

# Struggling for the Future, Burdened by the Past: Croatia's Relations with the United Kingdom from Independence to Brexit

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## Abstract

*Apart from relations with its neighbours, Croatia's relations with the United Kingdom (UK) were undoubtedly its greatest international challenge since it won its independence in the early 1990s. Relations between the two countries during this period were frequently strained partly due to Zagreb's democratic shortcomings, but partly also due to competing visions of post-Cold War Southeast Europe and due to long-lasting biases rooted in Croatia's and Britain's conflicting policies during Yugoslavia's breakup and wars. Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013 offered an opportunity for the two countries to leave the burdens of their past behind, since Zagreb and London had similar preferences on a number of crucial EU policy fronts. However, Brexit changed everything. Croatia's future relations with the UK are likely to be determined by the nature of Brexit negotiations and the evolution of British policy toward the pace and direction of EU integration.*

## KEY WORDS:

*Croatia, United Kingdom, foreign relations, European Union*

The contrast between Croatia's standing in the international system today and its position in January 1992, when it was finally recognised by the member states of the European Community, could not be starker. Two and a half decades ago Croatia won its independence after barely surviving a brutal war that left thousands of its citizens dead, several hundred thousand homeless, and a third of its territory under occupation. Although internationally recognised, its territorial integrity was far from secured. Moreover, its relations with most European and world powers – partly on account of its pursuit of independence, and partly on account of these powers' policies during the war – were troublingly acrimonious. Twenty-five years ago, Croatia was attempting to ride the wave of international system changes in order to extricate itself from a troublesome regional status quo. Today, in the midst of a new round of tectonic shifts in the international system, Croatia is hardly keen to alter the regional or larger European status quo. It is a country at peace with its neighbours (despite frequent, though comparatively minor, tensions), desperate to maintain the protection it receives through the membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and European Union (EU).

Over the course of the same two and a half decades, the United Kingdom (UK) went through a completely opposite transformation of its standing in the international system. At the time of the end of the Cold War, Britain was engaged in a profound debate regarding its foreign policy strategy and the shift in its geopolitical position. The end of the Soviet threat, the reunification of Germany, and the process of deepening of European integration left Britain's political class torn over the redefinition of Britain's international priorities. Was Britain supposed to jump behind the steering wheel of European integration – to be “at the heart of Europe”, as the newly installed Prime Minister John Major exclaimed in November 1990 (Smith, G. 1992: 155) – or was it to remain on its side-lines? What role was Britain's “special relationship” with the United States (US) to play in its positioning in the budding EU? Considering the change in America's perception of Europe and the geopolitical transformation of the continent, was Britain on the verge of losing to a reunited Germany the position of the “pivot of the West” and a bridge between the US and Europe, and instead turning into “England under Henry VIII: a kingdom on the edge of a European system, attempting both to play a part in continental politics and to assert its independence of continental constraints” (Wallace 1992: 424)?

Although the British political class welcomed these questions with trepidation, a new status quo in Europe – that was highly beneficial to the UK – developed rather quickly. London was at the forefront of shaping new European political and security structures, all the while building on its special relationship with Washington, and maintaining its connections throughout its former Empire (Jović 2007). Then, however, came Brexit. Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee under Margaret Thatcher and John Major, Sir Percy Cradock, thought that one of the greatest errors of modern British foreign policy was treating Europe “[not] as if it was truly our future, rather as if it was a threat, or an adversary” (Cradock 1997: 207). That error, simmering on and under the surface of British politics for five decades, materialised in the summer of 2016 into a de facto capture of the ruling Conservative Party by its Eurosceptic wing and the consequent departure of the UK from the EU after a bitterly fought and extremely divisive referendum campaign. From one of the pillars of European political and economic security, Britain suddenly turned into one of the largest threats to Europe’s geopolitical status quo. The role reversal between Britain and Croatia, if one compares their positions toward Europe’s present and future, was complete.

Such a clear disparity in the direction and nature of change in the international positions of Croatia and Britain over the past twenty-five years, coupled with Britain’s traditionally low interest in Eastern Europe, could lead us to conclude that relations between the two countries during this period were at best inconsequential. The obvious disproportion in their power capabilities may also lead us to conclude that their relations could only have been unidirectional: that is, Croatia could only have been an object of British foreign policy, never a truly independent subject in the interaction between the two countries, no matter the obvious power imbalance. Both of those conclusions, however, would be incorrect. The story of relations between Croatia and Britain is by no means a thin volume depicting the powerless simply adjusting to the wishes of the powerful. In the two and a half decades of its independence, Croatia faced many foreign policy challenges: from securing its territorial integrity to establishing functional relations with its neighbours and positioning itself firmly within the political, economic, and security structures of the EU and NATO. Arguably no other country outside of Southeast Europe (SEE) created more obstacles for Croatia in the completion of those foreign

policy challenges than Britain. Considering the extraordinary changes in Europe's political architecture that we are currently witnessing, it is time to take stock of the evolution of the relations between these two countries. This article traces Croatia's relations with the UK from its struggle for independence in the early 1990s until the present day, with particular attention devoted to the one intervening variable without which those relations could not be properly understood: the European Union. The article does that in the hope of better understanding the future of not only relations between these two countries, but also of the European project and the UK's policies toward its continued development.

## **The "original sin": Britain, Croatia and the breakup of Yugoslavia**

Britain's policy toward the violent breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, later labelled by Brendan Simms (2002) as Britain's "unfinest hour", was founded upon two closely related dynamics from the late 1980s: 1) London's devotion to the continuing existence of the Yugoslav federation, and 2) the consequent blind spot for the campaign of Slobodan Milošević's Serbia for control over a recentralized Yugoslavia. The response of the Foreign Office to Ambassador Peter Hall's distressed 1989 and 1990 reports about the harmful consequences of Milošević's campaign was that "they really would much prefer it not to be happening" and that Yugoslavia simply had to remain united (Hall 2005). This position of the Foreign Office was in no way exceptional. During this period, all Western powers – including (West) Germany which did not deviate from the mainstream until real war began in the summer of 1991 – strongly believed not only that the Yugoslav republics had to stick together, but also that they would politically and economically benefit from steady centralisation. This policy preference essentially implied that the Western powers supported Milošević and not Yugoslavia's northwest republics in the constitutional debates which consumed the federation's political landscape in the years leading up to war. It also matched the West's larger policy preference regarding the preservation of stability in Eastern Europe. As the Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd later put it, "We had no strategic interest in the Balkans, no

commercial interest, no selfish interest at all. We simply wished that quiet should return" (Hurd 2005).

