

# CAFÉ EUROPE

## From renegade to president

Stipe Mesic and Croatia after Tudjman

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*Stipe Mesic. Photo: flickr/PanARMENIAN/Vahan Stepanyan*

**“The Hague [Tribunal] helped the whole region,” says Stipe Mesic, a former communist subsequently put in prison by the communist party; a founding member of Franjo Tudjman’s HDZ party who then became its most pugnacious critic. He embodies many of the tensions and contradictions of 20th century Croatia.**

**M**ore than 50 heads of state, prime ministers and other top officials flocked to Zagreb for the inauguration of Croatia’s new president, Stipe Mesic, on 18 February 2000. They included U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Germany’s Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer and EU Commissioner for External Relations Chris Patten.

During the funeral of Mesic's predecessor, Franjo Tudjman, just two months earlier, foreign dignitaries were most notable by their absence. The only president in attendance was Turkey's Suleyman Demirel. The U.S. was represented by its ambassador. The lack of foreign leaders was emblematic of Croatia's isolation under Tudjman, whom the West accused of fanning the flames of nationalism, disregarding human rights, interfering in the judiciary, undermining the freedom of the media, and covering up wartime crimes.

Mesic's election to the presidency came just a month after Croats ousted Tudjman's Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) from power, opting instead for a centre-left, pro-Western government led by [Ivica Racan](#). Secretary of State Albright had reason to congratulate the Croatian people, as she did during Mesic's inauguration, "for choosing the path of economic and political changes that are necessary for Croatia's re-integration into Europe."

Mesic himself stated, on that same occasion, "Let's start to act already today so that Croatia becomes a member of the European Union and NATO." He vowed to be different from Tudjman, and he fulfilled his promise. Tudjman used archaic, heavy Croatian; Mesic used slang. Tudjman loved uniforms and pomp; Mesic was jovial and loved to meet people. Tudjman tried to create myths; Mesic de-constructed them, often with a joke.

Mesic had been part of Tudjman's clique for a period of five years, but in 1994 he was one of the first within the HDZ to openly challenge him, creating the first rupture in the party. Mesic and Josip Manolic, both among the HDZ's founders, criticized Tudjman for his undemocratic rule and desire to carve up Bosnia.

Mesic's persistent opposition to nationalism earned him widespread support. He served two five-year mandates as president. Although his popularity remained high, rightist nationalists declared him a first-rate national traitor.

Step by step, Mesic demolished Tudjman's legacy, which had prevented Croatia from being accepted as a Western-style democracy. He openly accused Tudjman of having plotted with Slobodan Milosevic to carve up Bosnia. He condemned Tudjman's justification of the Croat Nazi puppet state during World War II and made the case that Croatia should face up to its own war crimes. Insisting that he represented all Croatian citizens, he reached out to the Serb minority,

and reacted when they were intimidated or attacked. Looking back at this time, he told ESI:

*“After Tudjman’s departure, Croatian society was in a different mood. I was simply the interpreter of that public mood. That’s why I was the most popular, even though I had many enemies.”*

Stjepan Mesic was born on 24 December 1934 in the small city of Orahovica. During World War II, Croatia’s pro-Nazi forces killed his grandparents, a childhood trauma that likely contributed to his antifascist views.

Mesic graduated with a degree in law and married Milka Dudundic, a Serb. (His opponents often claimed this explained his openness towards Serbian interests.) Mesic said his wife was of Ukrainian origin, but rejected any debate on ethnicity, saying once that it was “senseless to count one’s blood cells ... I have always found racists rather disgusting.”

In 1965 he was elected to the Croatian parliament as an independent. Two years later he became mayor of his native Orahovica. He attained some fame by trying to establish a privately owned factory in the town, which, as a capitalist enterprise, was prohibited by the communist authorities.

