



Weekly Briefing

**Croatia external relations briefing:
The Foreign Policy and National Security Concerns Amid Israeli-
Hamis Conflict
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The Foreign Policy and National Security Concerns Amid Israeli-Hamas Conflict

Summary

On 7 October Hamas-led militant groups launched a rocket strike on Israel which marked the beginning of a new bloodshed in the Middle East. Israel responded by conducting airstrikes and imposing a blockade in Gaza. The conflict brought numerous concerns for the international community, especially those regarding national security. In Croatia, the conflict provoked new tensions between the heads of the executive, both concerning the country's position in the conflict and the level to which the national security of the country might be endangered, taking into account the latest voting in the UN General Assembly.

Introduction

This article will present and discuss the position of Croatia and the international community amid the ongoing armed conflict between Israel and Hamas-led militant groups that began on 7 October after the latter launched a rocket strike on Israel and breached the Gaza-Israel barrier killing over 1.400 Israelis and taking more than 200 people in hostage. In retaliation, IDF (Israel Defense Forces) carried out multiple airstrikes and imposed a blockade of the Gaza Strip which included a cut off in water, food, medicine, and electricity supplies to its inhabitants. The conflict once again introduced fears of the humanitarian and possible migrant crisis, as well as questioning the actions of both sides included in the war due to a large number of civilians killed, many of them being women and children.

As for the international community, here referring both to the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), it expressed solidarity with Israel, while condemning Hamas's attacks and its terrorist character. However, the conflict brought disagreements over foreign policy direction in Croatia on several occasions during the past three weeks. While Prime Minister Andrej Plenković accepted the diplomatic discourse of the EU, President Zoran Milanović was vocal about Israeli crimes conducted in retaliation and stood against the Government's decision to display the Israeli flag outside of the Croatian Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs's building. Likewise, the Office of the President stated that he was not

informed about the vote in the UN General Assembly on 27 October, arguing that the Government only made Croatia a possible target.

The Issue of Foreign Policy Leadership?

To shed more light on recent events that happened in the international community regarding the said conflict, most of all, the voting in the UN General Assembly on the UN resolution demanding an immediate, permanent, and sustainable humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza¹, that 14 countries voted against, among which was Croatia, one needs to understand the general context and the position of a particular country when it comes to the Israeli-Hamas war. Therefore, the first part of this article will discuss how political actors in Croatia commented on the conflict and how it introduced disagreements in the foreign policy direction of the country. Despite not having significant constitutional responsibilities, the President of Croatia is considered a co-creator of foreign policy and has powers in national security issues, both of which he should discuss and decide upon with the Government². Due to their divergent characters, but also differing opinions on the international community and Croatia's position in it, President Milanović and Prime Minister Plenković have had a fair share of misunderstandings on foreign policy and national security from the moment both of them took their respective offices. Likewise, the ministers of foreign affairs and defense in Plenković's second cabinet are people with whom the President argues over the media and quite often that conflict becomes visible to other members of the international community, such as during official visits or ceremonies held in Croatia or abroad.

For example, the President and Prime Minister had disagreements over Croatia's role in the War in Ukraine with the former accused of being overly sympathetic with Russia and wanting to keep Croatia as distanced from the conflict as possible. On the other hand, the Prime Minister was univocal with his counterparts from the EU and was there to support any decision made by the Western allies. The other examples of foreign policy or national security disputes are those related to the position of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the appointments of heads of national security agencies. As mentioned in the previous section, the relations of the President with the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs Goran Grlić-Radman and the Minister of Defense Mario Banožić especially deteriorated in the last few years to the point

¹ United Nations. 2023. UN General Assembly adopts Gaza resolution calling for immediate and sustained 'humanitarian truce' <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142847>.

² Ustav Republike Hrvatske. 2023. Članak 7. Zakon.hr <https://www.zakon.hr/z/94/Ustav-Republike-Hrvatske>.

where they are looking for excuses not to shake hands or purposely having different schedules in order to avoid meeting while representing the country abroad. All this puts the foreign policy direction of the country at stake and creates a sense of confusion in theoretical and practical terms. Since gaining independence, political scientists and other experts agreed that there was a clear path that the country was having: to join NATO and EU, position itself within the international community, and use the gained experience to influence the Euro-Atlantic path of neighboring countries.

Milanović's Comment on the Israeli Flag and Subsequent Reactions

After the conflict between Israel and Hamas-led militant groups broke out, the differences between the Government and the President once again surfaced and were even mentioned in the foreign press and commented on by the Spokesperson of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Lior Haitat who condemned Milanović's statements. When discussing Israel's retaliatory actions in Gaza, Milanović said: "With all my sympathy for Israel, which unfortunately they lost within 15 minutes [...] there is no place for other flags in Croatia, except in strict regulated situations [...] I condemn [Hamas'] murders, I even expressed disgust and abhorrence, but the right to defense does not include the right to revenge and the killing of civilians"³. His position toward the international community was evidenced by his second comment, but this one referred to the flags of NATO and the EU that stand in his presidential office for which he added that they should be lowered in order not to be positioned on the same level with the flag of Croatia. The sovereigntist rhetoric of Milanović is met with both praise and criticism on the domestic level. While some argue against his inappropriate vocabulary and sometimes controversial statements, others claim he is the one who genuinely represents Croatia's interest in foreign policy by not following the predefined path imposed by EU leaders.