Hurd's image of Britain simply wishing for "quiet" to return to a region in which it had no particular strategic interests is, of course, only one part of the story. The larger and by far the more interesting part was Britain's strong policy activism in pursuit of that "quiet" once real war came to Slovenia and – to a far greater extent – Croatia: Whitehall's rejection of Slovenia's and Croatia's declarations of independence; its equivocation in condemning the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) use of force; its dogged opposition to any form of international military intervention – even in the most benign form of ceasefire monitors; its support for an arms embargo which cemented the vast military supremacy of Serbia and its allies for years to come; its determined efforts to halt the recognition of the Yugoslav republics; its refusal to establish diplomatic relations with Croatia for months after its recognition; and, last but not least, the neo-colonial abuse of historical imagery by a number of its diplomats and foreign policy makers who argued that the Yugoslav conflicts were steeped in the region's "ancient hatreds" (Glaurdić 2011). Contemporary perceptions of Croatia among British foreign policy makers and of Britain among their Croatian counterparts were decisively shaped during those first months of Croatia's struggle for independence – and neither country came out looking good. Croatia, largely due to its president Franjo Tuđman and his Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), was seen in Whitehall as the nationalist-run destroyer of Yugoslavia, whereas Britain was seen in Zagreb not only as the country protective of Milošević's Serbia and hostile to Croatia's independence, but also blind to the plight of a series of Croatian towns and villages falling prey to the onslaught of Belgrade's military machinery.

What could explain the content of Britain's activism during this period? More than a century ago Lord Salisbury remarked that "the commonest error in politics [is] sticking to the carcasses of dead policies" (Hill 1988: 26). London's decision to stick to the policy of keeping Yugoslavia united even after the troubled federation's descent into mayhem does have some explanatory power, though probably only when it comes to the earlier stages of the war in Croatia. The fact that a different approach was eventually advocated by a recently reunited Germany also did not help. To say that Britain was wary of a new European order dominated by

Germany would be an understatement (Glaudić 2011). Although London (as well as Paris) to a great extent based its policy toward Yugoslavia on the considerations of larger European developments at the time, this line of argumentation also has its limits. A more useful interpretation may be the one offered by James Gow who saw Britain's "pusillanimous realism" decisively contributing to the Western "triumph of the lack of will" to intervene militarily in the Yugoslav conflicts (Gow 1997: 174-183). According to this view, London (and, to varying levels, other Western capitals) accepted the (im)balance of power on the ground in former Yugoslavia because it did not wish to jeopardise its own post-Cold War "peace dividend" by getting embroiled in a Balkan war.

This argument certainly does have its logical appeal. Nevertheless, it is flawed for several reasons. First, it implicitly suggests that Britain was little more than a troubled observer of what was happening in Yugoslavia when, in fact, it was a highly proactive participant with direct and indirect influence on the decisions of the Yugoslav protagonists. Second, the "lack of will" argument also serves to mask the serious clash of wills among the Western powers to which Britain made a decisive contribution, particularly when it comes to its relations with reunited Germany, but later also with the US under the Clinton administration. This clash of wills was not only centred on the question of military intervention, but was concerned with virtually every aspect of the West's policy – military or diplomatic. And third, the "lack of will" argument fails to reveal the extent to which British policy makers were committed to actively warping the interpretation of what was happening on the ground to build a case for their preferred policies. In order to dissuade the various members of the international community – as well as many in the British public, press, and politics – who were calling for a forceful intervention against Serbian aggression, the case had to be made not only that the origins of the Yugoslav conflict were "ancient", but also that all parties were equally guilty. Indeed, no one contributed more to the distorting campaign of moral relativism and the equivalence of guilt in Western perceptions of Yugoslav conflicts than British foreign policy makers and diplomats (Conversi 1996). As the Chairman of the Conference on Yugoslavia and the former foreign secretary, Lord Carrington, succinctly put it, the Yugoslavs were "all impossible people... all as bad as each other, and there are just more Serbs" (Simms 2002: 17). This was realism alright, but it was realism which was fully aware of its

consequences for the situation on the ground, and which found those consequences acceptable. As one British journalist observed at the time of the Srebrenica genocide in July 1995, “Ministers don’t say so in public, but the fundamental British view remains that only a strong Serbia can ultimately guarantee security in the Balkans” (ibid.: 12). If there was a carcass of dead policies that London stuck to over the years in the region of former Yugoslavia – then this was it.

## The triumph of realism: Britain, Croatia and the Bosnian war

British *realpolitik* reached its climax during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH). In spite of the obvious escalation of preparations for war by the Bosnian Serbs and their Belgrade sponsors, the European Community – decisively led by Britain – did nothing to halt the aggression before it happened. Instead, it withheld the international recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina in early 1992 and used the Serb military threats to force the BiH government to accept a deal for the de facto ethnic partition of its country. What is worst, this approach did not change even once the Serb military threats materialised in the form of ethnic cleansing and genocide throughout the summer of 1992. Lord Carrington continued to insist that “Peace will not come to Bosnia until there is a de facto partition”. The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Douglas Hogg, told the BiH government, “There is no cavalry over the hill. There is no international force coming to stop this” (ibid.: 20, 30). And Douglas Hurd argued against the repeal of the arms embargo on Bosnia-Herzegovina by suggesting that the West should not be creating a “level killing field”. The obvious implication was that an uneven killing field was preferable (Almond 1994: 321).

Western foreign policy makers actively worked to limit their involvement and publicly recast the conflict as an unfortunate but intractable civil war. In this effort, they were determinedly led by the administration of John Major in London which, together with the administration of François Mitterrand in

Paris, took the reins of the Western military and diplomatic effort in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Britain was, thus, instrumental in framing the UN intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina only in humanitarian terms – first as assistance in opening the Sarajevo airport for flights carrying humanitarian aid, then as protection for UNHCR convoys throughout the country, and finally (and extremely reluctantly) as ceasefire monitors and a quasi-protective force in Bosnia's five “safe areas”. Britain also maintained strong influence on the shape of the various peace plans which were negotiated during the war – first through Lord Carrington; then through another former Foreign Secretary, David Owen, who in August 1992 succeeded Carrington as the EU co-chairman of the Conference for the Former Yugoslavia; and finally, through the work of the Contact Group (the UK, the US, France, Russia, Germany). Unsurprisingly, all of these peace plans were based on the deeply flawed principle of ethnic territorialisation which ultimately rewarded land grab through violence and ethnic cleansing (Toal and Dahlman 2011), and which formed the crux of Britain's policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina. As Douglas Hogg explained in his 1994 contribution to the *Royal United Services Institute Journal*, the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina “have to recognize defeat when it stares them in the face, that land has been seized by force, and that there has to be a degree of acceptance of that fact... The other thing that they must accept is that the military option has to be abandoned”. This, he wrote, was a “major objective” of British policy (Hogg 1994: 16).