Mesic was involved in the so-called “Croatian Spring” of the early 1970s, a political movement seeking more rights, as well as economic and democratic reforms, for Croatia within the Yugoslav federation. Although he played no leading role, he was charged for spreading “enemy propaganda” and had to serve one year in prison.

After nearly two decades outside the political scene, having worked mostly in an architectural bureau, Mesic joined Tudjman’s newly formed Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) in 1989. In 1990, after the HDZ won Croatia’s first multi-party elections, he enjoyed a brief stint as prime minister. Later that year he became the Croatian representative in the Yugoslav federal presidency, based in Belgrade. Taking over as the head of the presidency in May 1991, he effectively became the last president of Yugoslavia. Fighting in Croatia had just started. Mesic would return to Zagreb, declaring, “There’s no more Yugoslavia.”

Back in Croatia, Mesic became speaker of parliament and a member of Tudjman’s inner circle. In 1992 he helped Tudjman oust the rather

moderate leader of the Bosnian Croats, Stjepan Kljucic, who would be replaced with the ultra-nationalist Mate Boban.

In 1994, however, Mesic broke with Tudjman because of Tudjman's authoritarian tendencies and expansionist ambitions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mesic and Manolic formed their own party, but failed to win any parliamentary seats. In 1997 Mesic joined the Croatian People's Party. He remained critical of Tudjman, but was largely out of the limelight. At the start of the 2000 presidential elections, he was a dark horse candidate, with support in the vicinity of 2 per cent, according to polls. Eventually, however, he ended up in the runoff, in which he defeated the favorite, Drazen Budisa, whose strategy of wooing former Tudjman voters did not pay off.

Mesic's first foreign trip as president was to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where thousands, having recognised his break from Tudjman's policies, lined the streets to greet him. It was important for Croatia to re-establish connections with its Balkan neighbours, Mesic realised. In 2003, he and the then president of Serbia and Montenegro, Svetozar Marovic, exchanged apologies for their people's wartime atrocities.

Both Mesic and [Racan](#) knew that Croatia had to cooperate with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague and to prosecute war crimes at home in order to advance on its path towards the EU. In 2000, the court announced it would be sending indictments against Croatian officials. The first ones arrived the following year. Local prosecutors were also launching their own cases.

The arrest of a dozen war veterans on 12 September 2000 on the basis of warrants issued by local prosecutors came as a huge psychological blow to Croatian society. Nationalists had always insisted that only Serbs committed war crimes. On 28 September 2000, 12 Croatian army generals signed an open letter demanding that the prosecutions against the wartime heroes stop. Most of the 12 generals were widely respected for their roles in the war. Some media speculated about an impending putsch. Within hours, Mesic – who, as president, was also supreme commander of the army – forcibly retired the generals in question, stripping them of their positions. He recounted the event to ESI as follows:

*“It wasn't easy to suppress the radicals. It wasn't easy to send 12 generals into retirement when everybody was afraid of a putsch. But*

*nothing happened. Our army is de-politicized now ... With the army, there's no negotiating. The army has to be commanded. The army had a pamphlet which said, 'We established this country, so we want to make decisions about what is happening in the country.' I said: 'Sure, go ahead, but only through elections, not while you're wearing uniforms.' And in three minutes, they were gone. And nothing happened. There would have been a problem if I hadn't reacted; in three days, we would have had a renegade army. That's why I cut it short immediately."*

This move was one of the most important – and boldest – of Mesic's rule. He curbed the influence of the military and, by the same token, of the nationalists, who refused to acknowledge that Croats had committed war crimes.

The nationalists did not give in, however. On 11 February 2001, more than 100,000 people gathered in Split at a protest against the prosecutions. [Racan](#) and Mesic were declared enemies of the nation. The rally was organized by war veterans but backed by the HDZ whose leader at the time, [Ivo Sanader](#), was among the speakers.

