



## **Weekly Briefing**

**Croatia external relations briefing:**  
**The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on foreign relations of Croatia**  
**Benjamin Petrović**


### **China-CEE Institute**

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin

Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 [office@china-cee.eu](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)

 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# **The effect of COVID-19 pandemic on foreign relations of Croatia**

## **Summary**

*When predicting the main points of focus regarding the foreign policy of Croatia in 2020, the emphasis revolved around Croatia's presiding over the Council of the European Union in the first half of the year. With the task of serving as a representative of the Council before other EU institutions, non-member states, international actors and civil society organizations, Croatia is currently facing an important responsibility when it comes to its international presentation. Yet, as the world deals with the growing expansion of a global pandemic in the shape of the COVID-19 virus, international organizations, national governments and other key actors are shifting their view towards providing the right measures in preserving public health, but also economic flows.*

## **Croatia's position in European Union's institutional framework**

At the time of writing, Croatia has entered its fourth month of presiding over the Council of the European Union, and taking into account the fact that the global pandemic COVID-19 has disrupted the global state of play, Croatia has been doing quite a solid job. With the high level arrangement of various meetings of ministers from member states and other institution representatives and delegates, Croatian Government, led by the Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, has positioned itself as a solid mediator in addressing key designated issues for the incoming period: the adoption of Multiannual Financial Framework, full implementation of European Pillar of Social Rights, the fight against climate change and negative demographic trends and the EU enlargement on Western Balkans, which would be discussed at the Zagreb EU-Western Balkans Summit scheduled for May 2020.

But as the COVID-19 virus kept on spreading across the country, with a growing toll of infected and deceased population, a shattering earthquake in the capital city of Zagreb, and urgent economic reforms needed to maintain stability of national economy, Croatian presiding found itself in front of the challenge which would require measures that would affect its foreign relations. At the moment of writing there are 1222 infection cases in Croatia, with 16 fatalities and 130 cured patients. As the world reaches a number of 1 286 294 infected and 70 446 losses of lives, strict safety and contagion measures are implemented on a global level. In various

degrees, according to the specific situations, countries are organizing quarantines, banning travel between municipalities, gatherings of larger groups, and urging their citizens to stay at home, all in order to achieve containment of the Novel coronavirus. International organizations, such as the European Union, found themselves paralyzed, facing the impossibility of arranging meetings and implementing policy strategies in the times when states are focused on unilateral decision making according to their specific needs and assessments. Nevertheless, international actors should not be written out as significant factors in terms of providing guidelines and a unified approach to various issues, with necessary adaptability. They could position themselves as not only voices of solidarity, but pilots steering the course of decision making processes towards the right choices.

### **Challenges and initiatives**

One of the essential challenges in facing various security measures while presiding over the Council of the European Union, was organization of different meeting on the levels of ministers representing various departments. Even though the EU procedures require personal presence of certain ministers in Luxembourg or in Brussels, the undertaken safety precautions make that unviable, therefore, Croatia suggested a temporary solution which implies establishment of online meetings for ministers, while the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER) will proceed with meetings in designated locations.

Moreover, still in January, as a primary measure of precaution, Croatian presidency activated EU's framework mechanism for coordination of crises at the highest political level and between its institutions. The IPCR or Integrated political crisis response mechanism is being used in an information sharing mode, to enable the members states, their leaders and EU institutions to work in an orderly manner, without significant delays and ensure that all the valuable information is shared on time. With addition to that, in line with the solution of arranging video conferences as a way of communication, Croatian presidency organised a number of online meetings between the ministers of health, in order to successfully coordinate the medical aspects of the pandemic implications on the level of EU.

Another important issue to tackle on the EU level is protection of member states economies, investment procedures, workers and other aspects of establishing economic stability. In line with that, Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative (CRII) was formed. It implies a package of specific measures and 37 billion euros of investment, aiming at making sure that national economies under the EU are protected by using the reserves of the European

Structural and Investments Funds. The mentioned initiative was immediately followed by a video conference of EU ministers and representatives of the Member States responsible for the Cohesion Policy, organized by the Croatian Minister of Regional Development and EU Funds Marko Pavić, in order to discuss the measures foreseen under the initiative. It was agreed that use of the majority of the remaining European Structural and Investment Funds in areas like health care, entrepreneurship, labour markets and liquidity is needed to overcome the negative effects of COVID-19.

Furthermore, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of May, the European Council members participated in a video conference discussing the COVID-19 outbreak and EU's role as a lighthouse in the time of crisis. Agreeing on the necessity of urgent and effective measures in containing the outbreak of the virus, the leaders of EU member states made several points of reference to their common goals in dealing with the pandemic. The control of EU's external borders proved to be a significant issue before, but now additional measures such as temporary restriction of non-essential travel have been implemented. Joint procurement of medical equipment and increase in testing capacities has been highlighted along with investment into research with funds stemming from the European Innovation Council and the European Investment Bank. The already mentioned challenge of socio-economic consequences will require further mobilization of resources and investments in the coming period, while the enlargement talks with North Macedonia and Albania have resisted the pandemic and proceeded in the desired direction.

### **Addressing repatriation and international aspects**

Another important international aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic was discussed by the EU ministers of foreign affairs in early days of April. Issues such as the coordination of repatriation efforts and consular assistance to EU citizens who find themselves in non-EU countries were analysed, the discussion headed by Gordan Grlić Radman, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Croatia. "We need to continue with consular coordination to help bring stranded EU citizens back home. The Croatian Presidency has been very much engaged on this together with the European External Action Service and the Commission", highlighted the Minister. According to the EU data, as a result of such actions, and coordinated approach of EU institutions, national governments and consulates, more than 350 000 Europeans have been repatriated, with another 250 000 in need of assistance.