The interaction between Britain and Croatia when it comes to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina is still a subject of great controversy – which is perhaps not a great surprise, considering that the policies of both countries during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina remain extremely controversial as well. Britain's preference for ethnic territorialisation of Bosnia-Herzegovina closely mirrored the preferences of Croatia's president Franjo Tuđman and his proxies in the leadership of the BiH Croats; and the Vance-Owen and the Owen-Stoltenberg peace plans of 1993 were arguably territorially favourable to the Croats (Hodge 2008: 412-413). The perverse incentives of these plans for exclusionary policies by the parties on the ground, as well as the huge influx of Bosniak refugees into Croat-controlled areas in Central Bosnia, however, directly led to the Croat-Bosniak conflict of 1993-1994 which resulted in a near catastrophe for the BiH Croats and

Croatia itself. Significant territories were lost to the numerically superior and Bosniak-dominated Army of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the efforts of British foreign policy makers and diplomats to equalise Croatia's and Serbia's roles in Bosnia-Herzegovina intensified. London also led the calls for sanctions on Croatia (Hodge 2006: 66-67). Zagreb managed to avoid such a fate by consenting to the US-brokered 1994 Washington Agreement which led to the formation of a Bosniak-Croat federation, but Britain's policy saw little change in the last year and a half of the Bosnian war. Its foreign policy makers succeeded in suppressing mounting calls for international intervention, and its diplomats were instrumental in making sure that the Contact Group's peace plan, as well as the Dayton Agreement which finally ended the war awarded 49% of Bosnia-Herzegovina to the Serbs (ibid.: 106-126). Even after it became clear that the fall of Srebrenica was followed by a genocidal massacre of thousands of Bosniak men and boys, and that a similar fate likely awaited the "safe area" of Bihać which was surrounded and under heavy attack, Britain was adamant there would be no international action to prevent that from happening (Freedland 1995).

## **The "new original sin": Operation Storm and the end of the Croatian war**

Bihać, however, avoided Srebrenica's fate, largely thanks to Croatia's forces whose Operation Storm in August 1995 not only succeeded in ending the blockade of this "safe area", but also in regaining nearly all of Croatia's previously occupied territory by defeating the so-called "Republic of Serb Krajina". Operation Storm was a militarily successful four-day campaign which practically ended the war in Croatia and caused a complete shift of balance in Bosnia-Herzegovina that directly led to the end of the war there as well. The exodus of 150,000-200,000 Krajina Serbs, and the crimes of looting, arson, and murder of several hundred civilians who remained, also, however, sullied Croatia's international image and proved an enormous political and economic burden for years to come.

Britain's response to Operation Storm was extremely negative even before the crimes – which took place over the course of several weeks of lawless interregnum after the operation – became public. The reaction of Defence Secretary Michael Portillo on 7 August 1995 – the last day of the operation – was a perfect case in point. He labelled Operation Storm “ethnic cleansing” and expressed the view that “a conclusion which is based on shifting hundreds of thousands of people and in the process killing tens of thousands more is just not an acceptable way of moving towards a peace settlement.” Aside from grossly inflating the numbers of victims, Portillo also shed a revealing light on Britain's view of Croatia's internationally recognized borders: “The difficulty with this conflict has always been to try and get more than one party to agree that it is in their interests to negotiate a peace rather than just to seize more and more territory.” His opinion on the aims of the international community was no less illuminating: “The object of international efforts must be to bring the parties to the negotiating table, to establish a map, to establish a ceasefire and then allow the UN to police that ceasefire and continue its humanitarian work” (Wintour 1995). Croatia was chastised for allegedly “killing tens of thousands” of people and trying “to seize more and more territory”. Meanwhile, the preferred actions of the international community were in fact supposed to reinforce exactly such behaviour because Croatia's shape on the map – despite its internationally recognised borders – was apparently still to be established.

To say that Operation Storm and the nature of the end of the war in Croatia became a bone of contention between London and Zagreb would be an understatement. Whereas Croatia's pursuit of independence and Britain's strong opposition to it were the two countries' “original sins” in their mutual perceptions of each other, the character of Croatia's victory in its war for independence and Britain's strong insistence on criminalising that victory over the course of the next decade and a half became the “new original sins” in the relations between the two countries. Britain's foreign policy makers and diplomats insisted not only on Croatia's judicial prosecution of those guilty of crimes against Serb civilians and on the enforcement of the Serb refugees' right to return; but also on the de facto revision of Croatia's perception of its victory into an element of a “joint criminal enterprise” of its highest civilian and military leadership whose supposed aim was an ethnically pure state.

## Postwar acrimony: Tuđman and regional integration

Tuđman's basking in the glow of victory over the Krajina Serbs was short-lived. Within months his government was placed under strong international pressure which was decisively shaped and driven by London. One of the first causes of that pressure concerned the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accords which were agreed to in November 1995. In many ways, Dayton was an extension of the Contact Group peace plan which divided Bosnia-Herzegovina between the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb entity with the ratio 51:49. As was the case throughout the Bosnian war and with the various earlier iterations of Western peace plans, Tuđman was cooperative at Dayton and accepted the agreement's principal tenets without much fuss. Soon after the Accords were signed, however, he realised that his strategic goals were not going to be fulfilled on the ground. Rather than a loosely organised collection of ethnically defined cantons with significant self-rule that Tuđman believed it to be, the Bosniak-Croat Federation was to become an entity with strong central prerogatives and thus inevitably dominated by the numerically superior Bosniak community. This led to a serious conflict between the BiH Croats and Tuđman on one side, and the international mediators in Bosnia-Herzegovina on the other – conflict which ensued, with varying levels of intensity, throughout the rest of Tuđman's presidency.

The principal arena of conflict was the city of Mostar, split during the Bosniak-Croat conflict into two ethnically defined halves. The Dayton Agreement gave a new impetus to the EU efforts of unifying the city, but the local Croats strongly objected to a series of provisions for administrative reorganisation, joint policing, return of refugees, and freedom of movement between the two parts. Tuđman and his government supported their obstinacy, but with serious repercussions for Croatia's international position. As one EU diplomat told the *Guardian* in January 1996, "At one time Tuđman had friends in high places in some member states. There was talk of Croatia eventually joining the EU. That is completely out of the question now" (Palmer 1996). Throughout the first half of 1996, Tuđman remained dismissive of the EU's Mostar efforts, but by early August of that year he had to relent. What seemed to seal the deal was the US insistence that, if the Bosniak-Croat Federation was to fall apart because of Tuđman,

Croatia was to become an international pariah, as well as calls by UK officials in London and Mostar for possible economic sanctions on Croatia (Barber 1996; Borger 1996).

