



Weekly Briefing

Croatia external relations briefing:
The Summary of 2023 Key External Developments in Croatia:
Dangers of Divided Foreign Policy
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The Summary of 2023 Key External Developments in Croatia: Dangers of Divided Foreign Policy

Summary

In 2023, Croatian foreign policy was divided as never before. The Government and the President of the Republic were often on opposite sides in international relations, and when they had similar policy, the approach to resolving critical diplomatic situations was different and mutually destructive. In this text, the analysis is focused on an overview of those key foreign policy situations in which a unified and coordinated foreign policy was needed, but which was absent to the detriment of Croatian citizens, the reputation of the state and the Croatian economy (cases: marking the 10th anniversary of Croatia's membership in the European Union, the purchase of new fighter jets, detained citizens in Zambia and Greece, and Croatian foreign policy towards the wars in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip).

Introduction

In the Croatian political system, the President and the Government of the Republic of Croatia cooperate in shaping and implementing foreign policy (Article 99 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia¹). Because of this constitutional condition, it is important for the stability and successful implementation of foreign policy that there is ideological agreement between the President and the Government regarding the foreign policy orientation of the state and other approaches in international relations. If there is not even a minimal consensus on foreign policies between both branches of the executive power, there will be a double representation of Croatia in international relations and thus confusion, contradictions and damage is produced for Croatia in the international relations. Such a situation can simply occur when different political options take over different branches of executive power, which by definition results in a political relationship of cohabitation. In the case of Croatia, this last happened with the victory of Zoran Milanović, the SDP² candidate, in the 2019 presidential elections, and as a result Prime Minister and HDZ's³ president Andrej Plenković promptly

¹ [Ustav Republike Hrvatske \(pročišćeni tekst\) \(nn.hr\)](#)

² eng. Social Democratic Party of Croatia

³ eng. Croatian Democratic Union

announced a "hard cohabitation" in relation towards the future president Milanović⁴. Since then, the topic of fierce communication between Plenković and Milanović has not left the headlines of the media, and in 2023, this "hard cohabitation" relationship status radically escalated when various international situations appeared in which there was a particular need for a unified and united foreign policy. This article will present all those international situations where the President and the Government should have been united in foreign policy: the marking of the 10th anniversary of Croatia's membership in the EU, the political issue of the purchase of fighter jets, imprisoned Croatian citizens in Zambia and Greece, the attitude towards the war in Ukraine and in the Gaza Strip. Year 2023 shown how much damage a divided foreign policy can do to Croatia and its citizens.

Ten years of Croatia's accession in the EU and the purchase of Rafale fighter jets

The last goal in the foreign policy strategy that Croatia achieved was the achievement of deeper political and economic integration into the European Union by introducing the euro currency and achieving membership in the Schengen zone. Euro and Schengen were implemented on January 1, 2023 in the year when Croatia celebrates the 10th anniversary of its membership in the EU. The President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, visited Croatia to formally mark the 10th anniversary of membership, who said that Croatia had achieved "incredible success" in the ten years of membership⁵. Prime Minister Plenković also said at the same event that Croatia has completely transformed for the better in the last 10 years and that Croatia has now gained international reputation, respect and that Croatia's voice in international relations is respected⁶. In those days, the international media magnified various statistics, eulogies and moderate self-criticisms from various ministers, politicians and civil servants about the success of Croatia's membership in the EU. However, President Milanović did not take this unique opportunity to speak against the narrative of the Government of the Republic of Croatia and representatives of the EU institutions about Croatia's great success in the last 10 years, saying that Croatia's success is so modest that it can hardly be called a success at all, although it is certainly not a failure⁷. Here, there was a visible gap between the President

⁴ [Plenković: Milanović će doznati što to znači tvrda kohabitacija - Novi list](#)

⁵ [Vlada Republike Hrvatske - Plenković o 10 godina u EU: Hrvatska je u potpunosti transformirana. Imamo međunarodni ugled i naš se glas uvažava \(gov.hr\)](#)

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ [Milanović: "Hrvatska nije dovoljno napredovala u 10 godina članstva u EU" \(dnevnik.hr\)](#)

and the Government of the Republic of Croatia in the public international presentation of Croatia, which is certainly not in Croatia's favour.

