CONTESTED CITIZENSHIP: BETWEEN NATIONAL AND SOCIAL RIGHTS IN POST-WAR KNIN, CROATIA

Izazov građanstvu: Između nacionalnih i socijalnih prava u poratnom Kninu, Hrvatska

APSTRAKT Rad se bavi postsocijalističkim poraćem u području grada Knina u Hrvatskoj. Analizira se »veliki plan« hrvatskog nacionalnog inženjeringa nakon rata 1990-ih godina i njegov (delimični) »neuspeh« na lokalnom nivou. Koristeći pojmove socijalne sigurnosti i građanstva kao analitički okvir, autorka pokazuje da je hrvatska nacionalnost postala ne samo ideološka perspektiva nego i praktično sredstvo ostvarivanja socijalnih prava, uključujući i rešavanje stambenog pitanja. Ova strategija se, međutim, ispostavila kao kratkovađa: mnogi hrvatski naseljenici i povratnici, koji su u Knin došli s entuzijazmom, suočili su se s ograničenom dostupnošću socijalnih i materijalnih beneficija u poratnim, postsocijalističkim okolnostima, kao i sve manjim efektom nacionalnih prava počev od 1998. godine. Kninsko područje je doživelo marginalizaciju i »demodernizaciju«, a brojni »nacionalni pobednici« pretvorili su se u društvene gubitnike. Rastakanjem nacionalne solidarnosti ljudi u ovom regionu započeli su izgradnju (krhkog) lokalnog društva, što daje nadu za pojavu civilnih procesa u budućnosti.

KLJUČNE REČI nacionalna prava, socijalna prava, Hrvatska, kninsko područje

ABSTRACT The paper deals with the post-war, postsocialist region of Knin in Croatia and discusses the 'grand plan' of Croatian national engineering after the war in the 1990s and its (partial) 'failure' at the local level. Building on concepts of social security and citizenship as an analytical frame, it shows that the Croatian nationality became not only an ideological perspective, but a practical means to achieving social rights, including access to housing. However, this logic was rather shortsighted. While many Croatian settlers as well as Croatian returnees came to Knin with enthusiasm, they became frustrated by the limited access to social and material benefits in the post-war, postsocialist situation and the diminishing power of national rights from 1998 on. The region of Knin became marginalised

1 This article builds on my book “Claiming ownership in post-war Croatia” (2006), for which I have done fieldwork in the region of Knin in 2000 and 2001 (funded by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle) as well as on the article “Croatia’s Serbs Ten Years after the End of the War” (2007). I am very grateful to Ivana Spasić and the two anonymous reviewers for their critical comments.
and 'de-modernised' and many 'national winners' became social losers. With the fragmentation of national solidarity, people in the Knin region started to construct a (fragile) local society, giving hope for the emergence of civil processes.

KEY WORDS national rights, social rights, Croatia, Knin region

Introduction

Postsocialism in Croatia meant independence from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – but this came at a high price. An interethnic war broke out between Serbs and Croats in 1991 and lasted for four years. The region of Knin formed one of the centres of this conflict. Using this region as a case study, in this paper I want to grasp what kind of transformation was on the way in Croatia after the end of war and partly is even today, especially in the former war regions. In order to understand the transformation I want to look at changing notions of social security and citizenship rights from two perspectives: firstly the political and legal changes as well as their (partly difficult) implementation, and secondly from the viewpoints of the inhabitants of Knin, and especially the Croatian settlers, after the end of war in 1995. A special focus will be put on the transformation of housing rights and practices, as housing is one of the fundamental aspects of social security and can be seen as a basic human right.

I will argue that during the war and also in the immediate post-war period, citizenship rights, including the right to housing, were mainly defined nationally. Croatian nationality became not only in ideological perspective a means to achieve rights, but also on the level of practices as in access to housing. Many Croatian settlers as well as Croatian returnees came to Knin with enthusiasm, feeling protected by the Croatian state and hoping to build up a new future as promised by the Croatian authorities. However, this view was shaken when realising that in the post-war, post-socialist situation, the region of Knin became increasingly marginalised and “de-modernised” and social rights – like the right to employment and housing which had been guaranteed during socialism – had diminished. Croatian settlers as well as Croatian returnees started to realise that they were not “national winners” but social losers.

In order to understand the transformation in Knin, I will distinguish three time frames – the period of 1990-1999, 2000-2003, and from 2003 on. First of all, however, I want to introduce some theoretical thoughts on the conceptualization of the postwar-, postsocialist transformation, as well as on changing notions of citizenship and social security.

Theoretical considerations as frames of interpretation

According to Brandstädter (2007: 27), most academics and non-academics believe that the postsocialist transition is a phase which is perceived as being “in-
between” a socialist past and a capitalist future, which in Europe is often associated with “the West”, to which these societies are moving forward. The transformation is seen from the fixed ideological vision that this future will be better, more prosperous and more modern, while they see their socialist past often as a form of stagnation and retreat. In this fashion, also from many leading politicians, radical attempts of social engineering are going on, in order to create a new social, political and economic order. These radical attempts Brandtstädter calls “grand plans”. Her argument is however that these “grand plans” often also fail, not least because of their high ideologization and distance to reality. According to Brandtstädter, many people who live in the postsocialist transformation, especially whose in newly marginalized zones, have to cope with an imperfect present in which partly even basic social security is far from given. Although the violent post-socialist transformations in former Yugoslavia have been often treated as something different from the rest of post-socialist transitions due to the extreme forms of nationalism followed by outbreak of war and ethnic cleansing, nationalism promised a better future to all those people belonging to one’s own nation and can therefore also be seen as a “grand plan” of modernisation. This holds true although this kind of transformation led to an even greater marginalization of certain areas compared to other post-socialist transformations, and left many people with disappointed hopes.

