




Weekly Briefing

**Croatia external relations briefing:
The Diplomatic Choices of Political Actors in Croatia
Amid the War in Ukraine
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The Diplomatic Choices of Political Actors in Croatia Amid the War in Ukraine

Summary

This article discusses diplomatic choices of political actors in Croatia in light of the current events on the East, that is, the War in Ukraine. The article touches upon the differences in articulating the main ideas from the position of both heads of the executive, the Prime Minister and the President. While the Government tries to fully harmonize with the position of the European Union (EU), the President has acted much more independent which drew attention from foreign press. In its last part, the article will present how diplomatic choices can be conditioned by other factors, such as energy policy or electoral system.

Introduction

Since the inception of the War in Ukraine, the diplomatic and rhetoric support of the Western allies, in the context of this article, the European Union (EU) and its members states, as well as the NATO, towards Ukraine was safe-to-say unanimous. Taking into account the gravity of situation currently unfolding on the East, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia was first of such kind in many years that generated homogeneity among Western countries, but it was also a situation that, one can argue, brought back glimpses of the pre-1990s rhetoric that was based on the duality between the West and the East, and to some extent even mutual hostility, but this time towards and in-between their political leaders. However, one must be careful when using the terms such as “duality”, “hostility”, and the “West and East” dichotomy because they require precise conceptualization before they are put to use. Hence, the diplomacy is there to alleviate any misunderstandings and to allow countries and actors to take measures that would shed light on their position without being provoked to use forcible means.

Diplomatic Choices Amid the War in Ukraine

When it comes to Croatia, the country took a firm stance to support Ukraine in the conflict with Russia; however, the diplomatic choices and rhetorical figures of political actors, whether

political leaders or representatives of parliament, within the country are differing. Therefore, they could be misunderstood or misinterpreted deliberately or by chance. In February 2022, when the war broke out, the Croatian Government, led by Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, expressed complete solidarity with the Ukrainian people and soldiers defending the country, emphasizing that Croatia knows what it is like to be the victim of military aggression, a line which eventually found its place during every speech or public appearance of either Prime Minister or government officials. Furthermore, following the European-wide campaign to grant Ukraine a special status within the EU, Croatia supported the idea of the so-called accelerated process of Ukrainian accession to the EU even though there were five other countries waiting in line that have been granted the candidate status in the years prior. In chronological order of the year when they became candidates, those countries are: Turkey, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Albania. Out of the five countries, only with two the accession negotiations were opened before the War in Ukraine; with Montenegro in 2012 and Serbia in 2014. Turkey has opened accession negotiations in 2005, but are now considered frozen due to domestic issues related to deterioration of human rights and rule of law.

As for the political leaders, Croatian President Zoran Milanović joined the Government in supporting the Ukrainian membership in the EU or to put it more precise, to award the country with candidate status. However, he introduced the idea of granting the status to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, an ongoing issue that has been debated ever since French President Emmanuel Macron refused to approve the opening of accession negotiations with the two countries back in October 2019. As reported by the President's office, Milanović "stated his position that everything must be done to prevent the spread of the crisis to the Western Balkans, to our neighborhood and to avoid any possible threat not only to our neighboring countries but also to the Republic of Croatia. It is in Croatia's strategic and national interest that the countries of Southeast Europe [...] become members of the EU as soon as possible"¹. The President further pointed out that he expects the Government to follow him in this endeavor, with Ukrainian candidacy being

¹ Predsjednik.hr. 2022. Predsjednik Milanović podržava kandidaturu Ukrajine za članstvo u EU, predlaže status kandidata za članstvo za Bosnu i Hercegovinu i Kosovo te početak pregovora s Albanijom i Sjevernom Makedonijom <https://www.predsjudnik.hr/vijesti/predsjudnik-milanovic-podrzava-kandidaturu-ukrajine-za-clanstvo-u-eu-predlaze-status-kandidata-za-clanstvo-za-bosnu-i-hercegovinu-i-kosovo-te-pocetak-pregovora-s-albanijom-i-sjevernom-makedonijom/>.

conditioned on the very same issue regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially taking into consideration the economic, security and social circumstances surrounding the latter country².

