



Weekly Briefing

**Croatia external relations briefing:
A year in review – foreign policy in Croatia in 2018
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A year in review – foreign policy in Croatia in 2018

Summary

The year 2018 has not seen any major shifts in Croatian foreign policy making. A number of initiatives were made in relation to developments in neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting a focus on this country Croatian government officially proclaimed. Serbia and Slovenia, two other neighboring countries, were also part of foreign policy activities in 2018. More broadly, Croatia took part in different foreign policy discussions at the European Union level related to migration, Russia, and other topics.

Foreign policy making in Croatia

Croatian Constitution stipulates that foreign policy is co-created by the President of the Republic and the government. Another area where both have executive power is defense and security. Therefore, duality in foreign policy making is entrenched in the Croatian political system and is an explanation why sometimes there are different foreign policy messages and initiatives coming from Croatia, giving an image that the country does not have a unified stance on a number of foreign policy issues. This is not unique as there are other countries whose officials voice different views on foreign policy issues.

To understand Croatian foreign policy, one also has to take into account personal propensities for certain issues and ideological positions of officials who create foreign policy. For example, since the last general elections in Croatia in 2016, Croatia had two ministers of foreign affairs, both from the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the Christian Democratic party which leads the Croatian government. However, the selection of issues on which the two ministers concentrated and the style and content of their public statements appear as if the two ministers steered Croatian foreign policy in different directions.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

One foreign policy topic where both the President and the Prime Minister, representing the government, have almost a unison position on foreign policy is neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH). They both underline that Croatia has an interest and the right to assist

Bosnian Croats who make one out of three constituent peoples in BH (the fourth category are the Others, not being either Bosniaks, Serbs or Croats). The claim on the right to assist the Bosnian Croats is made on the basis of two arguments. One is that Croatia is a co-signatory of the Dayton Peace Agreement, a blueprint on which the current Bosnia and Herzegovina's political system is based. The other argument is that Croatian officials have a duty to protect Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina because the Croatian Constitution stipulates that Croatia has a duty to protect Croats living outside the country. However, both claims are challenged by Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as some other countries. Namely, Croatia is a co-signatory to the Dayton Peace Agreement because it was, just as Serbia, involved in the Bosnian war which was ended by the Peace Agreement. Furthermore, the duty that stems from the Croatian Constitution does not oblige others outside Croatia to respect it. Therefore, it will remain a challenge for Croatia to frame its discourse towards a neighboring country if it continues to use these two arguments.

In the course of the last few years, Croatian officials have been drawing attention in Europe and in the United States to the position of Bosnian Croats which they see as being marginalized and disempowered in the current Bosnian-Herzegovinian system, in particular in the Federation of BH, one of the two entities which comprise the BH state. Croatian Members of the European Parliament (EP) initiated a resolution adopted by the EP which asks for equality of all in BH and supports federalism as an acceptable principle to organize a country. Although Croatian officials defended these resolutions and a series of other statements by arguments that its intention is to help Bosnia and Herzegovina become a more stable and functional state, a number of BH officials criticized these initiatives as an intervention in internal affairs of a neighboring state.

The last general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina took place in October 2018. One of the elected members of a three-member Presidency is a Bosnian Croat, but not the representative of the largest Bosnian Croat political party, BH HDZ, a sister party of the ruling HDZ in Croatia. In the election campaign, numerous Croatian officials, including the Prime Minister and the President, gave support to the President of the BH HDZ as a member of the BH Presidency. The fact that he was not elected was interpreted in Croatia as another proof that Croats in BH cannot elect their own representatives and that the election law has to be changed.

The reaction from BH was expected. A number of politicians dismissed Croatian criticism and displayed further discontent with the neighboring state. The Croatian Parliament adopted in December 2018 a Declaration on the position of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina

with a majority of 81 for, 11 against, and five MPs abstained. Since the Croatian Parliament has 151 seats, it is obvious that many MPs did not show up for voting.

The official line in Croatia remains that it will continue to press the international community and use means at its disposal to protect the Bosnian Croats and initiate changes for the election law in BH in a way that fulfills the interests of Bosnian Croats.

The rest of the neighborhood

Shifting away from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatian foreign policy interest remains in the neighborhood. In the course of 2018, Croatia directed some of its activities towards Serbia and Slovenia, both neighbors, as well as Hungary.