This pattern of interaction between the West and post-war Croatia, with strenuous conflicts and threats of sanctions, was not limited to the issue of implementation of the Dayton Agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The domestic policies of the Tuđman government garnered even more criticism from international circles: from Tuđman's unwillingness to accept the opposition victory in the local elections in Zagreb to his regime's treatment of the media. In May 1996, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe delayed Croatia's accession to that organisation despite previous approval by the Council's Parliamentary Assembly – the first time this happened in the organization's history. Croatia was also asked to lift its barriers to the return of Serb refugees and to improve its cooperation with the newly proactive International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Guardian 1996). Although Croatia was officially admitted to the Council of Europe later that autumn, very little progress was made on any of those fronts. Its internal political environment and its relations with the international community thus continued to be dominated by public protests against the government, international threats and reprimands, and increasing obstinacy by Tuđman and the HDZ throughout 1996 and 1997. Relations turned particularly sour with London, as the British officials once again called for sanctions on Zagreb and the British media had a field day equalising Tuđman with Slobodan Milošević (Glenny 1996; Traynor 1996).

Croatia's hopes for a change in Britain's approach got a boost in May 1997, with the electoral victory of Tony Blair and the Labour Party. The pro-Serb bias of the Conservatives was a broadly accepted fact of Britain's political life, repeatedly confirmed during the war and once again in the summer of 1996 when the former Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd and the former Foreign Office Political Director Pauline Neville-Jones, in their capacities as high-ranking officials of NatWest Markets, concluded a highly lucrative business deal with the Milošević regime for the sale of Serbian Telecom (Hodge 2006: 127-128). This Conservative establishment, which decisively crafted Britain's and Europe's policy toward the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, was decimated at the

polls, with both the Defense Secretary Michael Portillo and the Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind – two prominent voices in favour of a tough line against Zagreb – losing their parliamentary seats. Hopes for a new approach increased further when the British Special Air Service (SAS) units made arrests of two Bosnian Serbs under sealed ICTY indictment that July, thus signalling London's shift away from Britain's earlier policy in the region.

Zagreb's hopes were, however, very soon dashed. The visit of the new Foreign Secretary Robin Cook to the region in late July 1997 made it clear that nothing substantive really changed in London's view of the situation on the ground. Cook reserved equal blame for all sides in Bosnia-Herzegovina for the failure to implement the Dayton Agreement – although the Serbian entity was unanimously identified by the international organisations in BiH as the overwhelming violator of the Agreement. He also endorsed Biljana Plavšić – one of the chief ideologues and leaders of the Bosnian Serb war effort – in her local power struggles and he publicly promised there would be no more arrests for war crimes in the British-controlled sector of Bosnia-Herzegovina (*ibid.*: 140-143). More importantly, during his visit to Zagreb, Cook announced that Britain had blocked an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan to Croatia and he rebuffed Tuđman's request for support of Croatia's closer association with the EU. According to press reports, Cook told Tuđman that "Britain saw 'no prospect' of Croatia becoming a member of the EU in the foreseeable future" (Binyon 1997).

Such a rigid stance by the Foreign Secretary came as somewhat of a surprise to Zagreb not only because of hopes that Labour would bring a different approach to Britain's policy in Southeast Europe, but also because of the new government's more proactive stance regarding EU eastward expansion. Tony Blair came to office believing that "We cannot shape Europe unless we matter in Europe" (Smith, J. 2005: 708). And one way of mattering in Europe was pushing forward a real agenda for enlargement. Crucially, this agenda for enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) was to be based on the principle of individual evaluation of each candidate country's own merits. Britain was against the across-the-board beginning of negotiations with all CEE prospective candidates and strongly believed in bilateralism as the guiding principle in relations between the EU and the CEE states (Lippert 2001: 11). This raised Croatia's expectations of London's support because of Zagreb's extreme irritation with the EU's

Regional Approach policy toward Southeast Europe which bundled Croatia together with FR Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania, and which was introduced in 1996.

The implication of this policy was that the EU was in Southeast Europe making regional cooperation into an element of its conditionality for future membership (Bechev 2006: 31). Tuđman's reaction to such a policy was obviously very negative. He opposed it partly on pragmatic grounds that the rest of the region – far less economically developed – was to hold Croatia back on its road to the EU. Even more so, he opposed it on political (or even ideological) grounds because he saw the EU Regional Approach as an attempt to rebuild some form of a regional superstructure akin to former Yugoslavia. To Tuđman's disappointment, the new British government not only rebuffed his request for support of Croatia's closer integration with the EU, but it also – in contrast to its policy toward CEE – backed the EU Regional Approach for Southeast Europe. Tuđman's response was characteristically defiant. He initiated the process of constitutional changes in Croatia and had an amendment inserted prohibiting “the initiation of a process of association of the Republic of Croatia into unions with other states which could lead to the restoration of the Yugoslav state community or the formation of a Balkan state community in any form” (Zastupnički dom 1997).

The last two years of Tuđman's presidency were thus marked by tense relations with the international community; pressures and threats regarding Croatia's record on human rights, refugee return, implementation of the Dayton Agreement, cooperation with the ICTY, and regional integration; and, as a result, little or no progress on association with the EU. Although many authors suggest that what truly changed this acrimonious malaise was Tuđman's death in December 1999 and the subsequent electoral defeat of his HDZ in January 2000, what changed the EU's – and Britain's – approach to SEE and Croatia was the Kosovo war in the summer of 1999. The Western alliance needed regional support for its intervention against the Milošević regime and it bought that support by redesigning the EU's policies toward the region. With the end of NATO operations against Belgrade in June 1999, the EU initiated the launch of the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe. The Pact's Special Coordinator Bodo Hombach famously labeled it as “the fast track to full EU membership” (Bechev 2006: 35). And Romania and Bulgaria

– whose EU accession process had stalled until their cooperation helped NATO in its intervention against Belgrade – received a pledge from Tony Blair: “You stood by us, we’ll stand by you” (Binyon 1999).

More importantly, the EU abandoned its Regional Approach in favour of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), which was supposed to deepen contractual relations with *individual* SEE states based on EU criteria of democratisation and market reform (Bechev 2006: 35). In one of his last public speeches before passing away, at the summit launching the Stability Pact on 30 July 1999 in Sarajevo, Franjo Tuđman stayed true to himself and pledged Croatia's opposition to any form of regional integration which would repeat the historical errors of Yugoslavia. He also, however, called for a clear path to European and international integration for all states of the region, to be determined on their own individual merit (Tuđman 2009: 219-221). He did not live long enough to see that his view prevailed – not that Western diplomats and foreign policy makers would have ever admitted that anyway. Their distaste for the Croatian president was such that no head of any EU member state or its government came to his funeral. As for Britain, Tuđman's obituaries in the London press labeled him “just as ruthless and corrupt, and as guilty of precipitating appalling slaughter as his notorious contemporary in Belgrade, the Yugoslav President, Slobodan Milosevic” (Times 1999). And British politicians, like the Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, remembered Tuđman – former member of Tito's WWII resistance movement who maintained a rather generous view of Tito until the very end – as “the closest I would ever get to talking to a real-life European fascist, full of bombast and national superiority” (MacShane 2011: 27).