Furthermore, ministers of foreign affairs consulted on and stressed areas of global response to the pandemic and the need of being wary of the disinformation. A global crisis such

as the current pandemic requires a unified approach of all the actors, with solidarity and collaboration in finding the best possible solutions, especially in the areas of the world which are in need of additional humanitarian, social and economic aid. The discussion touched upon the use of social media in a way that undermines the value and role of both international organizations and national governments. The false information about the Novel coronavirus and the measures which are being undertaken, are causing fear and panic among citizens who spend a great deal of their time at home browsing social media, looking for information. Also, doubt and a hostile approach towards the upheld measures are presenting the national and international stakeholders as ineffective in their approach.

### **Success in the enlargement process**

Concerning enlargement and association processes of North Macedonia and Albania, the decision to open accession negotiations with the two countries is a good representation on how the Croatian presiding over the Council of the European Union remains operational in spite the time of crisis. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of March, the ministers of European affairs agreed on the decision to open the accession talks with the two Western Balkan countries. Such a decision is significant from several perspectives, primarily further establishing EU, its values and political direction as a main reference point in the troubled region.

The two developing countries, both faced with a history of regional and internal conflict, have presented themselves as ambitious in their goals of identifying with Europe, therefore adopting the necessary political, economic and social measures in line with their national interest. “The Government of the Republic of Croatia is pleased that one of the priorities of the Croatian presidency has been fulfilled; the decision to open negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. This decision is also the result of months-long intense political and diplomatic efforts by the Croatian Government, which has remained steadfast in order to achieve this objective”, stated the Prime Minister Plenković. The adoption of the negotiating framework by the European Commission is the next step before formally opening the negotiations with the two countries.

### **Croatian presence in NATO mission Resolute Support**

Moving away from the European Union aspects of Croatian involvement in the sphere of international relations, it is of value to note another area in which Croatia actively participates

with both implicit and explicit effect on its international positioning. The security and military branch is also facing the repercussions of the COVID-19 virus. In late March, as decided by Damir Krstičević, the Minister of Defence and Vice President of the Government, 105 members of 11<sup>th</sup> contingent of Croatian military, taking part in NATO-led train, advise and assist mission in Afghanistan called Resolute Support, were to be returned to Croatia immediately. The 11<sup>th</sup> contingent is also comprised of military personnel from the armed forces of allied partner countries of Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania.

It must be noted that the mandate of the 11<sup>th</sup> contingent has ended much before and the handover of duties to the 12<sup>th</sup> contingent had been established. The delay of the return of military personnel stems from two interlinked reasons. First, the pandemic caused a global delay in mechanisms to conduct international transport, including of armed forces deployed in various parts of the world. Second, the transport of the Armed Forces of Croatia usually depends on the transport capabilities of allied partners such as Germany and the USA. Unfortunately, Croatian military transport airplane AN-32B has not been used for years which presents itself as a significant blow to the national air force in cases of emergency and unavailability of partners' capacities. At the moment, members of the 12<sup>th</sup> contingent are present in their deployment stations in Afghanistan with all the necessary precaution measures adopted to prevent the infection and spread of COVID-19.

### **The delay of acquisition of fighter jets**

After the multi-year saga of Croatian process of acquiring fighter jets has reached a steady state of gathering tenders from potential partners, the Croatian Minister of Defence, Damir Krstičević announced that the already controversial process, followed by media, experts and general public, will be halted, in line with the potential economic restructuring caused by the implications of COVID-19. Emphasizing the responsibility of the security system in sharing the burden caused by the potential economic disruption, Krstičević urged that the process is not cancelled, but delayed in order to deal with more pressing matters.

Additionally, he announced further measures of savings when it comes to the defence department and the military, which could imply lowering the standard of the Croatian military personnel, exclusion from participation in international missions and training exercises, and other delays in acquiring the necessary equipment such as Black Hawk helicopters. Any reduction of capacities in regards to the security sector, especially the Armed Forces, must be dealt with care, because the military has proven its worth in several crisis areas in recent times,

from dealing with floods and massive fires, to helping with the repercussions of the earthquake which shook the Croatian capital Zagreb and establishing expedition camps where the infected population can be situated if required.

Further delay of acquiring fighter jets means a great loss for Croatia on several levels. The primary loss can be seen from the inability to successfully and independently protect and defend its air space, meaning its territorial integrity and therefore sovereignty. The secondary drawback is the lacking ability to present itself as a regional leader when it comes to security and defence capabilities, which are an indicator of nations' strength and development. The third shortcoming will stem from the decrease of interest, emerging from the lack of capacities, of future pilots, therefore potentially making pilot schools ineffective and unnecessary.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to various implications of the global pandemic in the shape of the COVID-19 virus to Croatia's position in the international sphere, it is obvious that the effect will be different concerning the aspects. Croatian presidency over the Council of the European Union has been going quite well regardless of the crisis state. Moreover, it provided an opportunity for Croatia to establish itself as an able driver behind the EU's steering wheel against very challenging odds. It is on Croatia to preserve its positive stature for the further benefit of its economy in the troubling times. Concerning the future saving and economic measures which will affect various areas of significance, such as defence and security, it is vital that every such decision is made with a firm stance of national interests and long-term outcomes.