



Weekly Briefing

Croatia external relations briefing:
Obstructive Narratives in Croatia's Foreign Policy towards the EU
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Obstructive Narratives in Croatia's Foreign Policy towards the EU

Summary

In November 2023 the European Parliament voted on a proposal to amend the EU Treaties. The proposal passed, but certainly not with a landslide. The topic caused a divide between member states, as well as between Croatia's own representatives in the EU Parliament. This text analyses the narratives prevalent within Croatia's foreign policy towards the EU and showcases the (un)desirable political approaches that overshadow national interests in Croatian foreign policy.

Introduction

The long present discussion regarding the necessity for changes to the “constitution” of the European Union has gained new momentum in light of escalating geopolitical tensions and the EU's apparent paralysis in forging a unified response, proposing a more integrated and efficient Union. Views regarding the future role of the Union vary among member states, but also within the states. Croatia, a state that solidified its position in the European core by joining the Eurozone and Schengen Area in 2023, faces internal debates over its foreign policy orientation. Politicians applaud themselves for the triumphs of the first European decade but prevailing political discourse reveals that the process of Europeanization is far from complete. Croatian foreign policy shows all symptoms of afflictions present domestically, namely the entanglement of national interests with partisan ideologies and contentious historical legacies, and public debates tinned with ownership claims over patriotism. This article will introduce the debate around the latest vote on the proposal to amend the EU Treaties and the potential implications of the proposal for the EU and Croatia. Most significantly, it will assess the rhetoric and the substance of the discussion that arose between Croatian Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and wider political leadership on the topic and reflect on the general lack of clarity in Croatian foreign policy.

The Proposal of the Treaty Reform

On the 22nd of November 2023, the European Parliament voted on a proposal to amend the EU Treaties for the first time since the Treaty of Lisbon came into force in 2009. The proposal itself resulted from the Conference on the Future of Europe, a year-long practice of participatory democracy that brought 800 citizens from all the member states together at the EU level. Randomly selected participants produced a proposal that consisted of more than 240 amendments, with a comprehensive aim “to give citizens a stronger say and create a more effective European Union”.¹ Significantly, it addressed decision-making and voting procedures in the EU institutions, proposing that most matters that are currently decided by unanimity should be decided by qualified majority vote (QMV), including matters of “foreign affairs, external security and defence, external border policy, and cross-border-infrastructure”.² The only exceptions would remain the matters of the enlargement of the EU and changes to the fundamental principles of the EU as stated in Art. 2 TEU and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

The proposal passed with 305 votes for and 276 votes against and an accompanying resolution was adopted. Although this signals the strongest initiative for amending the Treaties since the Lisbon Treaty, there is hardly a collective drive behind it, as it was supported by fewer than half of the MEPs, including abstentions. For the resolution to have effect it is now for the heads of the member states in the European Council to decide by a simple majority to open the convention, an extraordinary meeting of representatives of the European institutions and the governments of the member states. If the European Council approves the opening of the Convention, representatives will come together to discuss potential changes. Any change would again require the agreement of all the countries, with the possibility of a veto blocking the process, as “unanimity is needed even to limit unanimity in the EU”.³ Some member states would likely also hold a referendum, as did Ireland during the process of introducing Lisbon Treaty, delaying the reform until approval on the next referendum. Clearly, this would be a long

¹European Parliament, “Future of the EU: Parliament’s Proposals to Amend the Treaties,” November 22, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20231117IPR12217/future-of-the-eu-parliament-s-proposals-to-amend-the-treaties>

² European Parliament, “Future of the EU: Parliament’s Proposals to Amend the Treaties,” November 22, 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20231117IPR12217/future-of-the-eu-parliament-s-proposals-to-amend-the-treaties>

³ Vincenzo Genovese, “Reforming the European Treaties, the Challenge Facing 2024,” *Euranet Plus*, January 11, 2024, <https://euranetplus-inside.eu/reforming-the-european-treaties-the-challenge-facing-2024/> .

and complex process, especially since several states, including Croatia, hold a hard line against the Treaty changes, judging them as dangerous and premature.

Out of Croatia's 12 MEPs, seven have voted against the proposal, four for the proposal, while the official vote of Romana Jerković has not been recorded. Christian Democrats of the European People's Party, Željana Zovko, Karlo Ressler, Tomislav Sokol and Sunčana Glavak who are all members of the Croatian Democratic Party (HDZ), the ruling party in Croatia that has almost consecutively been in power since the state's independence, have all voted against the resolution and so have the conservative and reformist Ladislav Ilčić and independent members Vilibor Sinčić and Mislav Kolakušić. Social Democrats Biljana Borzan, Predrag Matic and Toni Picula, all members of the strongest opposition party in Croatia, Socio Democratic Party of Croatia (SDP) and liberal Valter Flego have voted for the proposal. The split in the Croatian vote has caused a heated discussion and the two sides resolved to accuse one another of national treason.⁴ While two opposing opinions could have provided fertile ground for an educating and constructive debate over Croatia's future in the EU and the prospects for the Union itself, the discussion, unfortunately, adopted the traditional Croatian political narrative over who's the true Croat and who is the foe.