But one did not have to wait too long for the reaction of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its Spokesperson Haitat said the following in the social media post: "The President of Croatia's outrageous announcement is conspicuous against the backdrop of the messages of support from international leaders who have expressed sympathy for the people of Israel after horrific images of Hamas' barbaric terror attack were publicized all over the world"⁴. Furthermore, Milanović's statements were criticized by members of the Government and the

³ Starčević, Seb. 2023. Israel has lost my sympathy, says Croatia's president. Politico.eu <https://www.politico.eu/article/israel-has-lost-my-sympathy-says-croatian-president/>.

⁴ N1info.hr. 2023. Israeli Foreign Ministry condemns Milanovic, thanks Plenkovic <https://n1info.hr/english/news/israeli-foreign-ministry-condemns-milanovic-thanks-plenkovic/>.

Prime Minister who distanced himself and the country from the President's comments. Unfortunately, in these situations, it appears as if the lack of private communication between the Government and the President, and the non-existence of subsequent agreement on how to approach critical issues compromises the image of Croatia among its partner countries, with the President playing the role of a “bad cop” who is not afraid to speak out loud, sometimes rightfully, while the Prime Minister is a "good cop" or better to say "firefighter" who takes on the responsibility to explain the position of the country to everyone who find it ambiguous. This perhaps stems from different interpretations of the Constitution which highlights the role of the President, but puts the Government ahead when it comes to foreign policy.

As for national security, the President's concerns regarding the Israeli-Hamas war are similar to those of the War in Ukraine. By giving univocal and non-debatable support to Ukraine and Israel, and by providing the necessary assistance of any kind either bilaterally or together with the EU, the President's fear is of making Croatia a potential target of retaliatory actions of Russia or terrorist cells located around Europe. While acknowledging the need to express solidarity and support to victims of aggression, with Croatia also being such a victim in the early nineties, the position of Milanović could rightfully be discussed as the question remains to what extent should a country that is geographically small and relatively does not bring any weight to the table when it comes to making decisions should expose itself and become visible to potential threats. While Croatia is generally considered safe and does not possess any real prize for the terrorists to be considered their destination, the issue of safety remains and should not be taken for granted, especially after witnessing the horrific consequences of escalating conflicts. However, in the case of Croatia, this topic remains heavily debatable since two heads of the executive express differing opinions with one advocating a more cautious approach, while the other is more in line with the thinking of the international community.

The Voting on the UN Declaration

The conflict between the President and Prime Minister reached new levels after the voting in the UN General Assembly on a Jordan-backed resolution that “[calls] for an immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce between Israeli forces and Hamas militants in Gaza”⁵. The resolution was adopted by 120 votes in favor, 14 against and 45 abstentions. However, the controversy occurred since the resolution did not mention Hamas as the one responsible for the

⁵ United Nations. 2023. UN General Assembly adopts Gaza resolution calling for immediate and sustained ‘humanitarian truce’ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1142847>.

7 October attack; therefore, Canada and 35 other countries proposed an amendment to explicitly mention and condemn Hamas' actions, but this did not pass. Among 14 countries that voted against the resolution were the United States and Israel, and they were joined by the EU member states like Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Croatia. Most of the other EU member states abstained during the voting, while the EU itself during the European Council summit which ended on 27 October adopted conclusions in which Hamas was mentioned. Interestingly enough, the President of the European Commission (EC) Ursula von der Leyen was criticized over her statements which were described as "more pro-Israeli than agreed", especially after Israel announced a blockade on water, food, medicine, and electricity supplies to Gaza inhabitants which is considered a violation of international humanitarian law.

As for Croatia, many attacked the Government for voting against the resolution: from political opponents, to political analysts and commentators, and the public, while comments were also going in the direction that the Government decided on such a move only because of Israel and the United States. The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs issued an official statement to clarify its position. The statement underlined: "The position of the Republic of Croatia has been clear and principles from the beginning. We condemn the terrorist attack by Hamas, emphasize Israel's right to security and self-defense [...] the interpretations that by voting 'against' the resolution in the UN General Assembly, Croatia is also against humanitarian pauses, providing aid to Gaza or protecting the civilian population are incorrect [...] The text of the resolution in question does not mention that Hamas carried out a terrorist attack on October 7 of this year, nor does it demand the unconditional release of the hostages"⁶. Also, the Ministry supported its position during the voting on the accounts of the European Council summit which, as previously mentioned, condemned Hamas' actions; therefore, like in many other cases, the rationale behind making decisions was not that the country took a firm stance toward the issue. Rather, it conveniently adjusted to the opinions of higher instances.