The second case of a gap in foreign policy occurred a few years earlier, but it did not materialize until 2023. Namely, in 2021, Croatia contracted with France to purchase 12 used Rafale fighter jets, the first of which arrived in Croatia in the fall of 2023. is Croatia due to the defence situation that its entire fleet of MiG-21 fighter planes will become out of service in 2024, the Government started the process of purchasing new fighter planes in 2019⁸. President Milanović welcomed this decision and expressed his opinion several times in public that the offer of fighter jets offered by the United States (namely, the new F-16 Block 70 model) should be chosen in order to create better diplomatic relations with the United States⁹. This opinion was opposed by experts, advocating the Swedish offer of Gripen fighter jets¹⁰, and the Government initially rejected the offer of Israel and their F-16 fighter jets, but Israel failed to deliver them in 2019 and the contract was cancelled¹¹.

Milanović's interventions in public against the policies of the Government are a clear expression of the aforementioned cohabitation and an indication that Croatian foreign policy is divided, double-minded and thus counterproductive to the achievement of the set goals. As long as it is about material things, this conflict between two political conceptions of foreign policy is still enduring in the public eye, but when it turns from the fate of things to human lives, that limit of tolerance is crossed.

The "Zambia" and the "Greece" cases

The following cases will show how a divided foreign policy can be a dangerous policy. At the end of 2022, 8 adult Croatian citizens and 4 of their adopted children were detained in Zambia by the Zambian police on charges of human trafficking. The entire judicial saga, from the detention of Croatian citizens to the acquittal of all charges and the return of the citizens to Croatia, lasted 7 months. Minister of Foreign Affairs Gordan Grlić Radman, Prime Minister Plenković, Ambassador Ante Cicvarić and other diplomatic services did as much as possible to diplomatically help detained Croatian citizens in Zambia as peacefully as possible. Croatian citizens travelled to Zambia at the end of 2022 to take their legally adopted children from

⁸ [Avion Rafale za moderno Hrvatsko ratno zrakoplovstvo - MORH](#)

⁹ [Croatia external relations briefing: Croatia's Acquisition of the First Three Rafale F3-R Fighter.. – China-CEE Institute](#)

¹⁰ [Vojni analitičar Tabak: Gripen je najbolji izbor za Hrvatsku - Index.hr](#)

¹¹ [Sada i službeno: Izraelsko izaslanstvo potvrdilo je da Hrvatskoj ne može isporučiti avione \(dnevnik.hr\)](#)

Zambia to Croatia, only for that dream to quickly turn into a judicial nightmare. In such a delicate situation, President Milanović publicly expressed his understanding and sympathy for the detained Croatian citizens, but he felt no hesitation in criticizing France and Germany for not helping the Croatian citizens in this critical situation because they have better diplomatic contacts with Zambia¹². If it is true that France and Germany could have helped diplomatically, then Milanović's statement is diplomatically harmful. If it is not true that France and Germany could have helped, then Milanović's statement was meaningless. In any case, the president acted diplomatically without consulting the Government of the Republic of Croatia, and such a form of arbitrariness by the president could have harmed the judicial process of detained Croatian citizens and who knows how long Croatian citizens would be detained. In such cases, ego and political interests are secondary, and the safety of human lives comes first.

