and the identity and memory politics of the Homeland War and 2) utilizes this process in its endeavour to antagonize the ruling HDZ.

The findings of the report emerge from qualitative content analysis (Schreier,

2012). The primary material consists of official documents such as party programmes, statements, and declarations issued by the parties under study, complemented with quotations of leading members of these parties, monitored in the Croatian and international press, expert reports, and public surveys.

## Croatia’s “Homeland war” (1991-95): National imageries and political appropriations

The “Homeland War” refers to the conflict over Croatian independence fought by the country’s armed forces, first against the Yugoslav military (1991-92) and then the forces of the self-proclaimed Republika Srpska Krajina in 1992-95. The interpretations of the war vary and are subject to the cleavages across Croatia’s party spectrum (Cvikić et al., 2014; Banjeglav, 2012).

However, these diverse understandings converge in recognizing the Homeland War as a landmark event in consolidating Croatian statehood (Šuligoj & Rudan, 2022). Of greater significance here is nationalist political actors’ utilization of the war and its symbolism. Notably, the eastern Slavonian town of Vukovar has been awarded the status of “master symbol” in the nationalist imageries of the Homeland War due to the fierce resistance that the Croatian forces put up against Yugoslav and Serb auxiliary units there from August to November 1991. More recently, between 2013 and 2016, a series of mass protests against the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script took place in Vukovar (Pavelic, 2013). The organizers of these demonstrations had deemed it unacceptable that the Serb Cyrillic script would be officially used in a town with such traumatic memories and a centrality in the symbolism of the Homeland War (Koska & Matan, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

## Croatia’s Far Right and the war in Ukraine: Reactions by the established actors

### *The Croatian Party of Rights (HSP)*

Dobroslav Paraga and Ante Paradžik established the HSP in February 1990. The leadership pledged commitment to the legacy of Starčević and Kvaternikin, the

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1. In Vukovar and other parts of Slavonia where the ethnic Serb population meets the 30% threshold prescribed by Croatian law, the official use of the Serb Cyrillic script has not been implemented largely due to public opposition.



nineteenth-century nationalists who founded the Party of Rights and laid the ground for modern Croatian nationalism. The HSP has no seats in the national parliament (the Sabor). However, the party controls the town halls of Popovača (City of Popovača, 2023) and Gospić. The mayor of Gospić is the former party chairman, Karlo Starčević (Gradonačelnik, n.d.).

Between 1991 and 1993, the HSP dispatched its paramilitary unit to Slavonia and Herzegovina (Petsinis, 2022). Between 2013 and 2016, the HSP participated in protests against the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script in Vukovar. In the “Vukovar Declaration” of 2018, the party condemned “all those political forces who obstructed, prevented, or falsified the investigation process for the war crimes committed (by the Yugoslav and Serb paramilitary forces) during the Homeland War” (Hrvatska Stranka Prava, 2018).

As soon as Russia commenced its invasion on February 24, 2022, the HSP leadership expressed its unequivocal support for Ukraine by emphasizing that “what is defended with blood is not given away easily” (Hrvatska Stranka Prava, 2022). However, neither the party website nor the issues of the official HSP magazine, *Hrvatsko Pravo (Croatian Right)*, nor any other declarations published between late February and December 2022 made any additional references to the war in Ukraine. Instead, the principal focus of the HSP’s official publications was internal party matters, anti-corruption themes and the function of Croatia’s judicial system, the veneration of selected historical figures (e.g., Ante Starčević and Rafael Boban<sup>2</sup>), the situation of the ethnic Croat communities in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the obligation to safeguard the symbolism of the Homeland War (Hrvatska Stranka Prava, n.d.). Meanwhile, no evidence exists that the HSP organized demonstrations or other public events supporting Ukraine during that period.

### ***The Authentic Croatian Party of Rights (A-HSP)***

The A-HSP was established in 2005. Like the HSP and the HČSP, it operates as an extra-parliamentary actor, having won no seats in the 2020 election (see Table 1). An ideological difference between the A-HSP and the HSP or the HČSP consists in the greater stress placed by this party on the purported “cultural exceptionalism of the Croatian nation” in relation to the Slavic, Germanic, and

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2. Rafael Boban was a military commander in the fascist Ustaše (“Insurgents”) militia under the rule of the Nazi puppet state in Croatia (NDH) created in 1941. He disappeared in 1945 but a right-wing cult grew up around him in subsequent years.

Latin realms of cultural influence. This party has been accused of inciting hatred against the ethnic Serb minority (HINA, 2018).

