



Weekly Briefing

**Croatia external relations briefing:
The 10th Anniversary of Croatian Membership in the European
Union**

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The 10th Anniversary of Croatian Membership in the European Union

Summary

This article will discuss the 10 years of Croatian membership in the European Union (EU) which was celebrated in early July. The country was visited by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, who met with the head of the Government and the Croatian Parliament in the National and University Library in Zagreb (NSK). The article will present benefits that membership in the EU has brought to Croatian citizens, such as those for young people and small- and medium-sized entrepreneurs, but it will also discuss concerns for which the EU did not find political will or interest to resolve.

Introduction

The 1st of July marked the 10th anniversary of Croatian membership in the European Union (EU). To celebrate the occasion, the joint conference of the Government and Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs was organized in the National and University Library in Zagreb (NSK) which was attended by numerous guests including the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola. In hindsight, the country has achieved a lot during the ten years: from recognizing the importance of European values (however, some would disagree with that claim), to achieving tangible results when it comes to economic indicators. Likewise, as argued by the governing structures, especially Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and people close to him, Croatia has become internationally recognized and respected by other member states. This January, Croatia joined the Eurozone and the Schengen area, thus, completing the process of European integration. Unfortunately, it is unavoidable to mention that the country has deteriorated in areas such as corruption and the rule of law. Some problems that were considered resolved during the accession period have come back, but the real question is whether they were gone in the first place.

The Celebration of 10 Years in the EU

During the conference that was held at the beginning of the month, Prime Minister Plenković emphasized what the membership in EU means to Croatia: “For us, the European Union was both a community of values and a community of rights. Those two key aspects are at the very core of what we have done by joining the EU. This can be seen today in democracy, freedom, protection of human and minority rights, built institutions and firm positioning in the very core of the European Union.”¹. Even though the road to becoming a 28th member state had been burdened by hardships, especially those related to border disputes with Slovenia and stalling relations with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), Croatia met the necessary preconditions, at least in technical terms and requirements, and is now seen as an example for other countries with similar context in Southeastern Europe wishing to join the EU. Taking into account the longevity of the Croatian accession negotiations process, as well as the lessons learned, the initial expectation was that upcoming enlargements will not face that many obstacles; however, the situation with Albania and North Macedonia proves otherwise. Be that as it may, the official position of Croatia is to provide every help and advice to its neighboring countries and bring them closer to the EU in years to come.

The Benefits of EU Membership

Membership in the EU has brought a lot to Croatia, especially to those people and parts of society that were often left behind in their endeavors to make something out of their life. Here, the author of this article is mostly referring to two groups: young people who were given an opportunity to study or work abroad; and small and medium-sized entrepreneurs from local communities who benefited from the funds available through EU sources and programs. On the one hand, the former faced fewer obstacles in attempting to find happiness, better education, and better-paid jobs. One could even say that young people found more respect and recognition studying or working in Western or some other CEE countries. On the other hand, the latter became less dependent on the domestic-oriented agencies and institutions that did not encourage their business activities and whose financial support was too small to be considered worthy of starting something on their own. Furthermore, the EU funds did not only help entrepreneurs, but public bodies and institutions. For example, if one looks at the east of the

¹ Vlada Republike Hrvatske. 2023. Plenković o 10 godina u EU: Hrvatska je u potpunosti transformirana. Imamo međunarodni ugled i naš se glas uvažava <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/plenkovic-o-10-godina-u-eu-hrvatska-je-u-potpunosti-transformirana-imamo-medjunarodni-ugled-i-nas-se-glas-uvazava/38525>.

country, say, in the direction of the Slavonia region, which is often regarded as least developed, one can find numerous examples of hospitals, schools, community centers, and local administration buildings being renovated or completely constructed by EU money. To mention only a few: Osijek, Slavonski Brod, Vukovar, Našice, and Vinkovci, all cities located in the Slavonia region, are among those with the highest percentage of the withdrawn money from EU funds, along with coastal cities such as Rijeka, Zadar, and Šibenik².

The Never-ending Issues Related to Corruption and the Rule of Law

However, aside from the recognition of European values as those which will spearhead the country's orientation in upcoming years, and the economic success evident in high export rates and growing GDP, it must not be neglected that Croatia is showing signals that issues related to corruption and rule of law, which were considered resolved or at least minimized during the EU accession negotiations period, have again surfaced and caused the country to deteriorate even more when compared to 15 years ago. Looking at the Corruption Perception Index, the country has a score of 47, meaning that it is considered corrupt due to the fact that 50 and the above scores indicate less corruption in public administration. For example, in 2015, the country has a score of 51, but since then it is in a downward trend. To add some context, the score of 47 puts the country in the same category as Malaysia, Cuba, and Montenegro³. The Corruption Perception Index “monitors the perception of public sector corruption among experts and representatives of the business community. It uses 13 independent sources of data, including those of the World Bank and the World Economic Forum.”⁴. Unfortunately, only in the last couple of years, the country faced numerous scandals that involved highly ranked Government or local officials related to the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).

² Novac.jutarnji.hr. 2023. Gradovi u 2021. iz EU fondova povukli gotovo 1,5 milijardu kuna – evo tko je bio najuspješniji! <https://novac.jutarnji.hr/novac/najbolji-gradovi/gradovi-u-2021-iz-eu-fondova-povukli-gotovo-1-5-milijardu-kuna-evo-tko-je-bio-najuspjesniji-15303842>.

³ Total Croatia News. 2023. Croatia still stagnating on the TI corruption perceptions index <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/business/croatia-still-stagnating-on-ti-corruption-perceptions-index/>.

⁴ Total Croatia News. 2023. Croatia still stagnating on the TI corruption perceptions index <https://total-croatia-news.com/news/business/croatia-still-stagnating-on-ti-corruption-perceptions-index/>.

Conclusion

All in all, in general terms, the 10-year membership of Croatia in the EU is considered a success story, with the country holding the rotating presidency over the Council of the European Union in 2020, and entering the Eurozone and Schengen area in January 2023. Nevertheless, despite such achievements, it appears that the EU has lost interest in what is happening in the country when it comes to corruption and the rule of law. This could be slightly ironic considering that chapter 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) which encompasses the two aspects has been crucial during the accession negotiations and the most effort was put into that direction. It remains to be seen whether the EU will address these concerns in upcoming years.