

Croatia and European Integration

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The public opinion toward joining the EU was very positive from the early nineties, however the policy of EU towards Croatia as well as former Croatian policy toward Europe resulted in Croatia having to wait three years to be admitted to the Council of Europe. During the past ten years, Croatian politicians failed to acquire enough information on European integration, while the Croatian public failed to recognise that EU is above all an association of high democratic standards, institutions and procedures, but also of free movement of goods, services, people and capital. Croatia also has to face the fact of conditionality or regional approach and cooperation from which, however, she can still get some advantages and endeavour. Within this context, Croatia should continue with democratic, institutional, administrative and economic reforms as well as take initiative ahead of the neighbouring countries.

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1. Introduction

If, on the eve of the first multi-party elections in 1990, a poll, or even a referendum, had been conducted on whether its citizens wanted Croatia to become a member of the then European Community, the great majority of them would have probably answered in the affirmative. To Croatian citizens Europe meant at the time returning to where they belonged, but also escape from the Balkans and Yugoslavia; it meant their other identity, of which they had been deprived, and hope of finding protection, rather than access to the exclusive club of the rich. This is why, in addition to national symbols, you could see only the European flag on their cars, shop windows, demonstrations in Croatia and abroad. But, had you asked at the time those same citizens what they knew about European integration structures, you would have been surprised at the paucity of replies and the ignorance of facts. You would not have obtained much better answers from the politicians, either. Few had even a rough idea of what was contained in the body of European legislation, both that

part passed by the European Council and what is usually called the *acquis communautaire*, a rare non-English term accepted in the otherwise English-speaking Union.

However, the unfortunate policy practised by Europe in relation to Croatia, especially before its international recognition, but also the policy practised by the Croatian President towards Europe, resulted in Croatia having to wait three years to be admitted to the Council of Europe, whilst neglecting cooperation within CEFTA, so that today it is hardly accepted in the waiting room of the European Union. The former Croatian President continuously insisted that Croatia did not belong to the Balkans and did not want to enter into any Balkan associations, but was leading the country, by his unreasonable and stubborn policy, precisely into the Balkans, which rejects Europe as its common home.

In some European quarters, which still nurture nostalgic hopes of a new Balkan association, such a policy was welcome. In a regional community of the type they had in mind, Croatia was needed as a motor to drive the whole region forward, but

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their main objective was to use this community in order to weaken what they consider to be the German zone of influence.

2. Failure of the political class

But, let us return to Croatia and to its possible rapprochement and accession to the European Union. From this viewpoint, a critical but constructive scrutiny is indicated of what Croatia should undertake and what the Union can do to make this work easier. During the past ten years, Croatian politicians did not take the trouble of acquiring enough information about European integration, or of sharing this information with their citizens. The Croatian public are not quite aware that the EU is above all an association of high democratic standards, institutions and procedures, but also of free movement of goods, services, people and capital. Unlike the other EU candidates, the political class in Croatia has not even tried to predict when Croatia might become an EU member, what efforts are required for this, and what negative and positive repercussions this would entail.

In Croatia, the so-called *acquis communautaire*, comprising some 30,000 pages of mandatory EU agreements, regulations and directives, is something of a *terra incognita* even to politicians. Nobody has yet brought before the public the issue of whether Croatia had any differential advantages - apart from its geographic position and a relatively unpolluted environment - from which it could derive benefit as part of the European Union. There are not many of those who have tried to figure out and explain to their fellow citizens what accession to the EU would mean for Croatian agriculture, fisheries, shipbuilding, tourism, transport, banking, industry, electric power production...

The Croatian political class has failed the test. Thus, for example, the Croatian public is not aware that some relatively poor countries are to become EU members before Croatia does and that the "European pie" will grow smaller at an ever faster rate, or that, since the introduction of the common currency, the euro, the Union has been driving in "double gear".

Croatia has no option but to face these, and other, unavoidable facts, such as the so-called *conditionality*, i.e. regional approach and cooperation as a condition, to use the wording of the Stabil-

ity Pact adopted in June 1999. However, even in this obligatory regional cooperation Croatia could derive certain advantages and endeavour to re-establish cooperation and links with Bosnia and Herzegovina on the basis of mutual respect and common interests. Croatia should also strive to renew good relations with Slovenia and Hungary, and to find a *modus coexistendi et operandi* with Montenegro.