Euro Atlantic Orientation in Foreign Policy

The diplomatic choices of the representatives of the Government, on the other hand, were somewhat different compared to those of the President. Apart from underlining continuous support to Ukraine since the beginning of the war, Croatian Government signed a joint Declaration on Ukraine's European perspective during early December 2021 when Prime Minister Plenković was in official visit in Ukraine, a document which before Croatia was signed by five other countries, including three Baltic states, Poland and Slovakia. While advocating for Ukrainian membership in the EU, the Government puts a large emphasis on the fact that Ukraine was one of the first countries that recognized Croatia in 1991; therefore, the relations between the countries have been established on the firm grounds, and Croatia aims to use its experience during the EU accession negotiations to assist Ukraine in its European path. Speaking of the European path, much of the choices the Croatian Government has made are reflection of its Euro Atlantic orientation, especially since Andrej Plenković took office in 2016. In 2000s, the country's most important foreign policy objective was the NATO and EU membership. The latter was burdened by hardships in reforming domestic institutions, taking into account that the EU introduced a new chapter that related to judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23). Once it succeeded on both fronts, NATO in 2009 and EU in 2013, the country sought to position itself among Western allies; however, one can argue that only recently the prevailing discourse has become that the country needs to turn its attention to neighborhood, that is, to other Western Balkans countries aiming to join the EU.

Diplomacy Toward Western Balkans

In 2020, Croatia took charge over the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union; thus, achieving additional milestone and adding an important reference in its resume, while 2023 is reserved for EURO introduction and entering the Schengen area. But when it comes to diplomatic choices towards other Western Balkans countries, the situation has been

² Pavičić, Milan. 2022. Milanović: 'Očekujem da Plenković uvjetuje davanje statusa kandidata Ukrajini za EU. BiH to mora postati istog dana' Telegram.hr <https://www.telegram.hr/politika-kriminal/milanovic-ocekujem-da-plenkovic-uvjetuje-davanje-statusa-kandidata-ukrajini-za-eu-bih-to-mora-postati-istog-dana/>.

conditioned by numerous other factors, such as energy policy with Serbia or electoral system with Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the former case, the situation between the two countries once again became “edgy” after the European Commission (EC) approved a new sanction package towards Russia which prohibits import of Russian crude oil to the EU by maritime routes; however, there were suggestions that Serbia could be excluded from this decision, thus, continue using the existing transit passages of Russian crude oil through Omišalj, Croatia, to the city of Pančevo. This decision was made back in June 2022. But in October, at the EU summit, Serbia’s exclusion was withdrawn, as Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić claims, on the initiative of Croatia, while Croatian Prime Minister Plenković argues that it was not the position of Croatia; rather, the position of the EU with Serbia being free to use any crude oil through Croatian pipeline system except that from Russia³. In the latter case, the issue of electoral representation of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been at the spotlight for some time now. Here, both heads of the executive, Prime Minister Plenković and President Milanović, in principle share their position; however, as Berto Šalaj, the professor of Political Science claims, they use different means to articulate their understanding of the problem⁴.

Conclusion

All in all, the diplomatic choices of Croatia in the last several years, and especially since the outbreak of the War in Ukraine, was heavily dependent on the position of the EU, which is reasonable to understand, at least from the position of the Government, as Croatia is the youngest member state and still needs to fully integrate with the EU-related organizations. Therefore, not all foreign policy objectives have been realized and the country needs to show its willingness to follow the wider narrative shared between the Western allies. One could understand this as the position of the Government. On the other hand, there are actors who are not completely comfortable with such level of conformity, but their diplomatic range of motion is quite narrow; thus, they are not considered relevant enough to represent the interests of the country.

³ Stojanović, Milica. 2022. Serbia Welcomes EU Delay to Decision on Russian Oil Ban Exemption. Balkaninsight.com <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/10/07/serbia-welcomes-eu-delay-to-decision-on-russian-oil-ban-exemption/>.

⁴ N1info.hr. 2022. Politolog otkrio u čemu se slažu, a u čemu razlikuju Milanović i Plenković <https://n1info.hr/video/newsroom/politolog-otkrio-u-cemu-se-slazu-a-u-cemu-razlikuju-milanovic-i-plenkovic-2/>.