Foreign Policy Infused with Toxic Political Rhetoric

Before the vote took place, Croatian president Zoran Milanović, an ex-SDP member, declared that voting for the abandonment of the unanimity requirement in EU decision-making equals high treason.⁵ After the vote, Flego resorted to accusations along the party lines pointing out that members of the parties that nominated Milanović were precisely the one that voted yes and rhetorically asked if SDP is guilty of treason.⁶ Much of these unpleasantries can be attributed to pre-election campaigns given the parliamentary and presidential elections approaching this year. However, politicians monopolizing patriotism in order to delegitimize the opposition is a *modus operandi* in Croatia and takes roots from the 1990s, which were highly

⁴ "Glasanje u parlamentu EU-a koje je podijelilo hrvatske zastupnike," Hrvatska radiotelevizija, accessed February 15, 2024, <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/eu/glasanje-u-eu-parlamentu-koje-je-podijelilo-hrvatske-zastupnike-11163278>.

⁵ "Milanović Oštro o Ukidanju Jednoglasnosti u EU-u: 'Onaj Tko to Želi, Koji Nije Ništa Naučio Iz Ranijih Iskustava, Nek' Se Onda Ubije,'" accessed February 19, 2024, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovic-uznemiruje-je-da-se-u-eu-a-raspravlja-o-ukidanju-jednoglasnosti---806142.html>.

⁶ "Glasanje u parlamentu EU-a koje je podijelilo hrvatske zastupnike," <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/eu/glasanje-u-eu-parlamentu-koje-je-podijelilo-hrvatske-zastupnike-11163278>.

contextualized by a disputed claim to statehood and the War of Independence. HDZ, the party that won the first democratic elections in Croatia, was characterised by fierce nationalist rhetoric, echoing the people's desire for self-determination, and providing bases for the national identity. The adopted rhetoric, further strengthened through the war legacies and a decade of uninterrupted HDZ rule, spread a singular form of patriotism creating a public space in which only one version of what it means to be 'Croatian' exists and everything else is delegitimized. Thus, Croatian national identity was formed in a specific 'genesis environment' of state formation, where dominant actors had significant power to inspire a singular form of patriotism that shaped the national identity of future generations. As a result, voter preferences became increasingly linked to political parties' identities, rather than to their socio-economic programs, significantly diminishing the potential for effective scrutiny in the public sphere. While such methods of delegitimization against the opposition are prevalent in most political systems, in Croatia they often hold intuitive legitimacy and are therefore to a greater extent harmful to open public debates that are key to educated decision-making and political efficacy. While HDZ is the chief utilizer of the nationalist delegitimization of the opposition, the rhetoric is not reserved for the HDZ alone as we can commonly observe opposition actors such as Milanović equally claiming ownership over patriotism.

Croatia and the Europeanization

Amidst such harmful allegations, Sokol and Flego discussed their opposing views on a national television program. Sokol explained that the proposal aimed to abolish the veto right for crucial decisions on the EU level, including those in the area of joint external relations and security. He maintained that this would damage national interests as the concerned areas are pivotal for national sovereignty and veto rights remain one of the last mechanisms for protecting the national interests. Conversely, Flego argued that the EU's current form, where decisions crucial to the security of member states are blocked by the likes of Viktor Orban, is contrary to Croatian interests. He concluded that Croatian national interests lie with a dynamic, strong and efficient EU, requiring expedient reforms, holding a position that according to the dominant discourse in Croatia, amounts to high treason.⁷

⁷ "Glasanje u parlamentu EU-a koje je podijelilo hrvatske zastupnike", <https://vijesti.hrt.hr/eu/glasanje-u-eu-parlamentu-koje-je-podijelilo-hrvatske-zastupnike-11163278>."