A border dispute between Slovenia and Croatia was not resolved in 2018 and, judging from the statements of Croatian officials, it will not be resolved in any near future. It looks as if Croatia is of opinion that it is better to leave the issue of border settlement to a favorable moment in some distant future rather than trying to open it any time soon. From the Croatian perspective there is no need to rush into final border demarcation. The argument for this position is that there are a number of countries in the world, also in Europe, which do not have finally settled borders and which, despite this, cooperate without any problem with their neighbors. A temporary regime has been respected for decades and, according to Croatia, there is no obstacle to its continued application pending the final demarcation.

Slovenia takes a different position. It wants the implementation of the arbitration decision on the border between Croatia and Slovenia or some other agreement that would, de facto, represent an act of the implementation of the arbitration decision.

The arbitration procedure on the border between the two countries was made in 2017 and Slovenia initiated legislative changes anticipating the implementation of the decision. Since Croatia did not, Slovenia put the matter to the European Commission which decided that it was not a body to arbitrate between the two member states. After this decision, Slovenia sued Croatia at the European Union court in Luxembourg. The first hearing took place in September 2018. It remains to be seen what the Court will decide.

However, this situation burdens relations between the two neighboring states and there is little likelihood that relations will improve, judging from the Slovenian side, until the border is finally settled.

Serbia is another neighbor with whom Croatia has difficult relations. There are a number of open issues between the two countries mostly stemming from the war in the 1990s. Serbia is a candidate state for EU membership and Croatia has a say in deciding if it is successfully meeting the criteria for membership.

In an effort to improve relations, Croatia President invited Serbian President who came in an official visit in February 2018. His visit revealed different views on relations with Serbia held by the President and the government. The Prime Minister met very briefly with the Serbian President, leaving to the President to be a chief host. Both Presidents gave conciliatory statements and the Croatian President accepted to visit Belgrade in the course of the year.

In April 2018, during an official visit to Serbia, the Speaker of the Croatian Parliament was verbally attacked by a sentenced war criminal and a member of the Serbian Parliament. This incident easily damaged precarious relations between the two neighboring states. The reaction in Croatia was strong and the President cancelled her intended visit to Serbia. Since this incident, however, there has been relative calm on both sides. For the rest of the year both sides tried to steer clear from each other's path, probably in an attempt not to further aggravate already very tense relations.

Relations with Hungary, another neighboring state, do not stem from the common Yugoslav past, but are the result of events that took place since Croatia became an independent state. The purchase of the Croatian oil company INA by the Hungarian MOL was found to be tainted by corruption for which the Croatian court in 2012 sentenced in a first instance ruling the former Croatian Prime Minister. The appeal procedure asked for a renewal of the trial. In the meantime, the international arbitration of INA-MOL decided in 2017 to rule in favor of MOL. This was a big blow to Croatia who still requests an extradition of the former MOL director. Hungary is vehemently opposing this request and asks Croatia to withdraw the European arrest warrant. Croatia did not do so, but in November 2018, when the voting in the European Parliament on Hungary took place, Croatia's conservative MEPs voted against a resolution which criticizes Hungary for undermining democratic standards and is responsible for other breaches of European values. These MEPs explained that they voted against this resolution because they would like to improve neighborly relations between the two states. If this will pay off, remains to be seen. Hungary, after that, announced that it would withdraw its earlier objection for Croatia to join the OECD.

Conclusion

The year 2018 has seen plentiful events, but in summary none of them exceeded the usual level of activities in any regular year. Among else, in March 2018 the Croatian government declared one Russian diplomat in Zagreb a ‘persona non grata’, in solidarity with the United Kingdom and following the Salisbury attack for which the UK accused Russia. On migration issues, the discourse seems to be steadily shifting to more restrictive views on migration. Croatia seems to be aligning itself with a number of European countries which view migration primarily as a security issue. After the President decided not to travel to Marrakesh in December 2018 to adopt the declaration on regulating legal migration, a heated debate in the country ensued. However, in the end this did not deter the government to send the Minister of Interior to Marrakesh where he supported the Declaration.

The crux of foreign policy activities, as seen from this brief review, shows that Croatia is largely focused on its immediate neighborhood. Other issues also come on the agenda but with much less capacity or appetite to be pursued.

One has to note that currently, all three key officials in the country – the Speaker of the Parliament, the President of the Republic and the Prime Minister – are all former diplomats. They all nurture interest for foreign policy and will remain active actors in shaping Croatian foreign policy in the year to come.