A similar situation occurred in Greece this summer, when Croatian citizens were imprisoned in Greek detention centres on charges of damage to property and public order. On the eve of the football match between the Greek football club AEK and the Croatian football club Dinamo, Greek and Croatian football fans physically clashed in Athens and caused great damage to public and private property, and one Greek fan lost his life under still unexplained circumstances. 97 Croatian citizens — all members of the Bad Blue Boys (BBB), the fan group of the Zagreb football club Dinamo — were arrested by the Greek police, and one Croatian citizen, also a member of BBB, was hospitalized in a Greek hospital¹³. The Greek repressive apparatus, on the other hand, was evidently much more sympathetic towards the Greek fans, and by the end of 2023 had arrested only 4 Greek fans and those only months after the conflict, while almost all BBB members were arrested immediately¹⁴. As with the case in Zambia, Croatian citizens found themselves in a sensitive diplomatic situation that had to be resolved by Croatian diplomacy in communication with the local authorities. A unified foreign policy was needed. Detained Croatian citizens in Greece were often portrayed in public by the Greek media as if neo-Nazis who came to a foreign country were causing riots, which is not far from the truth, but the policy of the Greek media was not in the service of truthfully informing the public, but was nationalistically oriented to portray Croatian football fans as worse than Greek ones and thereby influence public opinion and the Greek judiciary¹⁵. In such an unfavourable political situation, it was necessary for Croatian citizens not to go public and directly against

¹² [Milanović o Zambiji: Gdje su Nijemci i Francuzi? Očekivao sam da se prostru kao ćilim - Index.hr](#)

¹³ [Procurila imena uhićenih u Ateni, među njima i šef Udruge navijača Dinama - tportal](#)

¹⁴ [Poznati novi detalji iz Grčke: Dosad uhićena 4 navijača AEK-a zbog krvavog sukoba s Boysima - Večernji.hr \(vecernji.hr\)](#)

¹⁵ [Jutarnji list - Grčki mediji se raspisali o BBB-ovcima: 'Evo što rade ti ultradesničarski huligani koji su ubili navijača AEK-a'](#)

Greek institutions and society, but to approach the Greek authorities with more emotionless diplomacy. The Government and the President Milanović did not previously agree on this approach to the Greek authorities. Prime Minister Plenković and Minister of Foreign Affairs Grlić Radman took a conventional diplomatic approach to solving the problems of Croatian citizens behind closed doors. Milanović, on the other hand, expressed his support for the detained BBB members and his desire to return home to his families as soon as possible, but at the same time he publicly and harshly criticized the Greek repressive apparatus, the judiciary and the media for being unfair to Croatian citizens. Milanović pointed out the obvious facts that the Greek repressive apparatus (police and state attorney's office) treated Croatian citizens unfairly, arresting a huge number of Croatian citizens, and almost none of the Greek football fans with whom the Croatian football fans clashed. Also, Milanović has repeatedly said that the entire Greek political system, including the judiciary, is corrupt and disordered, and that the media is deliberately bias towards soccer fans from Croatia¹⁶. Milanović did not stop there and said in public that the BBB members in Greek prisons have existential problems, such as the lack of drinking water, and that the inmates of Greek prisons will beat and rape them. In addition to all that, Milanović did not miss the opportunity to call out the Croatian Government from the position of president for not doing enough to protect the detained BBBs in Greece¹⁷. Of course, all the statements of President Milanović provoked reactions from the Greek authorities and the media and made it difficult for the Croatian diplomacy to do as much and as quickly as possible for the detained Croatian citizens in Greece. Again, Croatia's foreign policy acted inconsistently and thus the entire judicial process in Greece was complicated by the unnecessary negative bilateral relationship between the two countries. BBB members were released in December 2023. If the foreign policy had been uniform in its approach to the case of detained Croatian citizens in Greece, we do not know for sure whether the Croatian citizens would have been released earlier, but we can assume that it would have been easier to manage the whole process and the Croatian diplomacy and the Greek judiciary.

