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The Politics of Croatia

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Introduction

Croatia, a country perched at the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe, has a political landscape shaped by a rich interplay of history, culture, conflict, and reform. Since gaining independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, Croatia has undergone a remarkable transformation, becoming a parliamentary republic rooted in democratic principles and the rule of law. The country's political system has evolved through turbulent times, constitutional changes, and the challenges of state-building, yet today stands as a testament to the resilience of its people and institutions.

This book, "The Politics of Croatia: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Croatia," offers a comprehensive exploration of Croatia's political life, from its constitutional framework to the intricacies of daily governance and the forces that continue to shape its democracy. At its core, the Croatian political system rests on the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers, with an additional emphasis on the significance of local and regional self-government. The adoption and periodic amendment of the 1990 Constitution reflect Croatia's efforts to adapt its institutions to changing domestic and international realities.

The chapters ahead take the reader on a journey, beginning with the historical roots that inform Croatia's modern political identity, through the milestones of constitutional development, and into the daily workings of parliament, government, courts, and political parties. Special attention is given to the electoral process, the multi-party system that fosters coalition politics, and the mechanisms put in place to ensure political accountability and citizen participation. By examining both the structures and the individuals that animate Croatian politics, this guide seeks to provide not just a descriptive account, but also insight into the motivations, conflicts, and aspirations of Croatia's political actors.

Croatia's path has not been without its challenges. The legacies of war, the struggle against corruption, economic transitions, and demographic shifts have all left their mark on the country's governance. At the same time, Croatia's accession to the European Union in 2013 and entry into the Eurozone in 2023 have created new opportunities and obligations, further intertwining its domestic policies with broader European currents. The political system is continually shaped by the push and pull of tradition and innovation, nationalism and integration, stability and reform.

Throughout this book, readers will encounter not only the formal institutions of power but also the broader political culture: the way citizenship is experienced, how the media shapes debate, and how societal values are negotiated and contested. The story of Croatian politics is thus not just about politicians and parties, but about

society at large—the evolving relationship between state and citizen, and the pursuit of democratic ideals amidst the realities of the twenty-first century.

By the end of this guide, readers will understand the complex machinery that governs Croatia today, the controversies and debates that fuel its public life, and the prospects and challenges that lie ahead. Whether you are a student, observer, or participant in Croatian affairs, this book provides the essential context and analysis for understanding Croatia's dynamic political system.

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CHAPTER ONE: Tracing the Roots of Croatian Statehood

The story of Croatian politics is a long and winding one, stretching back centuries and deeply intertwined with the broader narrative of Central and Southeast Europe. To understand the present-day political system, we must first delve into the historical foundations that have shaped the Croatian identity and its aspirations for statehood. It's a journey marked by periods of independence, unions with powerful neighbors, and struggles for autonomy, all of which have left an indelible mark on the political consciousness of the nation.

Long before the arrival of the Croats, the territory was inhabited by various groups, including Pannonians and Illyrians in the north and south respectively. The Greeks established colonies along the coast in the 4th century BC, with places like Stari Grad, Vis, and Trogir standing as some of the oldest settlements in modern-day Croatia. The Romans later conquered the entire area, incorporating it into their vast empire and dividing it into the provinces of Illyricum and Pannonia. Christianity gained prominence during the Roman period and became the dominant religion by the 4th century AD.

The arrival of Slavic tribes, including the Croats, in the 7th century marked a pivotal moment. They settled in the areas of Pannonia and Illyricum, establishing their presence and laying the groundwork for future political entities. Early records of a Croatian state began to emerge in the 9th century, and by the 10th century, Croatia had become a kingdom. This early independent kingdom, ruled by native dynasties, lasted for nearly two centuries.

The medieval Croatian kingdom reached its zenith in the 11th century under rulers like Petar Krešimir IV and Demetrius Zvonimir. During this time, the kingdom extended its influence, asserting control over Dalmatian cities and engaging with regional powers like the Byzantine and Bulgarian Empires. This period of independent rule is a cornerstone of the Croatian historical narrative and a key reference point for later claims of statehood continuity.

However, the 12th century saw a significant shift. Following a succession crisis, the Croatian crown passed to the Árpád dynasty of Hungary in 1102. The precise nature of this union has been a subject of historical debate, with some viewing it as a personal union based on agreement, while others emphasize Hungarian force. Regardless of the exact terms, Croatia entered into a long period of association with Hungary, which would last until 1918.