## **Old policies and new beginnings: EU accession and cooperation with the ICTY**

At the turn of the century all conditions for a dramatic improvement in Croatia's relations with Britain and the EU seemed to be met. Croatia was ruled by a coalition government of six parties under Prime Minister

Ivica Račan of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), with the HDZ firmly in opposition. Tuđman's successor as the president of Croatia became the HDZ dissident Stjepan Mesić who campaigned on the platform of a radical departure from his predecessor's policies. The new government announced its clear commitment to a speedy accession into the EU, a reversal of Tuđman's policy toward Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as full support for the work of The Hague Tribunal. What was equally important, the Labour government in London was still riding the wave of its proactive European agenda, particularly when it came to foreign policy and security. British diplomats were placed into highest international foreign policy offices. In October 1999, for example, George Robertson became the Secretary General of NATO, and Chris Patten took the post of the European Commissioner for External Relations.

When it came to enlargement, there was firm political consensus on the need for its real progress among all major UK parties. For Tony Blair, Britain supported enlargement because it was not only stabilising the whole continent, but also crucial in turning the EU into a global "superpower, but not a superstate" (Blair 2000). And for the Shadow Foreign Secretary Francis Maude, enlargement was Britain's "moral imperative" (Crowson 2007: 104). Once Slobodan Milošević was ousted from power in early October 2000, the whole Southeast Europe seemed to be catching up with the train of Eastern European enlargement. At a summit in Zagreb on 24 November 2000, EU member states confirmed the membership perspective of SEE states which, in turn, endorsed the principles of the Stabilisation and Association Process. At this summit, Croatia started negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) – a new form of EU association agreement reserved for SEE countries. The optimism in Zagreb was such that there was widespread belief Croatia could catch up with other Eastern European candidate countries and join the EU within several years. This optimism, however, soon proved to be unfounded, largely due to Croatia's steadily deteriorating relations with Britain on account of Zagreb's (lack of) cooperation with The Hague Tribunal.

Relations between the Račan government in Zagreb and the Blair government in London, however, seemed to get off to a flying start. Already during the electoral campaign in October 1999, Račan and his principal coalition partner Dražen Budiša travelled to London to present

their post-election platform. In May 2000, Račan chose London as the destination of one of his first international visits, where he and his ministers met with their British counterparts. And in September of the same year, in his role of the president of the Croatian Social Democrats, he travelled to the convention of the Labour Party where he again met with Prime Minister Blair and Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and gave a speech on Croatia's foreign policy. Behind those courteous and encouraging interactions, however, there was very little of substance for Račan and his government to hold on to. Faced with an extremely dire economic situation – which was one of the main reasons why the HDZ lost the elections – Račan needed real aid to push through the needed economic reforms. But apart from support for Croatia's membership in the WTO, which finally materialised in November 2000, he received nothing of the sort. What he instead did receive were enormous pressures which often crossed the boundaries of normal diplomatic practice regarding the extremely challenging and politically toxic issue of cooperation with The Hague Tribunal.

Although Croatia under Tuđman strongly supported the formation of the ICTY, Zagreb's cooperation with The Hague was at best strained during the second half of the 1990s. Tuđman relatively easily succumbed to international pressures when it came to extraditing Bosnian Croats indicted by the Tribunal, but his government refused to accept the Tribunal's jurisdiction over Operations Flash and Storm which ended the war in Croatia in 1995 (Peskin and Boduzyński 2003: 1124). Primarily due to international pressures, the government of Ivica Račan reversed that position with a parliamentary Declaration of 14 April 2000 (Zastupnički dom 2000) and thus entered into open conflict with the extremely vocal coalition of the recently defeated political right and the various veterans' associations. As the Tribunal made progress in its investigations, a politically debilitating pattern emerged of recurring media speculation, followed by public protests, government defensiveness and internal division, and ultimately international pressure. The brittle government stayed united and managed to fend off the challenge from the right in February 2001 after the indictment of General Mirko Norac by a local court for war crimes committed against Serb civilians. Five months later, however, when the ICTY Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte brought sealed indictments against generals Ante Gotovina and Rahim Ademi, the governing coalition nearly fell apart (Peskin and Boduzyński 2003: 1126-1131).

Unlike the indictment against General Norac by the Croatian court, these indictments presented a far greater problem for the government for several reasons. Most obviously, they came from the ICTY, which meant that they were part of Croatia's international obligations and that they thus placed the government under the EU's magnifying glass. Since the government of FR Yugoslavia just days earlier extradited Slobodan Milošević to The Hague, Zagreb had very little manoeuvring space. More importantly, the indictment against General Gotovina carried far more serious charges than the indictment against General Norac. In the Gotovina indictment, the ICTY Office of the Prosecutor suggested the very nature of Croatia's military operations in the summer of 1995 was not only criminal, but also possibly genocidal. Gotovina was alleged to have been part of a criminal effort involving President Franjo Tuđman, whose aim was the purging of the Krajina region of its Serb population (ICTY 2001). These allegations led to a serious cabinet crisis during which four ministers from the SDP's principal coalition partner, Budiša's Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLP), tendered their resignations. Prime Minister Račan, however, managed to hold on to power by winning the parliamentary vote of confidence with the argument that Croatia could address the indictment's allegations only through the judicial process at the Tribunal. The outcome of this affair, however, was to haunt Croatian politics for more than a decade to come. In an act of either incompetence or political short-sightedness, Croatian authorities failed to capture General Gotovina who, instead of turning himself over to the ICTY, chose to go on the run.

With The Hague albatross around its neck, Croatia continued to make slow progress on its road to EU membership. The Stabilisation and Association Agreement was signed on 29 October 2001, but its ratification was protracted, particularly in Britain which used this process as a form of additional pressure on Croatia, ostensibly regarding cooperation with the ICTY. When the Croatian government decided to file a legal challenge against another ICTY indictment – this time of the former Chief of Staff of the Croatian Army, General Janko Bobetko – in the fall of 2002, London suspended the SAA ratification process. The Bobetko affair ultimately ended in the spring of 2003 with the death of the 84-year-old general, but relations between the two countries dipped to a new acrimonious low, to some extent also due to particularly vocal critique of the 2003 invasion of Iraq by some Croatian politicians, most notably president Stjepan Mesić

(Jović 2007). Britain, now backed by the displeased Bush administration in Washington, further intensified its campaign of pressure on Croatia.