A consensus is notably absent in Croatian foreign policy regarding the general degree to which the nation's interests align with those of the European Union. In the past, the central goals of Croatian foreign policy were clearly defined in becoming part of the EU, NATO, Eurozone and finally Schengen. To the population, these goals were presented as crucial to Croatia's prosperous future away from the Balkan legacies, and the image of Croatia as a true European state was propelled. In 2013, on the day when Croatia became a fully-fledged member of the EU, at the time president Josipović proclaimed that Croatia has always been, is and will remain European. Not only geographically but through the common values it shares with other member states.⁸ However, since reaching the "European milestones" this EU affiliation has become somewhat dimmed. Recently, president Milanović stated that Croatia's desire for EU membership was motivated by financial rather than ideological reasons.⁹ This has become a common narrative, reducing the Union to a sort of a bank for EU funds and a pathway for faster economic growth, however, simultaneously a threat to Croatian demography, as almost 400 000 people have emigrated since 2013¹⁰, and equally for national sovereignty. This unfortunate rhetoric ignores the reality of the frustration of Croatia's citizens with the domestic situation. While the economic climate undoubtedly shapes quality of life, it has become obvious that much of Croatia's young educated workforce has left not only in search of higher salaries, but precisely in search of those European values they could not find at home.¹¹ During the accession process to the Union, the efforts of the EU conditionality in Croatia were focused on strengthening the democratic form of governance, enforcing checks and balances, improving the independence of the judiciary and tackling issues of corruption through institutional and legal reforms. While Croatian institutions have been formally transformed through the process, in practice they stay highly politicized and instrumentalized by the dominant political actors, with no significant improvement achieved in tackling corruption and embodying the rule of law over the years. In many ways interests of Croatian citizens, if not those of political elites, precisely lie with becoming more ideologically tied to Europe and combatting legacies of a difficult past. However, the necessary normative shift of values in Croatia is precluded by both the toxic nationalist rhetoric and stubborn Euroscepticism. Mistrust shared among many smaller

⁸ "Josipović: Dan kada su se ostvarili snovi!," Dnevnik.hr, accessed February 20, 2024,

<https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/josipovic-uskoro-ce-prva-europska-zora-nase-domovine---292809.html> .

⁹ "Milanović Oštro o Ukidanju Jednoglasnosti u EU-u: 'Onaj Tko to Želi, Koji Nije Ništa Naučio Iz Ranijih Iskustava, Nek' Se Onda Ubije,'" <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovic-uznemiruje-je-da-se-u-eu-a-raspravlja-o-ukidanju-jednoglasnosti---806142.html> .

¹⁰ "Jutarnji List - Hrvatska Je Od Nacionalno Homogene Zemlje Postala Zemlja s Desecima Tisuća Stranih Radnika," accessed February 23, 2024, <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/10eu-godina/preko-noci-postali-smo-zemlja-s-desecima-tisuca-stranih-radnika-a-sada-nas-ceka-nova-kljucna-faza-15351929> .

¹¹ "ODLJEV MOZGOVA Mladi odlaze jer ne mogu čekati 'pet života' dok Hrvatska postane uređeno društvo," November 23, 2022, <https://www.globalnovine.eu/drustvo/odljev-mozgova-mladi-odlaze-jer-ne-mogu-cekati-pet-zivota-dok-hrvatska-postane-uredeno-drustvo-5022096> .

European states towards the Franco-German influence is pronounced in Croatia. However, as can be observed from political statements comparing the prospect of a more integrated Europe to Yugoslavia and urging those supporting such ideals “to kill themselves”¹², Euroscepticism in Croatia is not only fuelled by worries regarding the asymmetric power dynamics within the Union but also by the nationalist populism and partisan agendas, creating a more destructive form of Euroscepticism.

Intersecting Interests in the Treaty Reform Debate

Holding a hard line against the Treaty changes, MEP Sokol pointed out that the existence of veto rights in areas is crucial as it is often used by smaller member states to receive concessions in some other areas where qualified majority voting is used. In that sense, the veto right does remain a significant mechanism for preserving national interests, both when used to secure interests in the context of the decision concerned and when used to secure unrelated concessions. The strategic veto has long been utilized by member states in a *quid pro quo* game to obtain national gains, for example, by Slovenia who used a veto against Croatia’s EU membership over a bilateral territory dispute. However, “the reputational costs associated with the use or threat of veto have fallen in the last decade”, leading to more arbitrary use.¹³ Additionally, consensus-seeking stance has generally fallen among the member states in recent years due to a rise in the EU norm contestation by the right-wing populist governments. This issue is likely to additionally worsen as “the 2024 European Parliament elections could see a major shift to the right in many countries, with populist radical right parties gaining votes and seats across the EU”.¹⁴

These internal shifts in the EU come at a time of serious geopolitical crises and raise worries about the possible institutional paralysis in the face of challenges that could decide its future. Calls for more unity in foreign policy and security have only intensified with every crisis, from Eurozone and migration crises to geopolitical rivalry between the US and China.