War in Ukraine and Gaza Strip

Riots by football fans and legal misunderstandings in international child adoption processes are other events where a non-uniform foreign policy results in less damage. However,

¹⁶ [Jutarnji list - Mediji se zgražavaju, sada je stigao i službeni odgovor Milanoviću iz Grčke: Evo što su mu poručili](#)

¹⁷ [Milanović o navijačima u Grčkoj: 'Imaju egzistencijalne probleme. Vlada može napraviti puno više' - Večernji.hr \(vecernji.hr\)](#)

in cases of wars around the world, non-uniform foreign policy can create far-reaching political, economic and physical damages for the state, society and individuals of the country practicing non-uniform foreign policy. In Russia's aggression against Ukraine 2022, Croatian President Milanović has long been internationally known for his critical attitude towards the EU and the US foreign policy regarding the expansion of the EU and the NATO alliance into the Russian zone of interest with Ukraine. On the other hand, Prime Minister Plenković built a large part of his career as a European politician in representing Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic orientation and is known to the Ukrainian public as a politician who supports the fight for Ukraine's independence, while Milanović is persona non grata in Ukraine. Such a non-uniform foreign policy position regarding crucial issues in international relations continued in 2023, when the Government of the Republic of Croatia is trying to prove as much as possible to its American and European Union partners that it is a credible actor and a loyal NATO member, unlike, for example, Hungary, while at the same time President Milanović is saying in public that is Russia's aggression against Ukraine "an American war" and that the Ukrainian salute "Glory to Ukraine" is a Nazi salute on the same level as the German "Sieg Heil" and the Croatian "Za dom spremni", which is not far from the truth. Foreign policy divisiveness does not benefit any country. Perhaps it is in Milanović's interest that the other side of Croatian foreign policy does not benefit. It is certainly healthy and beneficial for society to allow a free public space for discussion about current politics and to get the right of the public and criticism of the ruling narrative (but not for the freedom of hate speech), because there is no other way to politically socialize society than in discussion and thinking about where the world and society are going. The dogmas of the regime are quickly replaced by the new dogmas of future regimes, while authentic political education is more resistant to domestic and international political changes. To that extent, Milanović plays a positive role by taking the position of criticizing the ruling narrative, but at the same time he remains just a mere irresponsible critic whose voice of criticism is remembered and counted in future calculations. Such criticism of Milanović did not benefit Croatian citizens in the Gaza Strip and Israel. Namely, although the Government sided completely with Israel in the violent confrontation with the Palestinian people and the Hamas organization in the Gaza Strip, President Milanović immediately declared in the first days after Israel's very violent confrontation with the Palestinian people that he no longer had sympathy for Israel and that the state the institutions should not be illuminated with the Israeli flag or have the Israeli flag hanging as a sign of solidarity because it is an "idiotic move". The spokesperson of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted negatively to Milanović's criticism on Platform X and at the same time thanked the Government of the Republic of Croatia for its support in

the fight against Hamas¹⁸. In the midst of the war, 22 Croatian citizens were evacuated from the Gaza Strip to Cairo and Croatian citizens were charged for the flight from Cairo to Zagreb¹⁹. Milanović is not to blame for the war profiteering of other actors towards the injured Croatian citizens, but it would be worth investigating whether such financially unfavorable evacuation arrangements were carried out towards the citizens of more loyal NATO members.

Conclusion

A non-unified foreign policy has its limits in public discussions, but in practice it is a very expensive activity. In the cases of detained Croatian citizens, we could see that an uncoordinated foreign policy and diplomatic approach has aggravating consequences for the resolution of judicial processes. At times when Croatia is promoting itself in international relations, it is necessary to coordinate foreign policy so that these rare moments can benefit a small country as much as possible for its reputation and national interests, as we have seen from the example of the celebration of the 10th anniversary of Croatia's membership in the EU and the purchase of new fighter jets there was also a counterproductive disparity in the foreign policy of the Government and the President. In war conflicts, it was especially necessary to find a minimal foreign policy consensus, as in the cases of the wars in Ukraine and the Gaza Strip, and not stubbornly insist on one's foreign policy concepts. The limit of the non-unity of foreign policy is in the limit of the freedom of the other, in the limit that protects the lives of the citizens that the foreign policy makers represent.

¹⁸ [Izraelsko ministarstvo vanjskih poslova napalo Zorana Milanovića | Telegram.hr](#)

¹⁹ [Osobe evakuirane iz Gaze hrvatskim vlastima dužne tisuće eura za avionske karte \(dnevnik.hr\)](#)