Generally, the concept of citizenship can be seen as part of the “grand plan” of radical social engineering as it changes with changing ideological frames. Focussing on the ideological and practical differences of socialist and postsocialist citizenship concepts, Chris Hann (1996), who has done extensive field research in Hungary, China, Poland and Turkey, highlights that in Hungary the socialist concept of citizenship did not entail many civil and political rights, as for example the right to voting and free expression. Still it granted various social and economic rights, including free health care, education, a locally based and secure work place, and significant social improvements like the building of roads, cultural centres and so on in the community. It was meant to diminish the social differences built up during the early period of capitalism in Hungary (lasting up the end of WWII). In the post-socialist Hungary, the new citizenship concept was formulated in opposition to the socialist one. Political and civil rights gained stronger importance, and villagers could vote freely and could found associations. At the same time however, the social and economic dimensions of citizenship diminished. As a result, many inhabitants lost their local work place, partly also their health insurance and lived in considerable social insecurity. Social inequalities increased again. Regarding Croatia in the 1990s, it is questionable what happened after citizenship rights were largely reformulated nationally and social rights were (at least partly) subordinated to the national principle.

The third concept which will be discussed in this paper is that of social security. It addresses not only the material conditions under which people live, like the quantity and quality of resources available to them (housing, food, health care, or education), but goes beyond this concept and includes also social relations like feelings of trust and (national) solidarity. Keebet and Franz von Benda-Beckmann (2001), who also focus their research on periods of political and social
transformation, plea to deal with the actual social and economic conditions of insecurity of local people and the ways in which social actors interpret, manipulate and change social relations and the normative frameworks that pertain to them. In this way, social security is treated as a dynamic concept which allows us to understand how social security links the present with the past and the future — and therefore depends on time and space and the point of view of the person dealing with it. With such concepts in mind, let us at this point turn to political and legal changes since the 1990s and the perspectives of the inhabitants of Knin.

1990-2000: The politics of ethno-national engineering and the manifestation of national rights

Up to 1991, the region of Knin had a mixed Serb and Croat population. Unlike many parts of Croatia, the Serbian population here was in the majority, and when Croatia pushed for independence in 1990 some extremist Serbs in the Knin region stirred up a revolt against the newly elected Croatian government. The reasons for this Serbian secession are complex and largely based on an escalating and dominant Serbian policy led by Milošević in Belgrade. However, one reason which many Croatian Serbs highlight is the fact that after the nationalist HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica), led by Franjo Tuđman, had won the 1990 elections in Croatia, it aimed at an independent, democratic Croatia, in which the position of the Serbs would be redefined. The Serbs, who at that time made up 12.2% of the population of Croatia (Goldstein 2003: 468), and up to this time enjoyed the same political status as a “state people” as the Croats, were supposed to be assigned the status of a “minority”, and many Serbs at least feared that their rights would be diminished with that. I will not go into more detail into the reasons of war, but it is arguable that the changes in citizenship rights really had an impact in the war escalation. As will be outlined later on, access to housing and employment as two important elements of citizenship rights were transformed during the war and the post-war period on a national basis, and remained an important barrier for ethnic reconciliation and return of Serbs.

Beginning in April 1991, after several violent incidents in ethnically mixed regions of Croatia, the conflict developed into a territorial war (cf. Grandits and Leutloff-Grandits 2003: 23-45 and Sundhaussen 1994). With the support of the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA), Serb paramilitaries brought even more areas of Croatia under their control, and started with the first ‘ethnic cleansing’. At the climax of the refugee crisis at the end of 1991, the UNHCR counted more than 600,000 persons who had been expelled from their homes in Croatia or who had taken flight; most of this number were Croats (International Crisis Group 2002: 3). In the Serb-occupied areas, massive amounts of Croatian property were destroyed. Serbs from other parts of Croatia, in which they formed a local minority,² emigrated

² Actually, at the start of the war, only 61% of Croatia’s Serbs lived in the regions of Knin, Kordun, Banija, and Slavonia, which later was largely absorbed into the ‘Republic of Serb Krajina’ (cf. Sundhaussen 2001: 19-35).
on grounds of ethnic discrimination and infringements of their rights. They fled either to Serbia or to Serb-occupied areas of Croatia. This resulted in largely ‘ethnically clean’ territories on both sides of the boundary.

In 1995, the Croatian army regained the Serb-held territory in two military operations called Bljesak (‘Flash’) and Oluja (‘Storm’). The military offensives prompted the flight of almost the entire Serb civilian population of the so-called Serbian Krajina, consisting of more than 150,000 persons, to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the regions of Bosnia under Serb control. Only about 5,000 to 6,000 Serb civilians – predominantly those of advanced age – remained in the Krajina (Goldstein, 2003: 420). That Serbs, who had tried, in spite of Oluja, to stay in their homeland, were acutely threatened was validated through the casualties during and after the military operation. According to reports in the Croatian daily newspaper, Vjesnik, in 2003, some 601 civilians were killed or went missing in the first 100 days after Oluja; most of them were of advanced age. Between August 1995 and the end of 1996, about 73% of Serb-owned houses were partly or completely destroyed, along with public buildings and factories. The proportion of Serb houses which were plundered has been estimated even higher (Otvoreni Oci 1998: 9).