When supporters of Ante Gotovina, another former Croatian army general, protested against his indictment by the ICTY later that year, Mesic addressed the nation on state TV:

*"A law-based government cannot and should not think about not acting according to its international obligations ... The Croatian people should not, and will not, be hostage to those with blood on their hands, who shamed Croatia's name, whatever their other achievements."*

His support for the ICTY was not only verbal. Mesic provided the court with a number of transcripts of Tudjman's meetings. Some of these helped the ICTY convict Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markac in 2011.

At the same time, Mesic worked to patch up relations with Israel. During a trip to Israel in 2001, he apologized for Croats' World War II atrocities against the Jews. In July 2003, during the visit of then Israeli President Moshe Katsav to Croatia's notorious World War II concentration camp of Jasenovac, Mesic said:

*"I have to say that here, in Jasenovac, people were killed in the name of the idea of a Croatian state. The idea of one's own state is great and*

*magnificent. But there's no idea that could justify the policy of killing innocents."*

In 2003, the HDZ returned to power, but now as a reformed conservative party whose leader, Ivo Sanader, placed the biggest emphasis on Croatia's EU accession. Sanader and Mesic managed to cohabitate quite well as they shared this overall goal. As Mesic told ESI about Sanader:

*"Once he won the elections, he played a very important role ... He changed his rhetoric and genuinely wanted to get Croatia into the EU."*

In January 2005, Mesic beat HDZ candidate (and future prime minister) Jadranka Kosor and won a second mandate. The Croatian constitution prevented him from running for a third one. In February 2010 he was succeeded by Ivo Josipovic, a Social Democrat.

During his decade long tenure as president Mesic also had critics, and not only among the nationalist right. Liberals objected to his two visits to Libya and his visit [to Cuba](#). In 2006 a speech was made public that Mesic had given in 1992 to Croats in Australia, where he had told them: "During World War II Croats won twice ... We won on April 10, when the Axis recognized the Croatian state and we won again after the war when we found ourselves on the winning side." Mesic justified his remarks by saying that he had wanted to please the diaspora audience, and that his antifascist credentials were in any case solid. In 2010, acting on the recommendation of the presidential amnesty commission, he shortened the prison term of a man who was serving an eight-year prison term for participating in the killing of Serbs in Pakracka Poljana during the war. That move triggered [criticism both in Croatia](#) and [from Serbian President Boris Tadic](#). On different occasions Mesic lost his temper with both journalists and political opponents. In early 2010 he cut short an interview for RTL Television, [telling a journalist that her question was "stupid" and that he would "not allow this shit"](#).

Mesic could be sometimes populist and rude. His career – a former communist subsequently put in prison by the communist party; a founding member of the HDZ who then became its most pugnacious critic – embodied many of the tensions and contradictions of 20th century Croatia. In the end, however, it is as a leader standing up to Tudjman over his policies in Bosnia, breaking with the legacy of the 1990s as president, defending the ICTY before most other politicians in the country dared to do so, and still managing to get elected and

reelected, that he is going to be remembered most. When it came to the fundamental question of which path Croatia should take, he came down firmly on one side, paving the way for Croatia to conclude EU accession talks 16 months after the end of his two-term presidency.

Selected further reading (in Croatian and Serbian only):

- Boris Pavelic, *Deset boljih godina*, Novi Liber i Novi list, 2010.
- Tomislav Jakic, *Nisam zavijao s vukovima, sjećanja otrgnuta zaboravu*, 2010.
- Ivica Djikic, *Domovinski obrat – politicka biografija Stipe Mesica*, VBZ Zagreb, 2004.
- Mirjana Kasapovic, “Odlazak velikog populista i reforma Ustava”, *Politicke analize*, No 1/1, 2010, pp.15-17.
- Tatjana Tagirov, [“Vickasti antifasista”](#), *Vreme*, 29 December 2009.
- Igor Lazic, “Intervju Dana: Mesic – Mogao sam završiti u loncu”, *Dani*, 18 February 2000. ■