According to a series of media reports in Croatia and the UK, in February 2003 London compelled the Račan government to consent to an intelligence operation led by the British Secret Service 'MI6' on Croatian territory with the purpose of capturing General Gotovina (Traynor 2005b). Although that month Croatia submitted its official application for EU membership, its accession was bound to make little progress because the SAA ratification was still blocked on account of the ICTY. By agreeing to let the MI6 conduct its operation on Croatian territory, Račan hoped to persuade London and its like-minded EU partners not only that Gotovina was out of the country, but also that Croatia was fully cooperating with the Tribunal. This turned out to be a mistake. The operation disturbed the whole political and intelligence apparatus in Zagreb, with accusations and counteraccusations dominating the media coverage on a daily basis. More importantly, MI6 seemed to feed the ICTY Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte with information that Gotovina was hiding in Croatia and that he was protected by nationalist elements in the state administration.

The British government also continued its effort of equalising Croatia's standing vis-à-vis The Hague with that of Serbia. Even though out of 20 ICTY indictees still at large in the summer of 2003 only one (Gotovina) was from Croatia and the other 19 were Serbs, British diplomats at the UN Security Council insisted that the UNSC resolution 1503 from 28 August of that year names Gotovina together with Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić as the remaining indictees deserving particular attention of the authorities (Hodge 2006: 195; Hartmann 2007: 289). The implication of this strategy was clear: the alleged crimes of Gotovina were on par with those of Karadžić and Mladić, and Croatia was equally culpable as Serbia for the lack of cooperation with The Hague Tribunal (Hodge 2008: 418). This campaign reached such a level that Prime Minister Račan decided to visit London in the midst of electoral campaign in September 2003 to lobby his British counterpart Tony Blair for some respite. The Hague Tribunal issue "has taken over the relationship with Great Britain," Račan told the media before leaving for London. "Croatia cannot be punished because it should have done something that it has not been able to do" (Traynor 2003). Blair, however, gave him little more than a polite hearing. As Denis

MacShane, his minister for Europe, said at the time, Croatia's "road to Brussels leads through The Hague" (Castle 2003). Several weeks later, Račan lost the election to the reformed HDZ under the leadership of Ivo Sanader, partly due to his government's policy toward the ICTY.

As expected, the return of the HDZ did not lead to a shift in Britain's position toward Croatia, even though Croatia's cooperation with The Hague Tribunal improved markedly. The perfect case in point came in April 2004 after Croatia extradited to the Tribunal two Croatian generals – Mladen Markač and Ivan Čermak – accused of crimes associated with Operation Storm, as well as six Bosnian Croats accused of crimes associated with the Croat wartime entity in BiH, the Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia. The extraditions came concurrently with the decisions by the European Commission and the European Council regarding Croatia's status as an official EU candidate country. On 14 April, the Tribunal's Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte was asked by the EU to comment on the level of Croatia's cooperation and her report was positive. According to the Tribunal's spokesperson and Del Ponte's advisor Florence Hartmann, however, within twenty minutes of Del Ponte's report becoming public, the British ambassador in The Hague came to her office to express his government's displeasure. Shortly thereafter he was followed by an official of the American embassy who chastised the Chief Prosecutor for supposedly alienating Serbia by praising Croatia. It is important to note that both the United States and Britain were at the time placing significant pressure on Del Ponte to refrain from issuing new indictments of Serbian officials, supposedly due to fears that the Serbian government after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in March 2003 was too weak to sustain the resulting pressures (Hartmann 2007: 288-291). Britain was at the forefront of efforts to shore up Belgrade – as the director of the East Adriatic Unit at the Foreign Office, Karen Pierce, said at the time – by "fast-track[ing] Serbia through some of the EU and NATO mechanisms" (Hodge 2006: 198).

Due to Del Ponte's positive report, however, Britain did not block Croatia from acquiring the European Commission's endorsement of candidacy in April 2004 and the European Council's official confirmation of its candidate status later that June, likely because it deemed such a move to be diplomatically too costly. In December of that year, Britain also failed to

fend off Croatia's supporters on the European Council from giving Croatia the provisional date of 17 March 2005 for the beginning of accession negotiations (Traynor 2004). In a repeat of the clash regarding Croatia's recognition in 1991, the conflict was once again primarily between Britain and Germany. But by March 2005, things changed dramatically. The full nature of the MI6 operation in Croatia was exposed by the media and one of the surveillance vans its agents were using was burned, probably by their local detractors. As a result, Del Ponte's rhetoric turned strongly negative and she reported to the European Council that Croatia was actually shielding Gotovina. On the eve of Croatia's start of accession negotiations, its foreign minister Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović travelled to London with evidence of her government's efforts to locate Gotovina and to curb the activities of his local associates, but her British interlocutors were unconvinced (Traynor 2005a). London managed to persuade enough of its partners on the European Council that Croatia's accession negotiations should be postponed. The British government even advised Croatia to suspend its membership application, supposedly to avoid the humiliation of postponement, and to resubmit it once there was progress on the Gotovina front.

Croatia rejected this advice and six months later the issue of its accession negotiations was once again on the agenda of the European Council. Britain favoured further delay of Croatia's negotiations, but its problem was that it also wanted the Council to approve the start of negotiations with Turkey. The Council was in a heated debate for several days with the dividing lines on the status of both countries nearly perfectly overlapped – Britain, for example, being the strongest opponent of Croatia and proponent of Turkey, and Austria being the strongest proponent of Croatia and opponent of Turkey. In a last-minute compromise, however, both Croatia and Turkey got what they were hoping for: the official start of accession negotiations. With the Council members (especially Britain and Austria which publicly announced their seemingly uncompromising positions) now facing humiliation themselves, Carla Del Ponte helped break the deadlock. She surprisingly submitted a report suggesting Croatia was doing everything possible regarding the capture of General Gotovina (Browne 2005a). Two months later, in part thanks to the work of Croatia's intelligence services, Gotovina indeed was arrested on the Canary Islands and extradited to The Hague. It soon transpired that he

had not been in Croatia since his flight in 2001, but had instead travelled to many other countries, including Argentina, Chile, China, the Czech Republic, Italy, Russia, Mauritius, and Tahiti (Guardian 2005). "Those who believed us when we were saying that Gotovina was not in Croatia today received the final and complete confirmation," Croatia's Prime Minister Ivo Sanader told the media, while welcoming the arrest (Browne 2005b). Neither Carla Del Ponte nor the British government addressed the issue of Gotovina's actual whereabouts during his escape.