Violence against Serb civilians and the destruction of their property were, however, not the only phenomena which defined the time after Oluja. Almost simultaneously, a huge wave of returning refugees and also immigrants began to arrive. According to a statement of the International Crisis Group (issued in 2002), there were still about 220,000 persons, mainly ethnic Croats, who had been driven out of Serb-occupied areas of Croatia and were still waiting to return. In the first days and months after Oluja, a large part of them came back. By 2004, some 95% of them had been registered as “returned” (Global IDP Database 2004; International Crisis Group 2002:3; IDMC 2006: 4). Nevertheless, this high figure should be treated with caution. Often the registered returnees did not actually settle down or moved elsewhere after a time. In addition, at least 20,000 abandoned (and plundered) houses which had belonged to Serbs were turned over to Croatian settlers for their use. Moreover, up to 30,000 domiciles (some of which had lain outside the war zone), which had been classified as “socially owned property” in socialist times but in which Serbs had acquired rights of usufruct, were turned over to Croats (Vreme 4 August 2005:13, IDMC 2006: 6).

The category of socially owned property was unique to socialist Yugoslavia and existed alongside private and state-owned property. In fact, all over socialist Yugoslavia, the right to housing was next to the right to education, health care and employment one of the social entitlements formulated by the socialist state to which all citizens were entitled. Unlike the capitalist system, where people need enough money to buy a house or a guarantee to be eligible for a loan, in socialist Yugoslavia socially owned housing was bound to the workplace and ‘social’ and ‘political’ criteria proved to be the most decisive determinants to receive housing rights.

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According to the socialist ideology, apartments and loans for houses were supposed to be allocated to workers and their families based on a distribution scheme that took account of their years in employment (radni staž), their payments into the housing fund of the firm they worked in, their family and property status, the family’s housing situation, and, of course, political criteria such as membership in the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (the former Communist Party of Yugoslavia) or commitment to the Partisans during WWII (cf. Nord 1992: 292). From the ideological point of view, the distribution of housing property therefore followed the notion of supporting the weak in society and creating social justice and became a matter of socialist citizenship rights (cf. Benda-Beckmann 2001). In practice, however, the ideology was not always put into place and social differences between the socialist elites and the (lower strata of the) population remained valid or even widened.

Contrary to this, the post-socialist, post-war period in Croatia was characterised by two quite different transformations concerning access to property and citizenship rights: first of all the privatisation of formerly socially owned property and secondly the distribution of housing property along national lines. Concerning the privatization of formerly socially owned property in the post-socialist transformation period, the new constitution of 1991 had dissolved the category of socially owned property and had placed it under state administration. Property could be transformed into private property as soon as it had been occupied by the tenant for several years and after the payment of a relatively small and subsidised sum, i.e. a price below the market value. The privatisation of formerly socially owned housing was one element of the ‘grand plan’ of social transformation in post-socialist Croatia (see Bezovan 2005), as well as in all other former Yugoslav republics. In Croatia, the possibility to turn the former socially owned housing into private property was however mainly given to ethnic Croats, while Serbs who had fled their socially owned apartments lost their rights to reclaim them.

But also many Croats did not manage to achieve private housing property after the demise of socialism and the abolition of socially owned housing. As rents on private apartments tended to be very high in the Yugoslav successor states as well as in many other post-socialist states, housing became a burning social question. The Croatian state made some efforts to deal with this problem by granting poor Croat citizens access to housing property of Serbs who fled the county. It therefore linked social rights to nationalist criteria and policies (cf. Bezovan 2005).

In fact, the distribution of abandoned Serb property after the end of the war followed first of all national criteria. This was given legal sanction through the passage of new laws on property rights. The ‘Law on areas of special state concern’ was central in this respect. It was released in order to ‘mitigate the consequences of war’, to ‘ease the rapid return of Croats who were expelled between 1993 and 1995’, as well as to ‘facilitate the settlement of Croats’ in the former Serb-occupied regions

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and to encourage the “Croatian settlers and returnees from abroad; Croats from Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina, who decided of their own free will to settle in Croatia”. The law also stipulated that the settlers would be granted property rights for the housing space after a period of 10 years of uninterrupted settlement and use of the property, and therewith making the settlement durable. At the same time, the Croatian state integrated a social component under the heading of these national dimensions. The ‘Law on areas of special state concern’ which encouraged the settlement of Croats into abandoned (Serbian) (private as well as former socially owned) housing space for example encouraged the settlement of “unemployed citizens or citizens who needed to solve their housing situation”. In addition, the Croatian settlers were promised employment and other economic and social benefits and privileges – privileges, which had been existed partly also during socialism, but which had been generally open to all ethnic groups. The Croatian state thus responded to the burning social questions which affected also many Croats after the demise of socialism and the abolition of socially owned housing, and in this way fuelled nationalistic thoughts and feelings among the lower strata of Croat ethnicity.

The new housing rights and the ensuing settlement in the Krajina of many young Croatian families, who took over abandoned Serb houses and apartments, led to another revision of the ethnic structure of the population and slowed down the return of many Serbs. Of the more than 300,000 Serbs who, at the end of the war, had either fled Croatia or sought protection at the time in eastern Slavonia, which was still under Serbian control (International Crisis Group 2002: 3), only little more than one third came back by 2006 (IDMC 2006). Furthermore, according to reports of diverse international organisations, up to 60 percent of these returnees merely allow themselves to be registered formally but do not, in fact, live permanently in Croatia. Most of the real returnees are older people (IDMC 2006: 4).

The Croatian version of hope: Local consequences of the ethno-national policy of the Croatian state

In accordance with the law inviting different groups of ‘Croats’ to move to the former war zone, Croatian settlers in the region of Knin came from various regions in Croatia itself, from Vojvodina and even Kosovo, the then southern province of Serbia. They occupied both – private property of Serbs as well as former socially owned property which had been allocated to Serbs under socialism. The majority of the settlers, however, came from different parts of Bosnia, such as the regions

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5 This is however also rather the ideological view as well as mirroring the official procedures. In practice the distribution of housing and other privileges followed partly also clientelistic structures.
6 According to an investigation of the UNHCR carried out by the Public Opinion Research Institute PULS (2001: 13), the average age of Serbian returnees in the former war zones in Croatia was exactly 60 years (in 2001). Only 8.9% of those of age were between 18 and 39, 27.2% were between 40 and 59 years of age, and 62.1% belonged to the over 60 group.
around Zenica, Tuzla and Vareš, mostly ethnically mixed areas where Croats had
been in the minority before (and after) the war.