On February 25, 2022, the A-HSP chairman, Dražen Keleminec, wholeheartedly voiced his solidarity with the struggle of the Ukrainian nation against “the new Hitler, Vladimir Putin [...] and his endeavour to erase Ukrainian statehood” (Autohtona–Hrvatska Stranka Prava, 2022). Keleminec also drew a linkage between Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and “the invasion of Croatia by Putin’s allies, the Serbs, in the 1990s” and contended that “Ukrainians and Croats share the same ancestry from the ‘White Croats’ of the Middle Ages” (ibid.). Despite its marginality, the A-HSP has been more active and consistent than the HSP and the HČSP in its promotion of pro-Ukraine themes through the official website and other media. The party leadership has been repeatedly comparing the war in Ukraine with Croatia’s Homeland War (Hrvatska Desnica, 2022a). Furthermore, the A-HSP dubbed Croatian President, Zoran Milanović,<sup>3</sup> a “man in the service of the Kremlin” (Hrvatska Desnica, 2022b) and has been warning about the alleged “recruitment of Croats among the ranks of KGB spies” (Hrvatska Desnica, 2022c).

### *The Croatian Pure Party of Rights (HČSP)*

The HČSP (founded in December 1992) claims continuity from the original Croatian Pure Party of Rights established in 1895 (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, n.d. a). The leadership pledges commitment to the legacies of Starčević and has equally been accused of historical revisionism and attempts at rehabilitating the fascist wartime Ustaše movement and the Nazi puppet state in Croatia during the Second World War (Vidov, 2015). Nevertheless, this party is even weaker than the HSP, without a single deputy in the Sabor (see Table 1) or any municipality under its control. In its extensive programme, the HČSP pledges to protect the dignity of the Homeland War and its legacy (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2021).

The HČSP leadership was quick on their feet to draw parallels with the Homeland War and grant its categorical support to Ukraine as soon as Russia invaded the country in late February 2022. In a more extensive declaration in comparison to the one issued by the HSP, the party underlined that “no one can be allowed to impose their will on a sovereign nation through violence [...] in these difficult times we voice our solidarity to the Ukrainian people and the brave

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3. Zoran Milanović is said to have maintained a controversial stance on Ukraine. On this issue, see Trkanjec (2022) and Radosavljevic (2022).



Ukrainian defenders who fight for their homeland” (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, n.d. b). The HČSP also expressed its anxieties over a potential “spill over” of the conflict to neighbouring regions. At the same time, in accordance with its programmatic apprehension vis-à-vis the Euro-Atlantic institutions, the party leadership castigated the “so-called allies” of Ukraine for “responding to Russia’s aggression only with economic sanctions and not with more drastic and urgently required measures” (ibid.).

Nevertheless, in a similar vein as the HSP, HČSP’s official website and the other party publications prioritize topics such as the operation of the party’s local committees across Croatia (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2022b); the commemoration of the Homeland War in its major sites (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2022c), and the veneration of leading figures from the NDH period, including Ante Pavelić (Hrvatske Čiste Stranke Prava, 2022a). Furthermore, there is no evidence that the party has coordinated any protests or other public manifestations in support of Ukraine since late February 2022.

## A ‘dissident’ outlier? The case of the Croatian Party of Rights 1861

Dobroslav Paraga, a formerly leading member of the HSP, established the HSP 1861 in 1995. This party is not represented in the Sabor (See Table 1). The programmatic principles of the HSP 1861 converge with those of the HČSP and the A-HSP along their criticism of NATO. However, with specific regard to the war in Ukraine, the HSP 1861 went several steps ahead the other two parties. In early March 2022, the party leadership contended that “Croatia is in greater danger from its NATO membership than from Russian aggression” and estimated that “Ukraine will opt for military neutrality” (Hrvatsko Pravo, 2022).

The HSP 1861 condemned the Russian invasion and acknowledged the yearning of the Ukrainian nation for freedom, democracy, and independence. However, the party argued that this cannot be achieved through Ukraine’s membership of NATO and accused the alliance of having “provoked” Russia to invade the country. The party dubbed, Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy a “NATO puppet who did nothing to implement the terms of the Minsk Agreement (2015)” and drew an indirect parallel between he and Ivo Sanader (ibid.).<sup>4</sup> The party underlined that “Ukraine must be a bridge between Russia and the EU and

not an apple of discord between Russia and NATO” (ibid.).<sup>5</sup> This party’s principled and integral opposition to NATO brings the HSP 1861 close to the outlooks of parties such as “Our Slovakia” (Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko, 2022) and “Greeks for the Homeland” (Kasidiaris, 2022) on the war in Ukraine.

## The role of grassroots and paramilitary actors

Since 2014, there are allegations that small numbers of Croatian extreme right-wingers had fought on an individual basis with the Azov Movement in eastern Ukraine. A prominent part in the recruitment of these individuals was played by Denis Seler, a former leader of FC Dinamo Zagreb’s “Bad Blue Boys” ultras (Colborne, 2019). In March 2022, sources from the Russian defence ministry claimed that 200 Croatian citizens had gone to fight in Ukraine. Nevertheless, the ministry rejected those allegations (Grgurinovic, 2022). Moreover, the Croatian branch of the extremist “Blood and Honour” coalition is said to have been maintaining links to likeminded groupings in Ukraine. However, “Blood and Honour” did not issue any statements regarding the war in Ukraine (Kuloglija, 2022).

