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Croatia's European Success Story

On 1st of July this year, Croatia, the youngest European Union member state celebrates 10 years of membership in the EU. In the first decennial anniversary of membership, this small Mediterranean Country gradually achieved remarkable success in crossing the various stages of integration and on 1st January 2023 gained membership of both the Eurozone and Schengen area, something that was never achieved in the history of the EU, to attain these two important milestones on the same day. Due to its dedication and achievements, Croatia can be seen as a true European success story as it has come a long way from a war torn Country fighting for independence in the 90s, to a poster child of European integration only 30 years later. Today, Croatia is one of the 15 Countries in the world, which are at the same time members of the EU, NATO, Schengen and Eurozone.

The Historical context

Croatia's turbulent history is pretty much defined by its long desired goal of independence during different historical periods and being part of various empires and state communities. Throughout these periods, the Croatian nation, regardless if independent or incorporated, constantly displayed national and political subjectivity¹.

The so-called Croatia's short 20th century from the end of 1918 to 1991 is marked by the existence of the two Yugoslav states that Croatia was a part of. The first one being (a) monarchical and capitalist, which lasted until 1941. The second one created after the 2nd World war, was dominated by the communist party and Josip Broz Tito until 1991. In the short 20th century, the center of gravity was further east, so the Croatian interests were subordinated to those of the Yugoslavs. Nonetheless, within the framework of Yugoslavia, Croatia continued to develop its own potential and, occasionally, to express its own political goals³. However, after the fall of the Berlin wall, un-

like other eastern European Countries, Croatia's road to independence and the realization of first the Croatian, and then the European dream, had to be fought with great sacrifice and determination.

Let Croatia be one of Europe's stars

Just like Ukraine in 2022, in the summer of 1991 Croatia was brutally attacked and had to start to defend its people and its territory in the Homeland war against the aggressor, Serbia and the Yugoslav National army. This quickly turned into a bloody war fought until 1995, when Croatia liberated its territory with the military operation "Storm". In these war years, Croatia was also pursuing a "diplomatic storm"³ and fought for its international recognition. Following a referendum in May 1991, the Declaration of the proclamation of the Sovereign, Independent Republic of Croatia was adopted on 25 June 1991. There followed the adoption of the ruling on the abrogation of public law relations with the remaining republics and provinces of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, i.e. Yugoslavia as an entity, on 8 October 1991. This period was very important for the nation building process and although Croatia had a great number of casualties and suffered a great deal of destruction to its infrastructure in the war, the Homeland war in which Croatia started out as the victim and ended as the winner, is embedded in the current statehood and was a defining force in the move towards EU integration. The Homeland war was a strong unifying factor for the Croatian nation and one of the many songs created at that time to boost national identity entitled "stop the war in Croatia" had a verse which perfectly depicted Croatia's aspirations and the trajectory it wanted to take after independence – Stop the war and let Croatia be one of Europe's stars. The message was clear, Croatia was ready to start its European dream.

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Back to Europe - From SAA to a fully fledged membership

After the end of the war, the period of the late 90s was marked by a slow process of moving towards European integration and little progress was made. After the coalition by the liberal – left in early 2000, the main foreign policy goal of Croatia was to join NATO and the EU, which was continued later by the right wing party. This process also marked the beginning of the “return to Europe” or better said, “leaving the Balkans”. The Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with Croatia was signed in 2001, followed by the formal application to become an EU member in 2003. The positive Avis, i.e. granting the candidate status, was achieved in 2004. Association negotiations began in 2005. One of the conditions that Croatia had to fulfill was also the full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for Ex-Yugoslavia as regards the Croatian generals who were accused of war crimes. Later in the process, in 2012 the Court overturned the convictions of the two Croatian generals Ante Gotovina and Maden Markac and ordered their release, which was another important moment in Croatian history and gave further impetus for EU accession. Accession negotiations were successfully completed on 30th June 2011, despite an initial blockade by Slovenia relating to a dispute over a maritime border around the Piran bay. On 9th December 2011, Croatia signed the Treaty of accession. The referendum on EU accession was held on 22 January 2012 with the turnout of 43.5 %, out of which 66 % voted in favor of joining the Union and 33.1 % was against. Finally, 10 years after submitting its application for EU membership, Croatia joined the EU on the 1st of July 2013, and after Greece in 1981, became the only Country that joined alone.