Settlers coming originally from other parts of Croatia often had no property of
their own, were often unemployed and/or unable to find the money to rent an
apartment. At the same time, social entitlements like housing and jobs had been cut,
with no social net founded on civil rights to catch and support the truly needy.
Magdalena, a woman in her late twenties and the mother of a young girl, explained
why she had moved from Zagreb: “I had to rent a flat privately, I was a sub-
tenant. I did not have a house, or a flat, I had nothing. I would not have come here if I had
had something.” Like Magdelenal, many settlers hoped to use nationally defined
access rights to property in order to escape their difficult social circumstances.

These considerations are also valid when considering the settlement of Croats
from Bosnia, but the situation here was more complex. Nearly all of the settlers from
Bosnia had been expelled from their homes during the war and many were also
victims of violence. Whether people had owned property in Bosnia or not, most had
no wish to return. Although many had positive memories of their pre-war lives, they
felt that such memories belonged to a past that could not be rebuilt – their home
community had been destroyed and they were homeless. They were bitter that the
war had turned them into a suppressed and discriminated national minority in their
native regions in Bosnia. They argued not to be able to express their own thoughts,
to speak their Croatian language (although the language is, from a linguistic point of
view, quite the same as Serbian or Bosnian), and to practise their religion in their
home regions in Bosnia – a process of marginalisation of national minorities as well
as of national homogenisation that according to some settlers had started under
socialism, reaching critical point during the war and continuing well into the
postwar period. The process of occupying houses belonging to members of the
national minority by members of the national majority was an important element in
this development. In Croatia, it made the return of Serbs very difficult. The fact that
the “new” Croatian citizenship law, which was based on an ethnic principle,
estended the right to Croatian citizenship virtually automatically to ethnic Croats in
Bosnia (and other countries of the world), made it possible that Croatian refugees
from Bosnia easily became citizens of Croatia and received housing based on
“national considerations”. Croatian settlers felt safe through the notion of a Croatian
solidarity, and had hopes for a better future within the Croatian nation state. At this
moment, they believed in the ‘grand plan’ of national transformation by the Croatian
state (disregarding the fact that they came to a region which was in many cases even
more marginalized than the one they had lived in during socialism).

On account of this, most settlers in the war-torn region declared themselves to
be ethnic Croats. Many settlers from Bosnia had acquired Croatian citizenship only
recently, in order to validate their settlement.\(^7\) They assumed that the area was

\(^7\) Of approximately 140,000 refugees from Bosnia in Croatia, 120,000 have received Croatian
citizenship up to 2001 and therefore no longer have refugee status. They are seen as ‘settlers’.
However, many have kept their Bosnian citizenship. Around 20,000 refugees from Bosnia still have
refugee status in Croatia (MPWRC 2001).
waiting to be settled by ethnic Croats. At the same time, they were unable to throw off the uncomfortable feeling of being newcomers. A man in his mid-40s from the region of Sarajevo expressed it this way:

“I think that we as well as all other citizens are needed in these regions, that is, in our beautiful homeland that I consider my homeland, my motherland of Croatia, and I have deep hopes that we will stay here, that we will not have to move on ... I believe my state and trust that it will support me. I want to be as trustworthy and honourable as I can. I want to stay here, because I fought in the war for Croatia. I fought trustworthily and honourably and I do not feel ashamed of that today. I do not feel ashamed of our flag.”

Such declarations indicate the insecurity felt by many Croatian settlers from Bosnia about settling in Knin and their need to justify their status. Many settlers also ‘marked’ the houses they occupied with graffiti showing the words ‘zauzeto’ (occupied) and ‘Hrvat’ (Croat) and hung a Croatian flag from their house, or painted the Croatian coat of arms and other Croatian symbols (such as acronyms of the Croatian Democratic Union) on the outer walls. These symbols and slogans demonstrated their belonging to the Croatian nation and thus were an attempt to stamp their claim to the house and to justify their settlement in the area. In this way, there was a shift from the importance of individual citizen rights to the importance of national group rights, which was accompanied by an uprooting of the people through war and migration.

Most local Croats were euphoric of coming home after the end of war in 1995, and many also adopted a national view of their home and homeland. After having suffered from Serbian secession and having been expelled by Serbs from their houses and region, they felt that home was a secure place only as long as it remained “Croatian”. But especially the better educated and the young ones preferred to stay in the towns of the coast and the capital Zagreb in which they had found employment or had started an education, instead of returning to a war-torn region. The complete destruction of communal and social life and the wounds of war visible in the locality of Knin diminished the value of coming home.