3. Reforms as a precondition

Within this context, Croatia should continue with democratic, institutional, administrative and economic reforms, since these represent conditions for association. In addition to this, owing to its geographic position, Croatia could take initiative ahead of the neighbouring countries in some of the areas where the Union extends special assistance to candidate countries, such as transport infrastructure and environmental protection. The Helsinki Trans-European Network, the Danube Convention and the Mediterranean Action Plan provide a good general framework for the modernisation of European transport corridors in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for the environmental protection of the Sava-Danube basin and of the Adriatic confluence and the Adriatic Sea, all of which could be extremely beneficial for Croatia.

The European Union, for its part, should develop a more nuanced approach to Croatia as well as to Bosnia and Herzegovina - in political and material terms. It should keep in mind that Croatia has attained its long-withheld sovereignty by war and suffering, and that Bosnia and Herzegovina, in spite of the war and many victims, is still factually under international protectorate. Besides, the leading countries of the Union, which are pushing for a fast "reconciliation" between the aggressor and the attacked countries, should remember that after the Second World War the precondition for reconciliation with Germany was not just military victory over the Nazi regime and occupation of Germany, but also its denazification, while nothing similar has been attempted as yet with Milošević's Serbia.

The European Union must not overlook the fact that the public in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina does not understand very well the Union's assistance policy. The EU has, namely, granted twice as much assistance to FR Yugoslavia than to

Croatia between 1991 and 1999. It is even harder to understand the latest proposal of the EU Commission for the distribution of European aid to the countries of the so-called western Balkans within the framework of the Community Association and Reconstruction Assistance Programme for the 2000 to 2006 period. According to this proposal, out of the total of 5.5 billion euros, 2.3 billion (or 42%) would be allocated to Serbia, 1.1 billion (or 20%) to Kosovo, with the remaining states - Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania plus Montenegro, receiving only one and a half billion euros, or 27% of the total sum. The remaining funds would be used for the so-called regional cooperation and for other purposes.

The European public is well aware that the EU has considerably contributed towards the elimination of the war damage in Bosnia and Herzegovina and that it is doing the same in Kosovo today. But the Croatian public is also not forgetting that Milošević's Serbia, with Montenegro, inflicted on Croatia damage in the value of nearly 30 billion dollars, and that Croatia bore the brunt of reconstruction and of care for over one million refugees and displaced persons from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina largely on its own.

4. Conclusion

European policy is non-transparent in this respect, to say the least. That is why both the Croatian and the European publics are justifiably wondering whether these unequal criteria are the result of a lasting fondness of some leading European states for any Serbia at all, and whether Serbia can be expected under such conditions to change and de-imperialise itself. This state of things could be also caused by the fact that Europe itself is at an impasse. EU development has stagnated ever since the introduction of the euro, and Europe is wondering how to reform its own institutions, notably the Commission, how to reach consensus in the Council of Ministers, whether, and how, to give up the too short six-month presidency of the Union in alphabetical order, how, and at what rate, to open and expand towards the new, poorer countries...

Europe is also disunited over common defence and security, not to mention common foreign policy; it is in two minds over the need for a European con-

stitution and some sort of *Magna Charta*... so that all these problems are waiting for France when it takes over the presidency of the Union, the period in which Croatia is to start negotiations with the Union on "stabilisation and association".

This brief survey requires also a *post scriptum* in the style *in dubio - pro parvo!* European integration is, namely, an almost unquestionable 'must' for the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and none of them has any real freedom of choice in relation to the EU. The European Union, for its part, should bear in mind more than in the past that all of these countries carry the heavy burden of communist mentality, that in a way they are leaving the prison and entering the world of responsibility and maturity. But, at the very moment of attaining the capacity to decide on their own future, they are forced to start preparations to enter a fully regulated community, in which everything has been decided before them and without them, regulated and fixed, from trade and tariffs to quail hunting and cow races in the French Department of Landes... While, at the time decisions of this kind were being made in EU institutions, there was much wrangling over British, French, Italian and other interests, all of which are now embedded in the Union's regulations and directives.

Of course, no account was, or could be, taken of the specific interests of individual candidate countries at the time the EU created its laws, standards and procedures. This is that fixed, continental globalisation, which, as opposed to planetary globalisation, does not include deregulation but superregulation of many things, even when this goes against one of the fundamental principles of the Union, i.e. the principle of subsidiarity. European superregulation is offered to the candidate countries in the style of "take it or leave it!". This is why the pre-accession procedure does not provide for real negotiations that would consider the interests of both sides and lead to compromise but consists exclusively of an assessment of the level of adjustment to what is termed the *acquis communautaire*.

The trouble is therefore in that the new democracies will not have a real option whether to join the EU, as Switzerland and Norway had. It would be, however, natural and democratic for their citizens to decide on that, but not before being fully informed about European integration structures.