The decision to vote against the resolution was met with a harsh reaction from the President whose Office issued a statement due to him not being consulted on how the ambassador to the UN will vote. Likewise, the President argued that not only he was not consulted, but the decision on voting was made behind his back. The statement emphasized: "It is not the first time that the Government of the Republic of Croatia does not consult the President of the Republic on foreign policy decisions and thus violates its constitutional obligation to co-create foreign policy [...] It is dangerous that the Government of the Republic

⁶ Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia. 2023. Priopćenje MVEP-a <https://mvep.gov.hr/press/priopcenje-mvep-a-264528/264528>.

of Croatia unnecessarily compromised national security with its decision and exposed Croatia to potential threats”⁷. The final section of the statement suggested that behind such a decision is a personal interest of Prime Minister Plenković who wants to position himself in the international community and keep the structure of diplomatic officers who will indisputably listen to his instructions, rather than vote in favor of the country's interest. In the following days, the exchange of statements from the Ministry and the President's Office was replaced by the Prime Minister's and President's personal quarrel regarding this issue, once again through the media and TV channels.

Unfortunately, the conflict that currently happens in Gaza was used by the domestic actors to discuss their personal differences and animosities, not to jointly condemn terrorist attacks and violations of international humanitarian law. Furthermore, one can argue that such behavior of both heads of the executive only compromises the perception of Croatia in the international community. One would assume that the background and experience in foreign affairs and diplomacy of both Plenković and Milanović would help them to at least have a common stance when representing the country abroad, especially regarding issues like the War in Ukraine or the conflict between Israel and Hamas-led militant groups. However, no matter how hard one attempts to discuss this from the foreign policy perspective, the dominant explanation is found in national politics, even in the upcoming 2024 elections. While some argue that the quarrel between the Prime Minister and the President is genuine, there are others who claim that it is a tacit agreement to help each other in the 2024 parliamentary elections and the 2024/2025 presidential elections. To what extent these assumptions may be true is difficult to grasp, but they do not serve the purpose and that is to maintain the international respect that Croatia should have earned due to its war-torn recent history, as well as the obstacles it successfully overcame during the process of negotiations to join the EU.

The Possibility of The New Migrant Wave

The last sub-topic to be discussed in this article is the potential of a new migration wave which was acknowledged by some of the highly-ranked EU officials, as well as the Croatian Prime Minister. Due to it being a safety concern, it is to be seen what will be the reaction of the EU if the situation eventually escalates, and how the external borders will be safeguarded.

⁷ Predsjednik.hr. 2023. Predsjednik Republike nije bio ni konzultiran niti obaviješten o tome kako će Hrvatska glasati o rezoluciji UN-a: Vlada je obilježila Hrvatsku kao protivnika mira <https://www.predsjudnik.hr/vijesti/predsjudnik-republike-nije-bio-ni-konzultiran-niti-obavijesten-o-tome-kako-ce-hrvatska-glasati-o-rezoluciji-un-a-vlada-je-obiljezila-hrvatsku-kao-protivnika-mira/>.

Taking into account the lack of joint position on some of the crucial issues in recent history, including the position on the Israel-Hamas conflict itself, it is questionable whether the representatives of the EU will be able to find common ground on how to address the influx of migrants, with many member states perhaps wanting to implement their own policies. As for Croatia, one can expect further divergence in opinions of those who should spearhead national security, here referring to the Ministry of Defense, led by Mario Banožić, and President Milanović who is highly critical of the aforementioned minister. Milanović served as the Prime Minister during the 2015 migrant crisis and was often accused by his political opponents of not controlling the influx of migrants by letting them enter the country without registering, only to allow them to leave the country as quickly as possible to continue their way to Western Europe. Likewise, he was accused of not cooperating with other EU member states.

Conclusion

This article briefly discussed the position of the international community toward the Israel-Hamas conflict that began on 7 October, and in more detail elaborated on Croatia's actions since the inception of the war. The aim of the article was to showcase the lack of foreign policy convergence currently happening in Croatia, with the Government and the President having opposing opinions on the Israel-Hamas war, while both are and should be responsible for the co-creation of foreign policy. The article also tackled the national security implications of the conflict: to what extent the countries that are relatively small and do not bring any significant weight are in danger of some sort of retaliation due to their actions. Furthermore, with the possibility of a new migration wave rising, it is to be seen how the EU and its member states will react if the situation gets the proportions of the migration wave that happened in 2015.

The voting in the UN General Assembly, that is, the results of voting and subsequent reactions have disclosed the lack of unity in Croatia's foreign policy. While the Government led by Prime Minister Plenković underlined that voting against the UN resolution was necessary since the document did not mention Hamas, the President argued that this only brought Croatia into the spotlight for possible retaliatory actions. To what extent this is true, it is early to prognose, but the fact is that what should have been discussed primarily as a foreign policy issue ended up becoming a national security issue. Not only that, but the voting results introduced a new set of debates about the internal politics of the country. For example, why the President was not consulted or informed about the voting since he is the co-creator of foreign

policy according to the Croatian Constitution? All that will need to be explained in the upcoming period.