Furthermore, in contrast to the newly incoming Croats who occupied the private family houses of Serbs, returning local Croats had much stronger moral concerns about occupying private Serbian property. In conversation, they often underlined the fact that they would respect private property and would not seek to live in the property of others, as Croatian settlers did. A 35-year-old Croatian man from Biskupija who had been a soldier during war and took part in Oluja in 1995 was adamant on this point: “No one can take the home of someone else, we are clear about this”. In their view, the social status of a family was partly bound to the private family house they had built during socialism, and by not respecting the private property of others, they feared that Croatian settlers got the social organisation of their home region into a mess. In this way, they held on to a social order that derived from socialism, and had concerns that Croatian settlers disregarded private property rights.
Interestingly, this did not apply to abandoned (former) socially owned housing property, which younger local Croats without housing property started to occupy, too. The distinction between private and socially owned property was mainly connected to the feeling of having been discriminated against and ruled by Serbs during the socialist period and especially during the war in the 1990s. This was regarded as particularly true in relation to the apartments that had belonged to the Yugoslav army in socialist times and had been used by the Serbian Krajina army during the war in the 1990s. Occupation of these apartments was seen as legitimate because the Serbs who were ‘aggressors in the war against Croatia’ had forfeited their rights to them. The fact that many other former socially owned apartments, which had been built by various firms and factories in Knin, were occupied by local Croats was justified by arguing that Serbs had been overprivileged in the socialist system and had received easier access to flats. The gap between legal norms and ideology on the one hand and the practices of property distribution during the socialist system on the other led to the creation of new norms which built on the idea of correcting perceived historical injustices. In this way, the nationalist property regime of the transition period was not completely new to people in Knin, but was a reassertion of norms and practices known from the socialist era – and therewith genuinely “post-socialist” as formulated by Humphrey (2001).

Shifting power frames and shifting rights: 2000 to 2003

The transfer of Serb housing and the housing rights which the Serbs had enjoyed in socialism, to Croats was one of the central manifestations of discrimination against Serbs at different levels in Croatia after independence. However, from 1998 on, the concept of nationally based citizenship rights which granted ethnic Croats social rights like housing was increasingly restricted.

After the flight of the Serb civilian population from the former war zones and the destruction and confiscation of their houses, international organisations, and especially the UNTAES (which was dissolved by the OSCE in 1997), the UNHCR, and the EU exerted increased pressure on the Croatian government in this question. They argued that the right of return was guaranteed to all refugees by the Dayton Peace Accords. Moreover, they emphasised that the protection of private property had been confirmed in the Croatian constitution. They threatened Croatia with international isolation, in the event that these rights were not respected (OSCE, Status Report No. 13: 4).

In 1998, international pressure resulted in the launching of a return program by the Croatian government, which revoked sections of the nationally motivated housing laws of 1996/97 and included the establishment of new administrative procedures for resolving disputes between the Croatian settlers and the Serb property-owners. To that end, housing commissions were set up in all communities in which there were property disputes, so that they might serve as mediators and find measures to facilitate the return of property to the Serbian owners. The state agency for the transfer and mediation of property (Agencija za
pravni promet i posredovanje nekretninama), which was established in 1997, was supposed to facilitate the sale of the property of those Serbs not wishing to return at suitable prices (this was all the more necessary because, at that time, there was hardly any private market in housing). For another thing, it was the task of the agency to make alternative housing available to Croats occupying the houses of Serbs, from the pool of acquired houses (Deutschlander and Roggia, 1998: 25). The program did not, however, foresee the restitution of residential rights for those who had been living in formerly socially owned housing. Since this had been the predominant system in the cities, returns to urban areas were, in this way, obstructed to a considerable extent.

Also, until his death at the end of 1999, Croatia’s autocratic president, Franjo Tudman, and for that matter also the HDZ which he led, showed little enthusiasm for the implementation of the refugee return program. In particular, the planned return of houses encountered resistance. Many housing commissions accepted the applications of Serbs for the return of their property, to be sure, but did not do anything more about it. Other housing commissions, by contrast, annulled the rights of usufruct which had been bestowed on Croats, but did not offer the Croatian settlers any alternative dwellings, so that these questionably occupied residences were not vacated. This was also due to the fact that the state agency for the transfer and mediation of property did not make available any such alternative lodging possibilities. Illegally occupied houses were not vacated, especially as generally there were no court orders calling for them to be vacated (Human Rights Watch 2003: 17). Therefore, the return of Serb refugees got under way very slowly in 1998. In 2000, Croatian settlers occupying Serbian housing units still made up the large majority in Knin, outnumbering local Croatian as well as Serbian returnees, and only the rural villages, which were less attractive to Croatian settlers, were again mainly inhabited by returning Serbs.

The stark discrepancy between the stated goals of the refugee return program and their realisation was due especially to the lack of political will on the part of Croatian power-brokers at both the local and the national level, whose interests by no means coincided with those of international organizations. The HDZ, which had an especially strong base among (Croatian) returnees and new settlers in the former war zones, relied on nationalistic arguments and talk of the “glorious Homeland War” to build their constituency, and did not want to give affront to their adherents with a “Serb-friendly” policy. In order not to lose their power base, they were prepared to accept even Croatia’s international isolation, especially where the EU was concerned. As a result, until 2000, the European Commission was only represented in Croatia through a single official legate.

The international isolation and the bad economic situation, which was in part associated with it, hit citizens of Croatia hard toward the end of the 1990s. With Tudman’s death in December 1999, this led to a political changeover at the next parliamentary and presidential elections. At the beginning of 2000, a coalition of former opposition parties, under the leadership of the post-communist Social Democratic Party (SDP), with Ivica Račan at the helm, came to power. The new
regime intensified Croatia’s cooperation with the ICTY and released a new action plan for the return of the Serbs. The latter concentrated once again on the reoccupation of houses. The lack of alternative dwelling space was, in particular, taken into consideration. At the same time, the authorities promised to take a tougher line where illegal house-squatting was concerned.

However, in many regards, the new governmental policy did not actually get anywhere. The readiness to make greater efforts to satisfy EU demands was based on the expectation that the new regime would work hard toward improving relations with the EU and, in tow, achieving membership in the European Union early. But at the same time, the SDP regime hesitated to put the question of the return of Serbs too much in the foreground, out of worry that this would polarise Croatian society. The veterans’ association, local politicians in the former war zones, and in part also representatives of Catholic institutions also severely criticised the policy vis-à-vis Serbs and the policy of co-operation with The Hague alike, calling these policies unpatriotic. Their strong public presence placed the regime under considerable pressure (Goldstein 2003: 441). As a result, the new laws and procedures for the return of houses to their Serbian owners were not or only partly applied. Only with an internationally funded reconstruction of war damaged homes could the return of Serbs be accelerated.

