

Two hundred days of Croatian foreign policy

Tonino Picula *

Original paper
UDC 327(497.5)
Received in June 2000

In the past six months Croatian officials made over fourthly state visits to foreign countries, and approximately the same number of foreign visits were made to Croatia. Following the January parliamentary elections the newly elected government changed the international picture of Croatia and created a new, forward-looking vision of its foreign policy. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs aims to establish Croatia's image as a co-operative partner country and no longer as a „case country“. Croatian foreign priorities are in joining international organisation, integrations and alliances such as EU and NATO and co-operating with the countries that share the same interests and values. In less than half a year Croatia has entered the NATO Partnership for Peace programme, signed the WTO protocol, a feasibility study for associated EU membership has been completed and accepted, and the negotiations on joining in the stabilisation and association process are scheduled to start soon.

Keywords: Foreign policy priorities, international relations, democratic change.

1. Introduction

This paper is titled "200 days of the Croatian Government's foreign policy: Diplomatic successes, challenges and views of the international community". Frankly, when it comes to the Foreign Ministry, it is difficult to say whether it should read "200 already" or simply "200 days" of the new Government's foreign policy. Contrary to a sense of time, it is better to opt for "only 200 days", because so many things have happened or have been done over the past few months that it seems impossible to squeeze them into 200 days. Speaking only of high-level visits, more than 80 have been made, more precisely, 43 to and about 40 from Croatia. Of these, more than 20 on the level of the heads of state, 18 of the heads of government, 24 of the foreign ministers. But one could also say "200 days already", because no matter how much one has succeeded in doing so far, an

awful lot of work is still ahead in terms of presenting Croatia abroad as a partner and as a friend, political, economic and cultural.

But what has been done over the past 200 days? And what is new in the Croatian foreign policy? The biggest change of all is, of course, the changed face of Croatia, for which, however, credit goes to the Croatian citizens who have refused to accept the kind of image of Croatia that the world, with the help of our previous politicians, was forming. At the parliamentary elections in January new people were given a mandate to make the vision of a progress-oriented, prosperous and accepted Croatia come true. Our Government's aim was to make Croatia look in the world as a partner state, no longer a case state.

Croatia's strategic foreign policy goal is the EU and NATO membership, a goal supported by a vast majority of the Croatian citizens. In terms of

* Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs

the clarity and extent of her foreign policy commitment, Croatia is in the mainstream of the European developments.

Although the term "Euroatlantic integration" tends to assume mythic features, in Croatia's case it is not anything like breeding a myth or illusion about a sudden rise of the standard of living. Integration into EU and NATO stands for the integration into the communities of the countries sharing the same interests and values, it is motivated by a strong desire to become an active part of the coalition of the countries having a political will and ability to defend and promote the fundamental values of democracy and the basic rights of every citizen.

The imminent Summit of the EU and the countries undergoing the stabilisation and association process, planned to take place in Zagreb in November this year, should clarify the pace and substance of further relations between these two groups of countries, as well as reconfirm their policy according to which all countries willing and able, and judged on individual basis, are to be integrated into the central EU institutions as soon as possible.

Many things began to change in Croatia a few months ago. But these reforms have not been imposed from the outside, or undertaken because we are keen to jump the queue and catch up in a rush with the rest of the democratic Europe and world. It is because democratisation, combined with political and social reforms, is imperative for Croatia's progress and better future. Nobody can do that job for us, and there is no reason nor time to defer it. The whole parts of Europe are undergoing a period of transformation. Unlike the time behind us, Croatia now plays an active role in these processes and is perceived in a positive way with an entirely up-to-date foreign policy identity.

2. PfP, Quadrilateral, Stability Pact

Since January, a lot has also been done in a purely operational sense of the word. Croatia has

joined the Partnership for Peace, the Feasibility Study has been completed and accepted, we are awaiting a very early start of negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Process, the Protocol on the WTO membership has been signed, the Council of Europe monitoring mission has been concluded. Croatia has improved her bilateral relations with the neighbouring countries, strengthened contacts with other transition countries. Croatia has been highly active within the regional initiatives, especially the Stability Pact. Croatia has extended and intensified her bilateral relations with all the countries of Western and Northern Europe, established partnership relations with USA, started an intense dialogue with a series of overseas countries, such as Israel, China and Islamic countries.

There are valid grounds in our belief that excellent relations with the neighbouring countries can be a short-cut on Croatia's way to the mainstream of the European institutions.

However, the policy of good neighbourliness should not be understood as just a means to reach a goal other than that. On the contrary, what links Croatia to her neighbours is a lot of shared interests and awareness that it is much easier to realise them through co-operation than conflicts. Of course, we find it much easier to build good relations with those neighbours with whom we share our political ideas.

Croatia belongs to three regions: Mediterranean, Central Europe and Southeastern Europe. More than a decade of instability and war conflicts in the area of the former Yugoslavia has resulted in a perception of Croatia as a country of only one of these regions, that of Southeastern Europe, whereby a major or part of her political, cultural and economic identity has been ignored. It can be said that over the past nine months we have managed to change this image to a certain extent and that Croatia has reopened and strengthened her Mediterranean and Central European dimension. Here, we are primarily referring to the beginning of the Adriatic-Ionian initiative and Croatia's joining of the quadrilateral cooperation together with Italy, Slovenia and Hungary. Indeed, it is of utmost importance for Croatia to de-

velop balanced relations with all the neighbours in the region with whom she shares common interests.

