

# Where Does Croatia Stand Right Now on Its European Path?

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*Up to this moment more than 50% of measures envisaged in the Implementation Plan have been carried out. Croatia has succeeded in adopting a strategy combining our own priorities with the priorities stated in the Commission's recommendations. The political requirements set by the EU as a measure of Croatia's political readiness and desire to become a part of the European family have not yet been fully met. The Croatian Government remains committed to make headway in meeting the political requirements by the end of this year 2002. The National Programme of the Republic of Croatia for Association with the European Union is about to be finished and it will become the principal steering mechanism in the Croatian Government's activities regarding the implementation of the Agreement, as well as all other activities aimed to bring the country nearer and nearer to the European Union. Croatian priority goal and task is to prove that it is capable of joining other candidate countries which will become EU members in the second round of enlargement. For our part, we shall show and prove that Croatia deserves the EU and that the EU deserves Croatia.*

**Key words:** Stabilisation and Association Agreement, Croatia, European integration, Croatian policy toward EU, implementation progress

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to try to answer to the following questions: Where does Croatia stand right now on its way towards the European Union? Are we heading on full speed, or are we waiting on the roadside to lane in?

Namely, if one trusts only what the media say, he may get an impression that **the pace of the European integration process is slowing down**, that the whole process is even taking a reverse direction. That is not true, however, although one may talk about a certain political slowdown. This denial can be corroborated by a series of not only technical but also political measures being taken to honour Croatia's obligations assumed under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and to create preconditions for

applying for EU membership early next year. What are the reasons to say this? As an answer, only a few activities should be mentioned that have been undertaken, those which have remained unjustly overshadowed by more attractive media comments on Croatia's dealings with the Hague Tribunal, yet these activities are of exceptional importance for Croatia's continued rapprochement to the European Union.

On the occasion of the first anniversary of signing the SAA, on 29 October, 2002, stock of its implementation has been taken, very successfully, it might be said. Up to this moment more than 50 per cent of measures envisaged in the Implementation Plan have been or are being carried out. Such a picture is also presented in the document entitled **A Report on Croatia's progress in the implementation of obligations assumed under the Stabilisation and Association Agreement from its signing to November 2002**, adopted by the Croatian Govern-

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ment at its last week's session. The document particularly deals with the implementing recommendations given by the European Commission in its first report on the Stabilisation and Association Process and compares what has been accomplished with the measures envisaged in the SAA Implementation Plan as a basis for the fulfilment of all assumed obligations. It makes clear that Croatia has succeeded in adopting a strategy combining its own priorities with the priorities stated in the Commission's recommendations. The document will be submitted to the European Commission as Croatia's initial contribution to the next regular report on the Stabilisation and Association Process, since it is expected that the key measures, especially the legislative ones, defined in the Implementation Plan will be carried out for a great part by the end of the current year. In order to maintain the progress in honouring Croatian obligations under the Agreement, and reluctant to carry some obligations over to the next year, a series of measures originally planned for December have been shifted to November. Thus their implementation has been ensured by the end of the year and showed that the current Government is determined not to be delayed on its European way.

The political requirements set by the EU as a measure of Croatia's political readiness and desire to become a part of the European family have not yet been fully met. The Croatian Government remains committed to make headway in meeting the political requirements by the end of the year 2002. Recently the Government has adopted document on Reform of Judiciary, which is already under way. Last week, at its session, the Government also adopted a **conclusion on a series of political requirements to be met by the end of this year**. By the end of November the final draft of the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities is to be prepared and presented to the Parliament for the second reading; besides, a schedule is to be drawn up for defining a legal framework concerning the freedom of the media, including the Croatian Radio & Television (HRT) Bill for the first reading. Among other things, by the end of the year the Croatian Government will consider the possibility of taking care of the former holders of tenancy rights returning to the areas other than the areas of special state concern. This requires an analysis of the economic situation plus proposed measures for removing the existing obstacles to the development of these areas and thus ensuring a speedier approach in addressing the economic problems encountered by the areas of special state concern. Also prepared by the end of the year will be a proposed National Strategy for the Roma, a

Plan for Ratification of the Council of Europe conventions acceded to but not yet ratified by Croatia, a plan for accession to the conventions being a part of *acquis communautaire* which Croatia still has not acceded to, and a plan for transposition into national legislation of the provisions of the conventions Croatia has both accepted and ratified. By fulfilling its obligations in a timely manner, Croatia is keen to prove that it is meeting all the requirements for joining the candidate countries which will become EU Member States in the second round of enlargement.

## 2. The Relevance of the National Programme

It should also be noted that the **National Programme of the Republic of Croatia for Association with the European Union** is about to be finished after a three-month work of all government departments, and expected to be presented to the Government shortly for further procedure. Its importance derives from the fact that in the years to come it will be a principal steering mechanism in the Croatian Government's activities regarding the implementation of the Agreement, as well as all other activities aimed to bring the country nearer and nearer to the European Union. The Programme departs from individual government departments, their assignments, their priorities, the priorities set out in the Agreement, and the measures defined in the Implementation Plan, it links them and identifies their regulatory and economic effects and provides an estimate of resources required for carrying out the planned measures. Thus in terms of substance and method the Programme builds upon the SAA Implementation Plan. It should be emphasized that, while taking the experiences of the candidate countries into account, Croatia is preparing the National Programme on its own, without any support or contribution of the European Commission. How demanding this project is can well be illustrated by the fact that it comprises several hundred pages.