**Fragmentation and radicalisation of hope: Local reactions to the 2000 changes**

In the Knin as well as in other parts of the former war region, the reactions to this new policy were however diverse. Many Croatian settlers, whether occupying houses in rural areas or in the town of Knin, felt deprived of the rights they had been promised. Their hopes of staying in the house for many decades, and perhaps even of being able to pass the house on to their children, were dashed. They furthermore stressed that they had invested much work and effort in rebuilding and maintaining the houses that had become their homes over the past few years. The 30-year-old head of a settler family, who in 1997 had moved into a Serbian house in Biskupija that had been devastated in 1995 and had been empty for two years, commented on the return of the Serbs and their wish to repossess their property in the following way:

*Now Serbs are returning. It is normal that people return to their homes. This is normal, nothing new, only that it makes the catastrophe here in Knin even bigger ... You settle the house for them. In fact, you clean up the house and repair it and make it habitable again. This house was damaged and we had to repair it before we could move in. The windows were all broken, the whole house had been empty. When they return, they will find a house that we settled and rebuilt.*

Like in this example, many settlers were desperately disappointed to learn that they were set to ‘lose’ the house they perceived more and more as their home all again. Last but not at least, many settlers lived with the insecurity of not knowing when and where and what kind of alternative accommodation they would be offered.
Amid the uncertainties surrounding the housing situation, many of these Croatian settlers blamed the Croatian SDP-led government for these changes and accused it for treason (and the government was scared of such an accusation). Many came to believe that Croatian national solidarity should be reinforced. Those settlers who had illegally occupied a house were especially prone to such thinking. Until 2000 – before the HDZ had lost power at the national level – many of these settlers had trusted that the housing commissions and other institutions in the region of Knin would not evict them. But when the Croatian SDP-led government began to publicly propagate the view that private property rights would now be respected and that illegal occupants would have to move out of Serbian property, this trust was shaken. Those Croats who had illegally occupied property became most dependent on the nationalist power-holders acting on local level who supported their property rights against Serbs. These settlers protested against the new legal provisions for the restitution of housing property to Serbian owners and hoped that a re-nationalisation of society would strengthen their rights.

However, this view was not shared by all Croatian settlers. Settlers who had originally been holding a use-permit accepted more easily that they would have to return the house they occupied to the legal owner, as the government promised them not to evict them until they were offered equivalent alternative accommodation. In the municipality of Biskupija, this confidence was supported by the head of the housing commission, a local Croat. He personally delivered the letters informing settlers about the cancellation of their use permits, explaining that the settlers could stay in the houses they occupied until the municipality offered them alternative housing. This form of negotiation served to relax tensions between the settlers and the Serb owners. Indeed, from 2000, many of the settlers welcomed the owners when they approached, inviting them in for a cup of coffee and showing them the interior of the house. A woman aged about 40, who came to Biskupija from a village in the Bosnian municipality of Konjic, explained why she did not worry about the return of the Serb owner of the house she was living in:

The owner once came to speak with us. He had received a decision that the house would be returned to him. This will happen as soon as the municipality of Knin builds us a house for our nine family members, because we have seven kids and with us two parents we are nine. As soon as we get such a house, we will return this house, and we will move out. But we do not know when this will happen because the municipality doesn’t have any money, and we are their citizens and they can not tear us out of the house.

Relaxed attitudes such as these were based on sound reasoning. By referring to housing as a basic citizen right in Croatia, this settler expressed feelings of security which enabled them to accept the return of Serbs and the granting of their property rights. In this way, there was a shift in the way that private property of a Serb owner was recognised again. However, social housing rights were still connected to the membership of a Croatian ethno-nation which had precedence over Serb (private property) rights. Furthermore, based on administrative and political
barriers, alternative accommodation was rare and most settlers had to wait long before being able to move into alternative accommodation.

Insecurity also remained because of the deteriorating economic situation. During the 1991–5 war, the already weak economic base of the Knin region was almost completely destroyed. All the region’s factories, the main source of employment under socialism, suffered looting or devastation. On the heels of the war came more general problems that characterised the postsocialist transition, as an overall breakdown of the market, with many processing factories and firms going out of business and with very high unemployment in the Knin region, rising to more than 60% in 2001. As mentioned earlier, the difficult economic situation was also another reason why many of the younger and better educated local Croats did not return. For Serbs it was even more difficult to get a job in the public sector (about the only greater job provider in the Knin region) due to ethnic discrimination, which also hindered the return especially of the young ones.

Given the changes in the legal, political and economic conditions in Knin described above, an increasing number of Croatian settlers opted to emigrate again. Many of them realised that the nationalist promises to start a new life in the former war regions did not hold true, and that the “grand plan” to resettle the former ethnically mixed regions with ethnic Croats did not consider a strategy to socially include these marginalized regions into the Croatian state.

For those Croatian settlers who found themselves on the bottom of the social strata in Croatia, the alternative to move away was however often not given. Their situation seemed to become even more problematic, as competition for jobs in the public sector increased with the years, especially among local Croats and Croatian settlers. In this context, some settlers felt they were always second in line behind the local Croats. A settler from the region of Sarajevo put it this way: “I really wonder, it is not clear to me, and it doesn’t make sense to me ... are we second-class citizens? Once we were not second-class citizens but we are now. This is how the situation is at the moment”.

