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## PRO-NAZI NOSTALGIA FLOURISHES UNDER NEW CROATIA GOVERNMENT

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29.04.2016

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EurActiv

Nostalgia for a pro-Nazi past, spurning of ethnic minorities and pressure on the press: Croatian activists say an alarming climate of intolerance is taking hold under a new conservative government.

Since the ruling coalition took power in the European Union country in January, critics say authorities have turned a blind eye □ and even contributed to □ concerns over a far-right right surge.

Last week, in response, angry Jewish, ethnic Serb and anti-fascist groups refused to attend a ceremony remembering tens of thousands who died at Jasenovac, the most notorious concentration camp under Croatias pro-Nazi Ustasha regime during World War II.

The boycott was a brave and correct decision in the face of the wave of neo-fascist Ustasha nostalgia which is sweeping Croatia, said Efraim Zuroff at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an international Jewish rights organisation.

Although the Ustashes so-called Independent State of Croatia was a Nazi puppet state □ killing hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Jews, Roma and others □ their modern sympathisers see them as the countrys founding fathers.

The downplaying of their atrocities has existed for years, but in a different intensity, historian Tvrtko Jakovina told AFP.

It has now penetrated cabinet ministers and the mainstream media.

Among the controversial appointments to the new government was that of Zlatko Hasanbegović, a historian and alleged Ustasha sympathiser, as culture minister.

A new documentary about the Jasenovac death camp, slammed by Jews as an attempt to revise Croatias dark past, was praised by Hasanbegović as the best way to finally shed light on many controversial parts of Croatias history.

**Fascism and football**

Prime Minister Tihomir Orešković was criticised for failing to react at a March football match against Israel when chants of the Ustasha salute Za dom spremni! (Ready for the homeland!) rang out in the stadium.

A day later the government condemned symbols of totalitarian regimes, without clearly singling out the Ustasha.

The state is simply not doing anything \* and does not want to prevent a far-right revival, said Ognjen Kraus, leader of Croatias Jewish community.

Eventually both Orešković and President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović specifically condemned the Usthas crimes, when the US special envoy for Holocaust issues paid a visit earlier this month.

Observers have likened Croatias rightward shift to those in other parts of Eastern Europe, namely Hungary led by strongman Viktor Orbán and Poland under the conservative Law and Justice party, which swept to power in October.

But while these leaders were decisively elected, Croatias main conservative party, the HDZ, failed to win a November election outright and embarked on weeks of horse-trading to cobble together a coalition.

Political scientist Zarko Puhovski suggested the new government, which also lacks a genuine economic programme to boost fragile growth, was using a strong nationalist ideology to create an illusion of a political victory.

Respect for minority rights was a key condition for Croatias entry to the EU in 2013, but the leader of Croatias ethnic Serbs, Milorad Pupovac, has repeatedly warned of an atmosphere of intolerance.

Milijan Brkić, a top HDZ official, responded last month that Pupovac should go where he would not be in danger if he felt at risk.

A local television journalist had in January warned citizens of Zagreb, notably mothers with children, to be careful while walking near a Serb Orthodox church to ensure priests would not kill them.

When a temporary ban was imposed on the channel for hate speech, thousands took the streets in protest — some of them again chanting the Ustasha salute, with no intervention from police.

### **Weakening secularity**

The governments press office denied what it said were false and politicised allegations, telling AFP it had strongly condemned totalitarian slogans and all forms of expression that promote or encourage hate speech and intolerance.

But journalists are also worried □ particularly after HDZ deputy Zeljko Glasnović described the media as the biggest obstacle to a true democracy.

Prominent satirical writer Ante Tomić was assaulted in the coastal city of Split last month, in an attack condemned by the European Federation of Journalists.

But the culture minister said the case reminds us of the importance of responsibility for words

spoken and written in public.

The head of Croatia's agency regulating electronic media also quit last month, citing political pressure.

In the realm of education, Zagreb University students protested after a cooperation agreement was planned between the philosophy faculty — considered a bastion of liberal thought — and the Catholic theological faculty.

The deal, since put on hold, was seen as an attempt to boost the influence of the Church, considered a symbol of national identity and traditionally aligned with the HDZ.

It would be a step towards further weakening of secularity in Croatia, said Iva, 20, a sociology student.

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