Despite being part of the Hungarian Kingdom, Croatia maintained a degree of autonomy, retaining its own ruler (Ban) and its assembly (Sabor). The Sabor, as a representative body, played a crucial role in preserving Croatian identity and asserting its rights within the union. This tradition of a distinct political assembly is another enduring element in Croatian political history.

The subsequent centuries were marked by external pressures, most notably from the expanding Ottoman Empire. The threat of Ottoman conquest led the Croatian nobility in 1527 to elect Ferdinand I of Austria to the Croatian throne, thus bringing Croatia under Habsburg rule. This decision, according to the Croatian historical narrative, was a sovereign act by the Sabor to protect the realm.

Croatia was subsequently divided between the Habsburg Monarchy, the Ottoman Empire, and the Venetian Republic during the early modern period. This fragmentation and exposure to different imperial influences contributed to regional differences within Croatia that are still discernible today. The city of Dubrovnik, as the independent Ragusan Republic, also flourished during this time due to its diplomatic prowess.

The 19th century was a period of national awakening across Europe, and Croatia was no exception. Influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution and a desire to resist Germanization and Magyarization efforts, a national movement gained momentum. Key figures worked to standardize the Croatian language and establish national institutions, asserting a distinct Croatian identity. This period saw the increasing use of the Croatian language in administration and education, replacing Latin and challenging the imposition of German or Hungarian.

The revolution of 1848 brought about the fall of the old order and the beginnings of a modern civil state. The Croatian Ban Josip Jelačić played a notable role, siding with the Austrians against the Hungarian revolutionaries. Following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, the Dual Monarchy was created, and Croatian lands were divided, with Civil Croatia becoming part of the Hungarian half and Dalmatia and Istria part of the Austrian half. The Croatian-Hungarian Settlement of 1868 defined the terms of Croatia-Slavonia's autonomy within the Hungarian part of the Monarchy.

World War I led to the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On October 29, 1918, the Croatian Parliament declared independence and decided to join the newly formed State of Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs. This short-lived entity then merged with the Kingdom of Serbia in December 1918 to form the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, later known as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The Croatian Parliament, however, never ratified this union with Serbia and Montenegro, a point that would resonate in future claims of a historical right to independence.

The period within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was marked by political tensions and a

struggle for Croatian autonomy. The centralist policies of the new kingdom and the effective abolition of the Croatian Parliament and historical administrative divisions led to significant dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction fueled Croatian nationalism and movements seeking greater self-determination.

The complexities of the 20th century, including the tumultuous interwar period and World War II, further shaped the political landscape. During World War II, a Nazi-backed puppet state, the Independent State of Croatia (NDH), was established. This regime, led by the fascist Ustaša movement, pursued horrific policies of ethnic cleansing. However, a strong anti-fascist Partisan movement, with significant Croatian participation, emerged in opposition. The political aspirations of the Partisan movement were reflected in the establishment of the State Anti-fascist Council for the National Liberation of Croatia (ZAVNOH) in 1943, which is seen as a bearer of Croatian statehood during this period.

After the end of World War II, Croatia became one of the six constituent republics of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. While this new federation was intended to address the national aspirations of its peoples, a centrally controlled Communist Party and a push for Yugoslav unity often undermined republican autonomy. Tensions over economic centralization and political control simmered throughout the Yugoslav period.

Attempts at reform and decentralization in the 1960s contributed to the "Croatian Spring" of 1969-1971, a movement that sought greater Croatian autonomy and cultural expression. This movement was suppressed by the Yugoslav authorities, leading to purges and trials of Croatian politicians and intellectuals. Despite the repression, the desire for greater autonomy persisted and was reflected in the 1974 Yugoslav constitution, which granted republics more rights within the federation, albeit still under single-party control.

The late 1980s saw the weakening of communist control and the rise of nationalist movements across Yugoslavia. In Croatia, this period was marked by increasing political confrontation and a growing demand for sovereignty. The first multi-party elections were held in 1990, leading to the victory of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). This election and the subsequent constitution of the first democratic Parliament on May 30, 1990, are considered a symbolic beginning of the process towards an independent and democratic state. This date is now celebrated as Statehood Day in Croatia.

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