Like this settler, Croatian settlers argued that they did not deserve to be treated as second-class citizens since they were Croats and had fought for the Croatian state. In response, many settlers started to adopt again a nationalist position in order to stress the rights of their own group and to protect themselves from being displaced and dispossessed. In 2000, but to a large extent until today, this view was supported by influential national organisations, first of all the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church increasingly started to address the fate of the Croats of Knin by appealing to national solidarity and therewith by applying a national concept of citizenship rather than a social one. They encouraged Croatian settlers to stay in the region and bear their burden through the difficult times they were facing, in order to support the Croatian home and ‘homeland’. At this point, social security was mainly spiritually (and nationally) defined, and this spiritual security stood also in stark discrepancy with the difficult social and economic perspectives of the settlers in the Knin region. It seemed that settlers should forget their daily sorrows in order to live for the greater idea of the Croatian nation.
In early 2001, only some months before local elections were held, the local Catholic Caritas of Knin launched a welfare campaign which addressed the socio-economic as well as national problems of the Knin region under the slogans “fight the hunger in Knin” and “for survival” (opstanak). At this time, it tried to give not only spiritual but also material support to “hungry Croats” living in Knin. Other Catholic institutions responded to the Caritas appeal and expressed their solidarity with the Croatian settlers by praying for the allegedly poverty-stricken Croatian families, by collecting donations and visiting Knin to preach to the Catholic congregation. The bishop of the Šibenik diocese, Ante Ivas, for example supported the Croatian settlers in their claims by referring to the “divine” rights of the Croats in Knin. He declared:

*God the Father gives His people land and a homeland in which they should live freely. So that they will live honourably on their land and in their homeland ... You have the right to a worthy human life, here in Knin in Croatia. You dear and troubled families, dear children and dear young ones. Jesus Christ offers this to you, He who is the foundation of every human dignity and human right. You have the right to a human dwelling. You have the right to a piece of land, to your free homeland, to your nation, to your language, the right to express yourself and to vote ...* (Glasnik Sv. Ante 2001: 17–19).

According to the bishop, rights to housing, land, language, free expression and a free vote were granted by God. At the same time, he makes clear that in saying that God ‘gives his people land’, he is talking of Croats, not Serbs or Muslims.

Many of the Croatian settlers living in Knin were very positive about the fact that the Catholic Church had finally brought their miserable living conditions to public attention. Having felt neglected by the international organisations, which had mainly supported Serbs, and ignored by the government and ‘the state’ in general, they hoped that the charity campaign would help them to improve their situation. The solidarity shown by other Croats and Catholic institutions across Croatia encouraged many Croatian settlers to feel incorporated into the Croatian national community and cared for by the Catholic Church, which made them feel secure and nourished the hope for a better future. This emotional and spiritual support was for many of them even more important than the material help offered by the Church.

Following such political developments and heartfelt actions, in the local elections held in summer 2001 most citizens of Knin gave an ethnic vote and the HDZ managed to stay in power. In addition, the fact that Serbs once again represented a considerable demographic force, and two Serbian parties had been established and took part in the elections, made many Croats worry and rallied them behind Croatian national parties. For the Croatian settlers, a further reason to vote HDZ was that the party had given them the chance to settle in Croatia after the war, and had issued them Croatian travel documents and the right to (temporarily) occupy Serbian homes. Fearing they would lose these rights, settlers tended to vote for Croatian national parties. The majority of Serbs, on the other hand, were deeply frustrated with the ‘Croatian’ parties, which had failed to commit themselves fully to the implementation of Serbian civil rights, and voted therefore for Serbian parties.
Some new reasons to hope, and some to despair: Political changes and their local effects from 2003 up to now

At the governmental elections in November 2003, power changed hands once more. The passionate dispute concerning the cost of the war, and also the discontent over the slowness with which the economic situation was improving, negatively affected the SDP-led government, and the HDZ once again became the strongest party in the parliament. With Ivo Sanader at the helm, who had been the deputy foreign minister in the 1990s, the HDZ presented itself however in a reformed way. It seemed as if they had given up their “grand plan” of national engineering in Croatia, or that this plan was at least considered less important than before, and that the HDZ was willingly changing in a more civil direction.

Contrary to the original supposition of the international community, the HDZ continued the four-point policy begun by the SDP government, to comply with EU demands to improve conditions for the return of Serbs and also in the question of cooperation with the ICTY. The most powerful motivation behind these policies continued to be the aspiration to be accepted into the EU as soon as possible. Moreover, instead of making a coalition with the ultra-nationalists, Sanader signed a pact with the opposition SDSS (Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka, or Independent Democratic Serbian Party), led by Milorad Pupovac and Vojislav Stanimirović. The SDSS saw in this pact the chance to share in power in Croatia and, in this way, to push for the return of the Serbs (Rozic 2003: 573-574, Grandits 2004). New governmental plans for the improvement of conditions for the return of Serbs followed. Again, they confronted above all the question of housing and property.

These new governmental policies had of course also a strong impact on the local level – and, perhaps surprisingly, mainly in a positive way. The reformed HDZ pressured the local HDZ politicians and the administrations to accept the rights of Serbs and to implement the reformed property laws. In this way, on the local level as well citizenship rights were increasingly reformulated in terms of individual, private and social rights rather than in national terms. The reconstruction of destroyed houses was finally accelerated, and the return of private residential property was implemented. The number of occupied houses, which once stood at 20,000, was reduced to 1,400 by November 2004, and further reduced to 32 cases by February 2006 (IDMC 2006: 5). As this was done largely through the massive creation of alternative housing to provide for the Croatian settlers, who in turn were more open towards the return of Serbs. Furthermore, thanks to the good example from national level politics and thanks to the support of the international organisations, in Knin Croats and Serbs – although still organised in different “national” parties, started to cooperate and to find housing solutions also for the more difficult cases. In this way,

8 While there were still about 80,000 proposals to rebuild houses destroyed in the war, which had not been executed as of 2002, by the end of 2004, this number had been reduced to 17,000 (OSCE 2004, Status Report, no. 15).
the solving of the housing question for most citizens in the Knin region, regardless of their ethnic status, created feelings of security and thus contributed to the improvement of interethnic relations in the Knin region. These are the good news.