Why did Britain pursue Gotovina so vigilantly and why did it place such extraordinary pressure on Croatia, brazenly infringing on its sovereignty by insisting that it allow a foreign intelligence service to operate freely within its borders? According to various press reports, it is possible that the British intelligence service took the Gotovina case personally due to his alleged connections with the IRA and its attack on the MI6 headquarters in 2000 (Rufford and Walker 2004). For some British officials, like the former minister for Europe, Denis MacShane, the whole affair also seems to have been personal. In his part-memoir, part-diary, part-policy booklet published in 2011, MacShane exposed a rather undiplomatic distaste for both Gotovina and the late President Tuđman: Tuđman was a "latter-day mini-Mussolini", whereas Gotovina was a "thug" and a "war criminal" who had supposedly "awarded himself the rank of 'General' in Tuđman's war of ethnic cleansing in Croatia" (MacShane 2011: 27, 71, 82). After Gotovina's first-degree verdict of guilty in April 2011, MacShane took an unprecedented step and wrote a statement for the Croatian media in which he compared Gotovina both to the Nazis and to Stalin's executioners at Katyn (Trkanjec and Muhar 2011). In November 2012, after Gotovina's appeal was successful and he was found not guilty, the former British minister remained silent.

Personal animosities aside, however, it is undeniable that the Gotovina case and the issue of Croatia's cooperation with The Hague Tribunal had larger strategic implications for Britain's policy in the region. Putting pressure on Zagreb served as a form of legitimation of the process of transitional justice in Belgrade, as well as a tool of pressure control on the Serbian government. Placing emphasis on Croatia's cooperation with the ICTY in international forums had the potential of at the same time removing the spotlight off Serbia, and compelling its government to boost its own efforts

in extraditing the remaining indictees. More importantly, however, the issue of Croatia's cooperation with The Hague was obviously an extremely powerful tool in shaping the future of the region vis-à-vis its relations with the EU. This "regionalized" nature of the transitional justice process and the strategic give-and-take Britain and other Western powers have employed in their relations with Yugoslavia's successor states are often neglected by the literature which tends to present international players as rather unidimensional actors largely interested in justice and democratic progress in the region (e.g. Subotić 2009; Freyburg and Richter 2010). To quote Florence Hartmann, who witnessed the interaction of the Tribunal and British diplomats first-hand: "The obvious inconsistency in the policy of London, which is ready to make back-room deals for other indictees and is less determined to stop the impunity of Karadžić and Mladić than Gotovina,...[has] given Britain the chance to slow down Croatia's entry into the EU and to thus give Serbia the chance to make up for its own delay, in order to enable Europe to consider the possibility of joint entry of the two neighboring countries from the former Yugoslavia into the EU" (Hartmann 2007: 291). Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that Croatia lost several crucial years on its path toward EU accession due to the Gotovina case. As the former EU commissioner for enlargement Günter Verheugen said in an interview in September 2008, "Croatia would have already been in the EU had one intelligence service of one EU member state not driven all of us mad with the stories" of Croatia harbouring Gotovina (Palokaj 2008).

## **True allies at last? Croatia and Britain in the EU**

The arrest of Ante Gotovina and the start of Croatia's EU accession negotiations seemed to suggest that relations between Croatia and Britain would finally acquire some semblance of normalcy. Behind the scenes, however, Britain's efforts to slow down Croatia's accession to the EU continued. Documents of the US government uncovered in the WikiLeaks affair in 2010 give us a glimpse of the extent to which the British government was intent on delaying Croatia's accession by refusing to accept the opening of negotiations on the Judiciary and Fundamental

Rights chapter of the EU's *Acquis Communautaire* on account of Croatia's alleged lack of effort to turn over to the ICTY Office of the Prosecutor artillery documentation from Operation Storm. According to the report of the US Embassy in Zagreb from November 2009, British ambassador to Croatia, David Blunt, told his American colleague that "some key officials in London regard Croatia as virtually unchanged since the Tadjman era and are inclined to assume GOC bad faith in its dealings with the ICTY." He also suggested that a visit from the US officials to London "to acquaint senior officials with these realities might offer the only hope for a reassessment of the entrenched UK position" (Guardian 2010; Traynor 2010). While much media attention was given to the blockade of Croatia's negotiations by its north-western neighbour Slovenia because of their maritime border dispute, it was exactly the Judiciary and Fundamental Rights chapter that was the last to be opened and the last to be closed in Croatia's negotiations with the EU – chiefly due to Britain's influence on the negotiating process. Negotiations were, however, finally completed in June 2011 and the Accession Treaty was signed in December of the same year. Britain was one of the last countries to ratify it in January 2013, though it should be noted that it did so before Croatia's supposed EU ally and protector, Germany.

With Croatia's EU accession, relations between the two countries entered a phase of relative calm. Unfortunately, this phase proved to be rather brief. This time the sources of turbulence, however, did not come from Croatia or Southeast Europe, but from the UK. The first challenge was presented by the Scottish independence referendum held in September 2014. Although the prospect of an independent Scotland was welcomed among some political commentators in Croatia who saw the demise of the United Kingdom as karmic punishment for London's policies, Croatian government led by the Social Democrats took a more muted approach. In the run-up to the referendum, the Scottish government of Alex Salmond was eager to secure support for Scotland's automatic EU membership in case its voters opted for independence. The response from the Croatian government of Zoran Milanović – which did not substantively differ from the responses of other EU member states – brought a dose of hard reality to Edinburgh: "Negotiations with the EU are a process based on consensus. All member states have to agree to all decisions related to enlargement. Croatia knows all too well the numerous obstacles that could present

themselves in each individual case. Croatia stands firmly on the position that all states which wish to become members must go through a detailed, all-encompassing, carefully thought out, and just process of negotiations" (Veljković 2013). As sympathetic as the Croats may have been for the cause of independent Scotland, their government did not wish to rock neither the UK nor the EU boat.

Referendum fever in the UK, however, soon continued with the Brexit campaign. It would be generous to say that the short-lived coalition government of Tihomir Orešković had any real position toward the two possible outcomes of the Brexit referendum. How could it have had, considering how divided and weak it was, and considering how little its opinion would have mattered to both the UK voters and the remaining EU partners? It greeted the shocking referendum result with regret, labelling it as the "greatest strike against the unity of Europe from the very beginning of its integration, and for us a particularly sensitive issue at a time when enlargement to our neighbouring nations is worked on" (Vlada 2016a). Prime Minister Orešković's statements were a bit more revealing. Orešković invoked the "globalization trilemma" proposed by the economist Dani Rodrik (2000) (which states one cannot have a completely integrated common market, national sovereignty, and democracy) to argue against deeper integrative efforts. "A change is necessary," Orešković stated. "The Union needs to change to be able to resolve the issues which are driving discontent and scepticism, like the issue of transparency of decision making in Brussels" (Vlada 2016b).