¹² “Milanović Oštro o Ukidanju Jednoglasnosti u EU-u: ‘Onaj Tko to Želi, Koji Nije Ništa Naučio Iz Ranijih Iskustava, Nek’ Se Onda Ubije,” accessed February 19, 2024, <https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovic-uznemiruje-je-da-se-u-eu-a-raspravlja-o-ukidanju-jednoglasnosti---806142.html> .

¹³ Cecilia Navarra and Lenka Jančová with Isabelle Ioannides “Qualified majority voting in common foreign and security policy”, European Parliament Research Service, August 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS_STU\(2023\)740243_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/740243/EPRS_STU(2023)740243_EN.pdf) .

¹⁴ “Anti-EU Populism: MEP Elections to Deliver Gains to Far-Right,” Malta Today, accessed February 21, 2024, https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/ewopej/127503/antieu_populism_mep_elections_to_deliver_gains_to_far_right .

The re-emerging concern that the potential re-election of Trump in the US government would mean the dismantling of NATO, further stressed the need for the European strategic autonomy in the areas of defense and foreign policy. The war in Ukraine accelerated the European Union's progress towards strategic autonomy, but also revealed structural vulnerabilities, exemplified by Hungary's persistent obstruction of European measures to aid Ukraine, including a €50 billion financial support package. Although the EU recently approved the package after months of deadlock there is a crippling fear that EU policy is susceptible to both internal blackmail and third-country influence, and that the Union with its current limitations will not be able to support Ukraine without the help of the United States.¹⁵ Analysts emphasize that discarding the unanimity requirement would enable the European Union to pursue a more proactive foreign policy. This change would allow the EU to move beyond the constraints of seeking minimal consensus and implement more assertive sanction regimes to safeguard its collective interests, thereby significantly enhancing its efficiency.¹⁶ Additionally, it would allow further enlargements of the Union without risking the efficacy of the institutions. The way that the Union emerges from these crises will define its position on the global stage and accordingly the position of its member states. Croatia is a small and open economy in a relatively unsettled neighbourhood. Its prosperity and security are unquestionably linked to the strength of the European Union. Additionally, it is the state holding the longest EU external land border in the relatively unsteady Balkans. Reforms allowing sustainable enlargement towards the region would greatly benefit Croatia, allowing it to enjoy more stability and a significant position among the new member states.

Ensuring that the Union emerges stronger and more resilient after the current geopolitical crises is in the interest of its member states. However, this does not mean that smaller states should take their particular position within the Union for granted. The use of QMV in the EU Council raises a risk for smaller states to be outvoted since along the first deciding parameter, the number of states, QMV uses a second parameter, the percentage of the EU population, giving the bigger states more influence on the decision-making. Balanced yet determined foreign policy is needed to reach a compromise that allows the Union to develop with more confidence, while at the same time protecting the individual interests of its smaller members. Such compromise is in the interest of all member states as any forcefully produced obligations

¹⁵ María R. Sahuquillo, "Charles Michel: 'A Defeat for Ukraine Would Have Devastating Effects for Europe and the World,'" EL PAÍS English, February 22, 2024, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2024-02-22/charles-michel-a-defeat-for-ukraine-would-have-devastating-effects-for-europe-and-the-world.html> .

would lack internal legitimacy and would likely produce systematic deviation by the outvoted member states from the reached decisions, leading to more conflicted rather than united Union. Instead, small states would need to be provided securities, for example by adjusting voting 'weights' in specific areas relevant to small countries' interests, ensuring a fair calculation. However, as can be observed in case of Croatia, the paradigms required for building such a compromise are currently absent. Without a significant shift towards not only a joint culture in security, but towards a comprehensive culture of trust and solidarity across spheres, the greatest threat to the future of the Union will continue to come from within.

Conclusion

As changing the Treaties requires unanimity, the vote discussed in this article served primarily as a catalyst for initiating the conversation about necessary changes to the European framework. With every crisis, be it through Treaty changes or less formal processes, the EU will either integrate further or decline in its relevance. It is hard to imagine how the latter scenario could benefit any of its smaller states, including Croatia. Thus, not opening this conversation would have been regretful, to say the least. However, the processes of transformation happening within and around the Union are complex, offering no clear-cut solutions and undoubtedly putting pressure on delicate national interests. Unfortunately, constructive paradigms necessary to facilitate these crucial discussions are hindered in Croatia, due to the prevalence of toxic-nationalist and party-centric rhetoric. To navigate the current global landscapes in accordance with national interests, Croatia's foreign policy will have to break apart from its destructive path dependency and adopt a proactive strategic approach, prioritizing long-term advantages over short-term, ideological party-centric interests and grandiose political narratives.