
From Zvonimir Boban to Hajdučko Beer

As Croatia heads towards its first winter as a member of the European Union, two images seem timely to summarize the arc of Croatia's transition. The first is of Zvonimir Boban kicking a Yugoslav police officer during a Dynamo Zagreb – Red Star Belgrade football game in 1990. The second image is the Carlsberg Beer campaign producing a “Hajdučko” beer only sold in Dalmatia, Croatia's southern coastal region. This article will look at this arc, suggesting that what started in 1990 with a moment of proud and violent national independence has come now to a complex and uneven integration into the European Union (E.U). These images, one from 1990, before independence and one from the year that Croatia entered the E.U., suggest that the process of transition is not defined by clear starts and ends. It did not start with the rupture of independence nor does it end in normalization through E.U. accession.

The football match between Dynamo Zagreb and Red Star Belgrade, and perhaps even more specifically Boban's flying kick, has been held up as the unofficial start of the Yugoslav war. At the very least, it is one of the early public displays of intense hostility that was building between parts of the Yugoslav society. The game was interrupted by massive confrontations between the fan groups of both teams. The pre-meditated violence spilled onto the pitch as supporters on both sides tore down the fence between them and the pitch. Police attempted to quell the violence with tear gas, water cannons and by physically restraining people. At one moment in this chaos, Boban ran to the defense of a Dynamo fan and kicked out at the Yugoslav police officer in the process. A small struggle ensued, but both Boban and the fan managed to escape the police. Witnessing this on the pitch, Dynamo fans began singing Boban's name.

Boban, I would argue, thus became the first hero of Croatian national independence from Yugoslavia. As in all Ex-Yugoslav states, independence was forged through opposition to new enemies outside and inside the nation. If Boban's kick is a quintessential image in the nationalist

narrative of Croatian independence from Yugoslavia, then Hajdučko Pivo is perfectly analogous for Croatian integration in the E.U. The trick is how this beer is promoted: to capitalize on a niche market with minimal effort. The use of a Hajduk – a historical name for a freedom fighter throughout the Balkan region – in the name suggests strength and independence. Yet it is a Danish, thus foreign beer using local lore to sell more of its products.

It was also promoted in a really specific way. Every liter sold during the 2012-13 football season triggered a 1 Kuna (about €0.15; and one liter costs the consumer around 30 Kuna) donation by Carlsberg Brewery to Hajduk Split football team. In this way it can be seen as just a sponsorship deal. However, what sets this sponsorship apart is that Hajduk Split was facing insolvency. In this way, Carlsberg devised a deal for the duration of the 2012-13 season that was contingent on the consumption of their product. This way the relationship between the sponsor and the target audience, the fan, is less abstract than a name on a shirt; the fans are thus kindly encouraged to drink up. In practical terms there is no reason to be cynical about this, as a whole season of fans drinking the beer generated around €40,000 for the club.

While the benefits have been tangible, if small, equally important is what this suggests about independence and the terms of the Croatian integration into the European and global economy. Croatia staked its independence claims on the Federal government hampering its ability to develop and, like Slovenia, they resented sending taxes to Belgrade, only for them to be redistributed to places like Kosovo and Macedonia.

Yet 23 years after independence, Croatia has entered the E.U., and the Hajdučko beer offers a timely image for the hollowness of the nationalist victory and the conditions under which Croatia is entering the E.U. The economics of transition have led to immense wealth accumulation by a few individuals in all of the Ex-Yugoslav countries, but the economies are generally struggling. Of course, before the war the economic situation in Yugoslavia was already dire, with massive debts and an International Monetary Fund (IMF) negotiated austerity program. In this context, independence was debated partly argued on the republics having control over their finances, rather than the federal government in Belgrade. In all cases, however, it proved rather untrue.

Slovenia creeps along financially with some industry and tourism, but may yet be forced into a bail-out from the Troika (European Central Bank, European Commission and the IMF) because of

banking debts. The impact of financial institutions such as Moodys has largely forced Slovenia into self-imposed austerity measures, often with the justification of appeasing international financial markets. Croatia similarly lives off of tourism, and its limited industrial and agricultural sectors. While it may not have the kind of banking problems of Slovenia, a largely privatized economy has limited the options of the state in dealing with any future financial problems. Moreover, the adoption of E.U. regulations, particularly in agriculture, has put many Croatians at a competitive disadvantage to their European counter-parts. Small-scale fishers, for example, are faced with the large costs of changing all their nets to meet E.U. standards. While these nets were designed for Atlantic fishing and do not take into account the smaller fish of the Adriatic, the cost will force many to sell their business. As of the past summer, the most likely buyers were Italian companies, which have had multiple years head start on adapting to the E.U. rules. Meanwhile, Croatian football teams are being bailed out by European corporations who tell fans that the way to save their traditions is to consume beer that is itself a kind of illusion: a Carlsberg in Hajduk colors.

The independence and transition process in the region has been highly problematic, involving years of war, the physical and bureaucratic erasure of people, and the destruction of community. In such a complex process, two limited and fairly specific images presented here are always going to leave more questions than answers. They do however propose a more complex view, one that goes beyond seeing it as starting with independence and ending with E.U. accession. These images suggest that there are still questions to be asked of independence, the transition and the nationalism that accompanied these processes, not just in Croatia but in all of the Ex-Yugoslav states. Boban after all, left Croatia less than a year after his famous kick to go play for A.C. Milan. He made millions and avoided the war.

By David Brown