In the last nine months, the relations with Bosnia-Herzegovina have seen substantial changes, from the decision on full transparency of the financial assistance to the refusal of political tutorage over the Croats in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As one of three constituent peoples in this country, the Croats can best exercise their rights and equality by actively engaging in all levels of decision-making, and the Croatian Government, with its democratic legitimacy, is in much better position to give them a hand in their efforts.

In the neighboring Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, elections are scheduled in a week. Not only the future of this country but also the stability of the region at large depend on the outcome.

However, these elections could only be the beginning, not the functioning democracy. Possible personal changes mean nothing without the change in policy. Political parties cannot be the sole instrument of change; the involvement of the social - not only the political -, opposition to Milošević is important. What is needed is a civil involvement in order not to reduce the political dynamism to a bare conflict of political elites. Like other countries in transition, Serbia, too, will have to face a number of requirements to follow the rules of democracy, like the issues of the refugee return, the succession to the former SFRJ, or the co-operation with ICTY in the Hague.

One of the foreign policy priorities of Croatia is broader regional co-operation. With the above mentioned Adriatic-Ionian Seas initiative and the Quadrilateral, Croatia participates in the operation of the Central European Initiative, the Alps-Adria Working Community, the Working Community of the Danube Regions, the Southeast-European Co-operation Initiative, the Southeast-European Co-operation Process, and finally, the Stability Pact within which Croatia plays an active role in carrying out a number of important projects and initiatives. The most important thing about all forms of regional co-opera-

tion is that there is a common interest, that the co-operation is targeted and transparent, and that the countries to which the projects relate are subjects, not objects, of such initiatives. Croatia is not interested in the inflation of regional initiatives in their own right, especially not if they are to lead to an institutionalization that would slow down or put on hold the integration within a broader, European framework. Acting within the regional initiatives, we contribute to interconnecting, co-operation and better understanding in our environment.

For Croatia, the development of relations with the countries that have made progress in transition, like the Visegrad group and the Baltic states, is also important because we share the experience of the past and the challenges of the future. The experience of other countries in transition is invaluable for understanding and coping with the process of economic transformation and adjustment to the standards of the European Union and NATO. These countries are a strong lobbying force, too, because they share the interest in joining the central institutions of a united Europe as soon as possible.

3. Bilateral Relations

Bilateral relations with the countries of Western and Northern Europe, and the United States of America, have also been significantly consolidated and are growing into a partnership. Although Croatia is not large in terms of territory or population, it is right to believe that our complex experience of transition, our experience in democratization and reforms, our position and economic capacities, make Croatia an interesting country for co-operation and multi-layered relations. The distances between our countries are smaller than suggested by the border practice, as we share the common interests, the same values, a good portion of our common history. There is no reason why not to begin with a joint participation in creating conditions for one's own future that is to respect our special individual characteristics and enhance the individual capacities through co-operation. Croatia will endeavor to show in practice that it is a trustworthy partner and counterpart, in order

to create together a society with evenly distributed rights and duties, obligations and opportunities.

It is only natural that Croatia, as a European country, sees its immediate needs and interests provided for in its direct surroundings, but it does not mean that we do not understand and feel the need for strengthening dialogue with countries divided from us by oceans and thousands of miles. The Croatians have always been able seamen, both literally and metaphorically, and the development of relations with non-European countries will surely be one of our priorities in the coming period. One special link in such relations can be the numerous Croatian emigrants. In any case, the epoch of globalization we live in open possibilities for relations that at first sight do not seem logical. The globalization made many terms denoting distance or size relative. It should not be understood either as another utopian project for improving the world or as a sophisticated package for a system of exploitation. The Republic of Croatia belongs to a group of transition countries that can build their current experience of deep social changes into the reform processes of global organizations.

Conceptually, one of the major priorities of the Croatian foreign policy is perhaps the development of economic diplomacy. The world we live in is marked with both threats and opportunities that reach across state borders, with economic links becoming even stronger than the political ones. The logic of a new age is getting the upper hand, in which knowledge becomes the most expensive stock on the market, and the wealth of a country is measured by the riches of its scientific and technological resources. Our country is still little familiar to the world, therefore, a major effort is being made in presenting and promoting the Croatian economic capacities, from tourism to the pharmaceutical industry, from the development potential to sophisticated workforce.

4. Conclusion

Of course, there are a number of challenges and problems to face. This is this paper started with

the question: has it been 200 days only or 200 days already of the new Croatian foreign policy. In our relations to some of the neighboring countries, one of the major problems remains the return of refugees, and a sad figure of only 400 Croat refugees who have returned to the area of Banja Luka and Posavina. The effects of the aggression against Croatia are to be fully eliminated - Croatia still has 35,000 displaced persons from Croatia who cannot go home because there is no money for the reconstruction. Some of the Croatian territory is still contaminated with landmines; there is not enough money for mine clearing, so as to enable useful management of such land. The construction of traffic infrastructure, especially Corridor V, is also a challenge, as well as coping with security problems like illegal trade, illegal immigration, international organized crime.

This primarily includes technical and historical adjustment to the standards of the European Union and NATO, and above all hard work on developing friendly and partnership relations with all factors included in the complex system of international relations. ■