Of no lesser importance is the fact that the Croatian Government's operational mechanisms involve regular **bimonthly joint sessions of all its coordinations solely devoted to the European integration issues**. The first session of this kind was held on 6 November 2002. This newly introduced mechanism provides an opportunity to discuss and resolve some key issues at the minister or deputy minister level under Prime Minister's chairmanship and thus enhance the existing system of co-ordinating the affairs related to European integration.

Over the past several years the relations between Croatia and the European Union have greatly improved, especially in the wake of the signed SAA. The Agreement, in particular the activities initiated by the Croatian Government towards its implementation, clearly suggest that EU-Croatia relations are moving upward, but they also testify to Croatia's dedication and determination to reach its strategic goal – first associated, then full EU membership. With EU membership Croatia wants to achieve its own stability and prosperity, as well as to help ensure and maintain stability and prosperity in the region and Europe-wide.

All the aforesaid taken together, it is beyond doubt that the whole European integration process, involving the fulfilment of all political, legal, economic and administrative conditions for membership, is continuously evolving. Many measures taken are in fact an investment in the future and their full impact still remains to be seen. That's actually what the European integration process is all about. The reforms are being undertaken for Croatia's own sake, for the transformation of its social and economic systems, and the EU membership is just a terminal station on that route.

### 3. The Target Date

In this context, it is often remarked that **1 January 2007** as the target date by which Croatia intends to meet all requirements for full EU membership is just a view from the ivory tower called Ministry for European Integration. So it has to be repeated: yes, Croatia intends to meet all requirements for full EU membership, but whether or not it will actually join the EU depends not only on Croatia's preparedness, but also on the willingness of the European Union to accept new members after the large-scale enlargement due on 1 May 2004, a deadline much talked about these days, and the internal EU reforms after the Convention on the Future of Europe and the next inter-governmental conference. The said goal of the Croatian Government can be reached, provided that the present SAA implementation dynamics is upheld. To this end, emphasis should be laid not merely on the harmonisation of legislation, but rather on the implementation of such legislation in practice. The credibility of Croatia's aspirations for the EU candidate status will first of all depend on its success in implementing the SAA which paves the way to the ultimate EU membership. The implementation of the SAA is a test case for Croatia – whether or not it will succeed in

carrying out major reforms aimed to harmonise its legal and economic system and thus enhancing Croatia's readiness to contribute to the political and economic stability in South-Eastern Europe.

By the end of 2003 Croatia will pass this exam and meet nearly all the obligations assumed under the SAA. And then it will embark on the next stage, because at the present stage already it has started to fulfil obligations envisaged for full membership. Indeed, by the end of 2006 the Croatian Government is determined to reach the required level of preparedness for EU membership. This can be achieved only through strict adherence to deadlines set in the Implementation Plan and the future National Programme. In this respect there is no manoeuvring room in spite of all the difficulties Croatia is faced with. It should be pointed out once again that the European integration process is not an exclusive property of the Ministry for European Integration, it is a part of the mission of all government bodies within their respective responsibilities. Hence the key responsibility for the SAA implementation lies with individual government departments.

As the year is drawing to its close, we are both summing up what we have done so far and turning to the coming year. As already said, **the year 2003** is the year in which Croatia will apply for the EU membership and make another step along its European path. In this it counts on the support of its friends within the EU Member States, present and future. It hopes that the two upcoming EU presidencies, Greek in the first, Italian in the second half of the year, will put on their lists of priorities the relations with the countries involved in the Stabilisation and Association Process. Such announcements could be heard in Athens during the presentation of the Greek presidency of the European Union. Croatia welcomes them!

Croatia believes in the "*enlargement after enlargement*" to proceed on the same principles and conditions as it has been evolving so far. With such expectations in mind, its attention is focused on the Copenhagen meeting of the European Council in mid-December. Considering the imminent first round of enlargement, it is high time for EU to properly define a link between the two parallel-running processes in Europe. These are the Stabilisation and Association Process in South-eastern Europe and the EU enlargement process. The message of the Union should be: yes, there will be enlargement beyond enlargement, enlargement should be enlarged. Croatia expects the Stabilisation and Association

Agreement to become a bridge linking the association processes with the second round of the EU enlargement. Each State of South-Eastern Europe should be capable of crossing the bridge by virtue of its capacities and merits in adopting the European standards and criteria. This link must not be just an outcome of a political decision. It must be based on the individually assessed progress made by the countries involved in the stabilisation and association process in pursuing their commitments under the SAA. The stabilisation and association process is well conceived, but it can take root and survive only if proved able to turn out new EU candidates.

What in reality is a matter of the utmost importance for Croatia is that the EU, in the declaration at the end of the Danish presidency, upon completion of the accession negotiations, sent out a clear political signal for the next round of enlargement. This declaration should map out the next enlarge-

ment phase; define a time frame for preparing new EU candidates. That is where Croatia could be seen now!

Croatia's priority goal and task is to prove that it is capable of joining other candidate countries which will become EU members in the second round of enlargement. For its part, Croatia will show and prove that it deserves the EU and that the EU deserves Croatia.

Every journey starts with the first step, as a saying goes. On its way to Europe Croatia has already made some steps, many others are still ahead. It is up to Croatia whether on this way it will be steadily marching on, or two steps forward – one step backwards – or one step forward – two steps backwards. I firmly believe in marching on. And may these steps not be our burden, but our fun and joy. ■



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