Of course, if one wanted to get a real feel for the pulse of Croatia's political class regarding Brexit, one did not have to listen to Orešković. His government suffered a resounding vote of no confidence just days prior to the UK referendum. Three weeks after the Brexit vote, the senior coalition partner HDZ ousted its unpopular president Tomislav Karamarko and installed a new leadership under Andrej Plenković. Plenković, who was a career diplomat before joining the HDZ in 2011, was a member of the European Parliament at the time. His view of Brexit was substantively different from Orešković's. Gone were the calls for change and recognition of the EU's democratic deficit. Instead, Plenković focused on David Cameron's strategic error of succumbing to the populists and calling for an "unnecessary" referendum which turned a crisis within his own party

into a crisis of national, European, and global significance (Hina 2016). Plenković's statements were particularly interesting since he was already in campaign mode for the leadership of his own party. He was signalling a clear break with his more nationalist predecessor who found role-models in Orbán's Hungary or Kaczyński's Poland.

Indeed, as Plenković stated to the Croatian Television in response to a question regarding whether Croatia should get closer to the Visegrád Group in post-Brexit EU, "I believe we must be strongly pro-European because that is a project which will last despite the current crisis. If we give way to the forces that wish to water it down, I think that will make the whole continent much less relevant globally, and that would be a step back for us in terms of both economic performance and values" (HRT 2016). For Plenković and his government sworn in on 16 October 2016, Brexit could easily become Britain's new "original sin" if it jeopardizes the future of the EU. In that they probably differ little from a whole generation of pro-EU politicians on the continent. Whether Brexit does jeopardise the future of the EU, however, is still anybody's guess. UK Prime Minister Theresa May in her 17 January 2017 speech announcing her government's plans for hard Brexit wanted to assuage Europe's fears: "The decision to leave the EU represents no desire to become more distant to you, our friends and neighbors. It was no attempt to do harm to the EU itself or to any of its remaining member states" (Independent 2017). Brexit negotiations will, however, present the real test of this claim, as will Britain's relations with the Trump administration in Washington whose commitment to European integration is suspect at best. These issues will determine the near future of Britain's relations not only with Croatia, but also with the rest of the EU.

## Conclusions

Apart from relations with its neighbours, Croatia's relations with Britain were undoubtedly its greatest foreign policy challenge since independence. Despite their clear power disparity, however, relations between the two countries were not driven by Britain's preferences and Croatia's adaptation to them – on the contrary. Croatia pushed for and achieved

independence – against Britain's wishes. It secured its territorial integrity and ultimate victory in the war for independence – against Britain's wishes. It successfully navigated through the Scylla and Charybdis of EU negotiations and became a full member state before the rest of the region – also against Britain's wishes. A relatively small European state defied one of the greatest European powers and managed to achieve virtually all of its foreign policy aims. This is a cautionary tale for many scholars of international relations and EU politics committed to theoretical approaches which privilege state power capabilities over all other factors. Small states are not simply the objects of great power politics, but can shape their own and their regions' destinies independently. However, how do we explain Britain's policy activism when it comes to Croatia and its region? Why did a small and seemingly inconsequential country in Southeast Europe generate such interest and policy commitment from one of Europe's great powers?

Judging by Ambassador Blunt's candid comment regarding his superiors in Whitehall, perhaps the root of it all was in historical oversimplification – one error British policy makers have a strong tendency to make (Hill 1988: 24). Foreign Office, for example, in its online profile for Croatia until recently claimed that, "The roots of Croatia's traumatic emergence as an independent state in the 1990s date back to the Second World War (and even further). Its more recent history was strongly influenced by Slobodan Milošević, who came to power in the former Yugoslavia in 1989. Slovenia and Croatia, both then federal states within Yugoslavia, became disillusioned with the speed of economic and political reforms under his leadership. By January 1990 they had set themselves on the path to independence" (FCO 2012). Setting aside the highly problematic first sentence of that passage and its clumsy wording, the factual and interpretational absurdity that Milošević was a reformer who came to power in Yugoslavia in 1989 and that Yugoslavia apparently fell apart because Slovenia and Croatia were not comfortable with the speed of his reforms clearly suggests that the Foreign Office does not have a merely oversimplified view of what happened in former Yugoslavia – it seems to have no clue.

Foreign Office's historically inaccurate view of the breakup of Yugoslavia is, however, more important for another reason. It reveals that Whitehall still

lays the bulk of blame for Yugoslavia's dissolution on the federation's north-western republics and not on Serbia. In the eyes of London, the breakup of Yugoslavia – the starting point for the two countries' discordant relations – was Croatia's "original sin". This is not to say that Britain's policy toward Croatia over the past two decades has been some sort of vendetta for the demise of what British diplomats were in 1991 calling "our baby" (Glaudić 2011: 374). London's actions were obviously guided by the events on the ground, Croatia's own democratic deficit, the limitations of diplomacy in a multilateral environment, the perception of British interests in the region, and by the general reluctance of the UK public to support EU enlargement. In a national survey conducted on the eve of Croatia's EU accession, for example, only 10% of UK respondents stated they wished to see Croatia join the EU, with overwhelming majorities opposing further enlargement on account of its supposed negative effect on unemployment, immigration, terrorism, and EU decision making (YouGov 2012). Britain's actions toward Croatia were also, however, embedded in a particular kind of "historical thinking" about Southeast Europe and in a long tradition of thought about British policy in this region. British historical biases regarding Croatia were likely reinforced with that realist conception that "only a strong Serbia can ultimately guarantee security in the Balkans."

These factors were important determinants of Britain's relations with Croatia until Croatia's entry into the EU. Recent events, however, have profoundly altered the game, making it difficult to predict how the relations between the two countries will develop in the years to come. Ironically, the failures of EU policies – to a significant extent crafted by Britain – during the Yugoslav wars, and Britain's use of the EU accession process as a tool of pressure on Croatia, have made the Croatian public and political elite less Europhile and more Atlanticist, which would have meant that Zagreb and London could have become true allies within the EU on a number of crucial policy fronts – from the Union's relations with the United States to the EU eastward enlargement or even the process of deepening of economic integration.

Rather than future collaboration on the pace of EU reforms or enlargement in Southeast Europe, however, they will now be preoccupied with questions of Britain's exit from the EU. Croatia is unlikely to have great influence on that negotiating process, although consensus within the EU will be needed.

Croatia, and all other remaining EU member states, will however shape their relations with the UK based on the evolution of British policy toward the pace and direction of future EU integration. Prime Minister May was eager to reassure its EU partners that Britain will remain a friend of the European Union and a pillar of European security. It remains to be seen whether those words will translate into actual policy, or if London will be swayed toward who knows what kind of destabilising policy coming from Washington and/or Moscow in the near future. In other words, challenges to Europe's geopolitical status quo might once again be the principal bone of contention between Croatia and Britain, though this time with one crucial difference: Croatia will be in, and Britain out.

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