Croatia’s first EU Council presidency

Another important milestone in Croatia’s EU integration process was holding its first ever Presidency of the Council of the EU, from 1st January to 30th June 2020. Due to Brexit, the order of the rotating presidency was changed and Croatia had to take the Presidency much earlier than expected. This required significant efforts in terms of preparation, logistics and, most important, staffing, as the number of diplomats working in the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union in Brussels had to be almost tripled.

In its presidency programme, under the slogan “A strong Europe in the world of challenges”, Croatia focused on 4 key priorities: A Europe that develops, a Europe that connects, a Europe that protects and an influential Europe⁴. Interestingly, Croatia also put a strong emphasis on sports as a tool to connect people of all generations. As a proud nation of many world class athletes and teams, this was a natural step, as many people associate Croatia with the red and white squares worn on national jerseys by the Croatian athletes. This created a worldwide recognizable brand that was also capitalized on throughout the presidency. The sport successes of Croatian athletes at top events such as the Olympic games since 1992 and football World cups have contributed significantly to a positive image and international recognition of Croatia as a nation that enjoys and celebrates its successes of their national champions.

Managing and executing the Presidency of the Council of the EU can also be seen as a test for new Member States on how ready they are to take the driving seat of the Union. It also shows the maturity, the political and democratic consolidation, as well as the trust of other member states. Only after finishing the EU Presidency, can a Member State pass the test of fully-fledged internal integration. Croatia had to cope with the unprecedented disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and make important decisions at a time of crisis. Croatia’s administration had to quickly adapt to the new environment and get to grips with the virtual setting and meetings held via online platforms. For the first time in the history of the EU, negotiations and trilogues were held online and some successful deals were made in this new environment. However, many, if not all, planned events had to be cancelled, as travels were replaced by lockdowns.

In terms of the achievements and especially taking into account all the circumstances, the Croatian presidency can be seen as a successful one. As the youngest EU member, Croatia showed that even in times of crises like Brexit and the Covid -19 pandemic, its leadership and capability to lead was proven, adopting the role of a leader of the Union at times of hardship. Some of the biggest achievements of Croatia’s presidency were the decision to launch accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, the Zagreb EU-Western Balkan Summit and an orderly Brexit. The Next Croatian presidency of the Council of the EU will most probably coincide with the 20th

anniversary of Croatia joining the EU in 2023, which will be another important anniversary to mark and celebrate.

Europeanisation through EU funds and stages of integration

The transformative power of the EU can be seen in a lot of processes and many areas in Croatia, but the factor that has influenced the Europeanisation of Croatia the most, is the that of EU funds and projects financed with the assistance of the EU⁵. After programmes like CARDS and PHARE, IPA, Croatia's allocation of EU assistance increased significantly and already in the 2nd half of 2013, after joining, Croatia had over 600 million EUR at its disposal to spend. From the perspective of programming, between 2014 – 2020 Croatia was allocated around 1 billion Euros per year. By investing in skilled and well paid civil servants, Croatia built a strong foundation of structures that were able to cope with the cumbersome procedures, conditionality and all kinds of rules related to the usage of EU funds. From programming, implementation, monitoring, certification, reporting, an army of civil servants and bodies had to be created on multiple levels, including National, regional and local, and partly through learning by doing, they managed to create a robust, accountable and reliable system of state administration that accomplished remarkable results in EU funds absorption. This is seen especially in the area of transport, where one of the recently finished projects – the Peljesac bridge, which is now connecting the divided territory of the Republic of Croatia, shows how EU funds are changing Croatia for the better, having a direct connection to the lives of its citizens, showcasing the fact that the effects of EU membership are diverse, but also visible and tangible. Joining Eurozone and Schengen on 1st January 2023 completes Croatia's determination of full integration and opens new opportunities for fully utilizing the untapped potential of the EU common market and the 4 EU freedoms.

Croatia in relation to Ukraine, the Western Balkans and the future enlargement

Croatia's 10 years in the European Union also marks the longest period that has passed between the enlargement cycles since 1973, when the UK, Denmark and Ireland joined the EU. Therefore the year 2023

also marks a half century since the 1973 enlargement. It also marks two decades since the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, where the leaders were affirming unequivocally that 'the future of the Balkans is within the European Union'. Since then, some of the Western Balkan countries have backslided significantly and have generally developed a certain apathy towards enlargement. Therefore it is safe to say that before the war in Ukraine started, enlargement was dormant or almost dead. It went from fatigue to ignorance and beyond. But the unprovoked and unjustified aggression of Russia towards Ukraine changed a lot in the processes, the policy and the revival of enlargement.

