A review of the historical development of the Republic of Croatia

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Abstract: The Croats were among the first peoples of Europe who established a state, and from the beginning of the tenth century they had their own kingdom, the first among the Slav peoples. By their language they belong to the Indo-European Slavic, or more precisely the South Slavic group of peoples, and by their cultural and religious orientation they belong to the Western European sphere of civilization. They settled their present homeland at the beginning of the seventh century. Their formation as a distinct ethnicity began in the early Middle Ages, and this on territory which was for centuries the meeting place of Greek and Roman culture, the Frankish and Byzantine Empires, and the Holy Roman (German) and Ottoman Empires. Here the world's three greatest religions also met: Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam. The Croats are Catholics and have always gravitated to the West. As one of the six republics of the former Yugoslavia, Croatia was on the border between the Western democratic countries and the Eastern communist world, between the countries gathered in NATO and those in the Warsaw Pact. Since becoming an independent and democratic state in 1991, the Republic of Croatia has been on the eastern border of Central Europe.

The beginnings of statehood – the formation of two Croatian principalities

The name Croat (Hrvat), which is probably of Iranian origin, was first mentioned in the second or third century A.D. near the Sea of Azov. From here the Croats migrated to southern Poland around Cracow, where the so-called White Croatia was located. Around the year 630 they arrived in the western part of the Balkan Peninsula. They defeated or assimilated the Illyro-Celtic tribes, which were already somewhat Romanized, freed themselves from the Avars and established two principalities, one on the territory of the former Roman province of Dalmatia, and the other in the Pannonian region. The first principality was known as the Coastal or Dalmatian Croatia, and the other as Pannonian or Sava Croatia.

In addition to these areas, the Croats also settled southern Dalmatia and the territory of today's Herzegovina and Montenegro, which historical sources refer to as Red Croatia. They also settled Bosnia, Istria and southern Hungary, but they did not maintain a strong presence in all of these peripheral territories, as they were subject to assimilation. The Roman population withdrew into the Byzantine cities on the coast or islands (e.g. Split, Zadar, Trogir, Rab, Osor, Krk), while the Illyro-Roman population withdrew to the highlands, where they later became known as Vlach stock-herders. The Croats soon accepted Christianity, and became a part of Roman and Western Christian civilization.

In 812 the Franks (under Charlemagne) and the Byzantine Empire created spheres of interest, and the Croats fell under the Franks, while the coastal cities came under the rule of Constantinople. A result of this division was the revolt of Ljudevit (Louis), the prince of Sava Croatia, against the Frankish state (818), while Borna, the prince of Coastal Croatia, supported the Franks. A genuine war broke out, in which Ljudevit repelled the Frankish armies and defeated Borna. This was how the Croats first entered the political stage of Europe with their two principalities.

The independent Croatian principality, 879

After Ljudevit's revolt was quelled (823), the focus of Croatian statehood was transferred to Coastal, or Dalmatian, Croatia, where the Croats established their first port towns (Šibenik, Biograd, Nin), a navy and their first seats of government (Knin, Bijače). The most notable among the Croatian princes were Trpimir (845–864), Domagoj (864–876) and
Branimir (879–929). Trpimir led successful campaigns against the Bulgars and the Byzantine Empire in Dalmatia, introduced the Benedictine order to Croatia and issued the first charter in which he is mentioned as the first Croatian prince (Dux Chroatorum). Domagoj defeated the Venetians at sea, and together with the Franks he conquered Barin in Italy from the Arabs. Branimir established firm ties with the Pope and in 879 he obtained recognition of Croatia as an independent state from the Vatican—the first in the history of the Croats. During his reign the Neretljani Croats defeated the Venetians and imposed a tribute on Venice for free passage along the Croatian coast. In this way the Croats ruled the Adriatic Sea.