However, in the Knin region and partly beyond, there are still also problematic trends which continue since the beginning of the violent transformation period. Up to today, Serbs never regained their rights for former socially owned property and therewith lost a fundamental right which they enjoyed under socialism. This had far-reaching consequences: Since, as mentioned, residential rights for former socially owned property in the cities made up about 70 percent of the housing units (IDMC 2006: 6), the return of Serbs to urban centres was thereby, to a large extent, blocked, cementing ethnic engineering. Half-hearted efforts to provide Serbs who were prepared to return with alternative dwellings remained without result (ICG 2002: 4, 10; OSCE 2003, Status Report No. 13, p. 2; and OSCE 2004, Status Report No. 15, IDMC 2006: 6–7). Croats, on the other hand, who kept their right to use (and later also to achieve) housing rights to former socially owned property, were content with this procedure and found less reasons to rally against Serbs. In this way, the improvement of interethnic relations is also based on the fact that Croats increasingly realised that there is no threat from Serbs any more – as up to today, most of the returnees were elderly and younger hardly returned for good.

In fact, the improvement in the situation as regards private residential property did not lead, in the case of many younger Serbs, to their lasting return. Due to the weak economy in the former war zones, which improved only little in the last years, many of them simply locked their doors once again and returned to exile, or tried to sell or rent their houses (IDMC 2006: 6–7). Those few who had returned and who had hoped that the difficult time would be only a transitional period had increasingly lost the hope that the future will be brighter and that they could establish themselves, not to speak about achieving the standard of living they have had under socialism.

But also most Croats, local Croats and settlers alike, are still struck by the difficult economic situation and struggle with making a living and becoming self-reliant. The fact that in the Knin region most settlers belonged to the lower social strata even before they moved to the region is no help here. However, the hope dies last, and many Croats still prefer to believe in the Catholic Church, the Croatian national idea and the nationalist politicians with their promises rather than losing any faith in the future. In Knin up to this day nationalist parties have the highest ratings.

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9 For data on economic situation in Knin, see Neue Zürcher Zeitung (3 August 2005), p. 3. For data on the general economic situation in the former war zones and especially as regards the discrimination against Serbs in the economic sector, see Human Rights Watch, *Croatia: Broken Promises*, pp. 53–55; and ICG Balkans Report 2003: 11–12.

10 In many cases, Serbs were able to sell their houses to the Agency for the Transfer and Mediation of Property, which again concluded a rental agreement with the settlers. In other cases, the Serbian owners agreed on a rental contract with the Croats living in their houses through the mediation of the Croatian Catholic agency, Caritas. In these cases, Caritas was liable for the rent. See OSCE Mission to Croatia Headquarters 2004, pp. 2, 3.
Conclusion

By looking at the war and especially the post-war period through the lens of social transformations, in this paper I have highlighted the problematic interdependency of national and social rights. The war united the Croatian (and Serbian) population through the means of national homogenisation and by promising social rights and solidarity based on national group-membership. Generally, after the end of war, ethnic engineering continued, and citizenship rights were still transformed according to national criteria. This was especially visible in the form of access to social security, including shelter, which were ideologically as well as practically depending on membership in the ‘right’ national group. It hence differed fundamentally from the socialist concept of citizenship in former Yugoslavia, but also in other socialist countries as for example described by Chris Hann for Hungary. Still, when looking at the post-socialist transformations in the realm of housing rights, it became also clear that the nationalist procedures of occupation and privatisation related to some norms which have been established in socialism, and that these binding elements between post-socialist and socialist times created greater legitimisation.

While belonging to the ‘right’ nation was for many Croats associated with feelings of security, trust and hope for a better future, in the post-socialist, post-war transformation social inequalities increased also inside the national group, and a marginalization of regions took place. Thanks to the settlement program and the subordination of social rights to national rights, in the Knin region, many socially and economically poor Croatian settler families found themselves in one of the most socially and economically marginalized areas of Croatia and became fully dependent on the state. In a way, they experienced the divergence between the ideological view of this nationalisation project on the one hand and the difficult reality of everyday life in the poor regions on the other. Hope began to be scattered.

When the international community started to pressure the Croatian state to adhere to civil rights for Serbs and diminish the national rights of Croats, settlers felt disappointed and increasingly insecure. However, instead of criticising the nationalist concept, many of them reacted with increased nationalism in order to hold on to their perceived rights. This again was strongly supported by national organisations, first of all the Catholic Church, who appealed to the Croatian national solidarity and gave settlers the feeling of spiritual security. For the Catholic Church as well as many settlers, hope was at that time still very much bound to the future of the Croatian nation state, which stood often in discrepancy with future perspectives of the individual settlers which could not make a living in Knin. Other settlers who could, moved out of the region again – leaving the poorer ones and the concepts of spiritual security offered by the Church behind.

The interethic climate in the Knin region started to improve only after the link between national rights and social rights was cut by power-holders from above and access to housing was based on private property rights and social needs.
However, the way of criticising the “grand plan” of nationalisation by re-evaluating the socialist past, but also the war and the extremes of nationalism, is still far in the Knin region. Without an economic perspective, the formulation of an alternative future is vague for many of its inhabitants.

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