On 23 June 2022, the European Council granted candidate status to Ukraine⁶. Western Balkan Countries which have been in the waiting room for almost two decades, also felt the momentum building up, and some of them stepped up their assertiveness a little and important milestones were reached, such as granting candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, opening negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania and even prompting an official request for candidacy from Kosovo, showing that enlargement is back in the game. This is very important for Croatia as a direct neighbor to the Western Balkan Countries.

With its current policies, Croatia is putting enlargement and its role as facilitator in the enlargement process high on the agenda. This is particularly important for Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is often referred to as the most important Croatian neighbor. Acquis transposition, the opening and closing of negotiation chapters, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights are all the areas where Croatia's empirical examples can be of extreme value for all the candidate countries. Croatia's unique experience of joining the EU could be channeled through programmes like TAIEX, Twinning, Centres of excellence etc.

Regarding Ukraine, its recovery and rebuilding, Croatia is one of its strongest supporters in terms of its political, financial, humanitarian and military assistance. As a country which experienced aggression and destruction, Croatia is the only member state which can fully relate to Ukraine's current position. With its relatively recent war and post-war experience, Croatia can also serve as an example and share

its best practices in the area of peaceful reintegration of occupied territories.

Conclusion

10 years after membership, as a fully integrated EU Member state, Croatia has all the preconditions to serve as a role model, as a benchmark and as an inspiration to aspiring applicants of the Western Balkans and Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Croatia's success story offers unequivocal proof that enlargement not only works, but is also definitely worth it. As a new member of Schengen and Eurozone, Croatia is becoming much more attractive for investors and also much more easily reachable for tourists as there are no more border controls. Croatia has yet

to reap all the benefits of full integration through revenues from tourism but also through foreign direct investments. It has yet to fully absorb and spend the vast allocation of funds from the European Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) equaling €6.3 billion in grants, plus an additional €3.6 billion in potential loans. This is an incredible and historical opportunity for Croatia to further strengthen its economy and increase the life quality of its citizens by investing in meaningful projects. With smart and responsible policies, Croatia could, in the next 10 years, become not only a regional leader and an example of EU membership for aspiring applicants, but also a reliable and stable EU actor with a strong voice in future enlargements, showcasing that EU membership is truly transformative.

Footnotes

- 1 Croatia – the land and its people – the Miroslav Krleža institute of lexicography in association with the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb 2019.
- 2 The History of Croatia between Periodisation and Problematisation , Tvrtko Jakovina
- 3 Diplomatic Storm is the name of the book written by Mr Mate Granic, the Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Homeland war.
- 4 Programme of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union
- 5 Dalibor Dvorny, EU funds as an instrument of Europeanization: Croatian experience with strategic planning and policy evaluation, IJU/IPSA International Conference, Public Administration in a Democratic Society: Thirty Years of Democratic Transition in Europe; Dubrovnik, 3-6 October 2019
- 6 Ukraine - Consilium (europa.eu)

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 2. From the Lisbon Strategy to Europe 2020 , Institute for International Relations – IMO, Zagreb, 2010
 3. Croatia's Presidency of the European Union and the Western Balkans - A new Momentum or a Missed Opportunity?, Tihomir Cipek
 4. EU funds as an instrument of Europeanization: Croatian experience with strategic planning and policy evaluation, IJU/IPSA International Conference, Public Administration in a Democratic Society: Thirty Years of Democratic Transition in Europe; Dubrovnik, 3-6 October 2019, Dalibor Dvorny
 5. The History of Croatia between Periodisation and Problematisation , Tvrtko Jakovina
 6. The presidency of the Council, COVID -19 and Croatia. What do they have in common? , Marcela Barcakova
 7. To Europe and back- The Croatian EU accession process and its outcomes, Darko Seperic
 8. Croatia's preparation for EU Accession, Visnja Samardzija, The wiiw Balkan Observatory, Working papers 032
 9. Programme of the Croatian Presidency of the Council of the European Union
 10. (Ir)relevance of Croatian experience for further EU enlargement, Senada Selo Sabic.
- Croatia – the land and its people – the Miroslav Krleža institute of lexicography in association with the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, Zagreb 2019.