Priests came into Croatia in Branimir’s time, students of the “Slavic apostles”, Saints Cyril and Methodius, and they brought with them liturgical books in the Old Slavonic language and in the Slavic script—Glagolitic. From then liturgical services were held in this language, and church books were written in this script, so that this was the beginning of the written word among the Croats in their own language and script. Thus the Croats were the only European nation which held masses in their own language instead of in the Latin or Greek languages.

The Croatian princes left data engraved in rocks in a manner that almost no other nation in Europe did. These are primarily inscriptions with the names and functions of rulers, e.g. pro duce Trepim(ero) for Prince Trpimir. Two notes of Branimir remain, signed as dux Croatorum—the prince of the Croats. Višeslav left behind a special baptismal font, which symbolizes the acceptance of the church, and thereby Western culture, by the Croats. In addition to these items, there are other inscriptions and Croatian stone sculpture, and unique Croatian churches in Nin and in other places.

**Unification and the Croatian kingdom (925–1102)**

During the reign of Tomislav (910–928), Croatia, along with Bulgaria, became the strongest state in the area between Germany and Constantinople. He organized a strong army and navy, defeated the Magyars and forced them across the Drava River. Since then this river has been the age-old border between these two peoples. Tomislav also annexed Sava Croatia to his state. This included the area between the Drava, Sava and Kupa Rivers, which would later be known as Slavonia, i.e. the land of the Slavs (Slaveni, Slovini). This was the first time that the two Croatian principalities were united. As an ally of Byzantium, Tomislav also defeated the Bulgarian army, so that he was granted the right to administer the coastal cities (Zadar, Split, Trogir, so-called Byzantine Dalmatia) and thus rounded off his state from the Adriatic Sea to the Drava River, and from the Raša River in Istria to the Drina River.

At the height of his power Tomislav crowned himself as king (925). After this, at two church synods in Split he established the relationship between the Split, Latin and Nin, Croatian, diocese, and in this way strengthened internal relations in Croatia and resolved the dispute around the liturgical language between the Latinists and Croatian Glagolites. Through this Tomislav obtained the support of the pope, who was at that time an extremely important international power.

After Tomislav several kings ruled Croatia, of which the following are the most notable: Držislav, who received his crown from Constantinople as the king of Dalmatia and Croatia (969–997); Petar Krešimir IV, during whose reign Croatia achieved its greatest territorial extent (1058–1074); and Dimitar Zvonimir, who ruled at the time of Croatia’s greatest economic progress (1074–1089). All of these kings bore the recognized title of king of Dalmatia and Croatia, administered the wealthy Dalmatian towns, ruled the sea routes in the Adriatic Sea and resisted both Venice and Constantinople. During the reign of Dimitar Zvonimir a charter was engraved in stone, known as the Baška Tablet, which contains the king’s name and title. This tablet has been preserved and it is the oldest artifact written in the Croatian language and the Glagolitic script. It is considered that this was the beginning not only of Croatian literacy but also of literature.

The death of Dimitar Zvonimir also marked the end of the Croatian Trpimirović dynasty, named after Prince Trpimir. Thus a struggle for the Croatian throne commenced. The Hungarian nobility gathered around Zvonimir’s widow, Jelena, the sister of Hungarian King Ladislas, while the Croats gathered around Petar, a king chosen by the people. During these struggles the Zagreb diocese was established (1094), the Hungarian army invaded Croatia, and Petar was killed in this battle as the last Croatian king. However, the Hungarians could not take Croatia by force, so they signed a treaty in 1102, according to which the Croatian kingdom was attached to Hungary. In this arrangement the king was a common ruler to both Croatia and Hungary according to the principle of personal union. From that time a Croato-Hungarian state was created, in which Dalmatia, Croatia and Slavonia maintained their internal administration and elements of statehood. They had their bans (governors), viceroys, separate territory and even minted their own currency—the banovac.

**In the Croato-Hungarian state (1102–1526)**

The Croato-Hungarian state was a very significant factor in the area between the German and Byzantine Empires and as well as a rival to the strengthened...