## Ambitious contenders from the right and the war in Ukraine: The Homeland Movement

The Homeland Movement (DP) was established in February 2020 by former singer and TV host Miroslav Škoro. In the parliamentary elections of July 2020, the DP garnered 10.89% of the vote, sending 16 deputies to the Sabor (out of 151 seats), and took the third spot after the HDZ and SDP (Table 1). The party benefited from the weakening of the HDZ’s “right-wing faction” on the municipal and local levels, especially in the war-ravaged territories of Slavonia (Hrvatski Sabor, 2020). This was largely the case with the departure of Vukovar’s mayor and current leader of the DP, Ivan Penava, from the HDZ in May 2020 and his decision to join forces with the DP (Dnevik, 2020). In 2016, Penava had played a pivotal part in the coordination of the demonstrations against the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script (Petsinis, 2022).

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4. Ivo Sanader is a former Croatian prime minister (2003–09) and member of the HDZ who is serving a sentence in prison on corruption charges. Croatia was admitted into NATO in 2009 at the end of his term in office.

5. One should add that, as early as the Euromaidan protests in 2014, the HSP 1861 had been accusing the West of “Byzantine policies towards Ukraine” and had detected “geopolitical games of the global powers highly reminiscent of those in Croatia” (Hrvatsko Pravo, 2014).



On February 24, 2022, Ivan Penava stated that “our party expresses its firm solidarity with Ukraine and the Ukrainian people [...] we hope that this conflict will last as shortly as possible with as few human and material losses as possible” (Domovinski Pokret, 2022a). The same politician urged the state authorities to organize the accommodation of Ukrainian refugees in Croatia and allocate the material resources required in an efficient manner. In addition to highlighting the commonalities between the Homeland War and the developments in Ukraine, Penava cast doubts on the competence of the government to manage a migration crisis in Croatia (ibid.) Furthermore, on April 6, 2022, the party’s MP Stipo Mlinarić praised Volodymyr Zelenskyy for dealing with the ‘fifth column’ in Ukraine and lamented the fact that “the HDZ-led government has not done the same with the “fifth column” that operates from within the Serbian Democratic Independent Party (Domovinski Pokret, 2022b).<sup>6</sup>

Since 2020, the primary objective of the DP has been to antagonize the HDZ and the ruling party’s more nationalistic and socially conservative “right-wing faction” with which the DP shares core principles on identity politics (e.g., ethnic minority issues, gender-related themes, and the informal partnership between the Catholic Church and the state). So far, there is no evidence that the emphasis on the war in Ukraine alone has assisted the party to augment its appeal vis-à-vis the HDZ. On the contrary, as indicated in several public surveys, conducted by the Promocija Plus, 2X1 Komunikacije, and Ipsos polling agencies between March and December 2022, the DP has been lagging behind both Možemo and the centre-right Bridge List according to Europe Elects (<https://europeelects.eu/croatia/>).

To reverse this decline in popularity, the DP has been putting simultaneous stress on the rapidly increasing cost of living and the government’s alleged incompetence to harness the galloping inflation (Domovinski Pokret, 2022c). In this light, the strategy of the DP appears to resemble the policymaking patterns of populist and radical right-wing parties—such as Estonia’s Far Right party, EKRE (ERR, 2022a, 2022b)—which have prioritized the deteriorating economic situation since the autumn of 2022.

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6. The SDSS is the largest political party among the ethnic Serb minority in Croatia. It currently participates as a coalition partner in the Croatian government together with the HDZ.

Table 1. Vote share selected parties in the Croatian parliamentary elections (July 2020)

Party	Vote share (%)	Seats won
<b>HDZ</b>	37.26	66
<b>Restart (SDP-led) coalition</b>	24.87	41
<b>DP</b>	10.89	16
<b>Bridge List</b>	7.39	8
<b>Green-Left (Možemo)</b>	6.99	7
<b>HSP</b>	0.44	0
<b>A-HSP</b>	0.32	0
<b>Others</b>	11.84	13
<b>Total</b>	100	151

Source: Compiled by the author with data from the Croatian State Electoral Commission (<https://www.izbori.hr/arhiva-izbora/index.html#/app/parlament-2020>). Note: Parties in shaded rows are Far Right. Neither the HCSP nor the HSP 1861 participated in the 2020 elections.

## Conclusion

Several actors in the far right spectrum of Croatian politics have sought to draw linkages between the war in Ukraine and the Homeland War. Among the older parties of the radical and extremist right, the HSP, the HČSP, and the A-HSP converge along their unconditional support for Ukraine, whereas the HSP 1861 prioritizes its geopolitical opposition to NATO. Nevertheless, as a result of their marginality, all these parties place a disproportionately higher emphasis on domestic politics than on the developments in Ukraine since late February 2022. Meanwhile, the DP, as a more ambitious actor, does not seem to have capitalized sufficiently on the conflict in Ukraine as a trajectory towards boosting their appeal, either. As a closing remark, I would note that both the DP and the forces of Croatia's Radical Right appear to converge on the prioritization of themes such as anti-corruption and dealing with the increasing energy costs and the cost of living in general in their political discourses.



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