

Decision time in Croatia

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ANALYSIS
1 month before
the poll

On 9th December last in Brussels, Croatia signed its accession treaty to the EU. Some days earlier, on 1st December, the European Parliament approved, 564 votes in support, 38 against (and 32 abstentions), Zagreb's entry into the Union. "*Croatia is the best example of the strength and success of our enlargement policy,*" stressed the President of European Commission, José Manuel Barroso. "*Finally we are coming home,*" stressed the President of the Republic, Ivo Josipovic. "*The dream we have had for a long time now is finally becoming a reality,*" declared the then Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor (Democratic Union, HDZ) on 9th December.

On 23rd December the members of the Hrvatski Sabor, the only chamber in the Croatian parliament, elected just a few days prior to this (4th December), accepted (129 votes in support) the organisation of a referendum on their country joining the EU on 22nd January next. Some associations protested against the choice of date, believing that the authorities and organisations that support membership would not have enough time to inform the electorate and explain what their country belonging to the EU really means. The Croatian Labour Party-Labour Party (HL-SR), led by Dragutin Lesar asked for a three month postponement of the referendum so that a real debate could be launched, and the Democratic Alliance of Slavonia and Baranja (HDSSB) led by Vladimir Sisljagic, demanded that the electorate be convened next summer; it also called on the head of State and government to reassure the population on the future of Croatia's sovereignty.

"*We really want the ratification process on the membership treaty to be completed as soon as possible,*" declared the Croatian President Ivo Josipovic. "*I do not believe that the referendum will be any less democratic this way,*" he added, qualifying the moment as "*an historic event comparable to that of the referendum on independence.*" Twenty years ago on 19th May 1991 95.7% of the Croats voted in support of their country's independence (4.3% voted "no"). More than eight voters in ten (83.6%) turned out to vote.

The referendum on 22nd January is only the second to be organised in Croatia. There is no minimum turn out quota required for the election to be declared valid.

The Croatian unions wanted a popular vote on the modification of the rules in force governing the call for referendum to be changed on the same day as the vote. At present, 400,000 signatures have to be collated within 15 days. The project planned for a reduction in the total number of signatures down to 200,000 and to increase the lapse of time given to collate them to 30 days. The Democratic Union (HDZ), now the main opposition party, supported the organisation of this referendum. Moreover, the unions recalled that the new Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic (Social Democratic Party, SDP) said he agreed with the proposal in 2010. However they did not achieve their objective and their project will not be submitted to the electorate.

Zagreb's long road to Europe

Croatia's progress towards Europe started in 1999 after the death of the Republic's former President (1991-1999) Franjo Tudjman (HDZ). The government led by Ivica Racan (SDP) (2000-2003) and President (2000-2010) Stjepan Mesic did a great deal towards transforming Croatia into a true European democracy. In February 2003 Zagreb made its first request to Brussels. Four months later the European Council in Thessalonika (June 2003) confirmed the future possibility of EU membership for the Western Balkan countries. Croatia became an official candidate country in June 2004. Negotiations between Zagreb and Brussels that were launched on 3rd October 2005 were completed on 30th June 2011.

Referendum in Croatia 22nd January 2012

Full cooperation on the part of the Croatian authorities with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY) was one of the demands made by Brussels to help towards Zagreb's integration into Europe. In 2000 Croatian Army Lieutenant General Ante Gotovina, said that the army would not cooperate with the international court as requested by President of the Republic Stjepan Mesic. In June 2001 the ICTY brought charges against Ante Gotovina for the infringement of laws governing warfare and for crimes against humanity. He was accused of persecuting people for political, racial and religious reasons, of murder (notably for the murder of around 150 Serb civilians from Krajina and 30 people in Knin), of forcing the displacement of populations and of the destruction of towns and villages. But Mr Gotovina disappeared just a few days before his official indictment and the issue of his arrest warrant. After four years on the run, he was finally arrested in Tenerife (Spain) on 7th December 2005 and convicted on 15th April 2011 to 24 years in prison by the ICTY for the crimes he committed and for those committed under his command in 1995 during Operation Storm (*Oluja*).

Support of the country's accession to the EU enjoyed majority support in all polls until that date but after Mr Gotovina's conviction, support dropped radically, since he is considered a hero by many Croatians, notably because of the capture, on 5th August 1995, of Knin, the temporary capital of the Serb Republic of Krajina but also Croatia's former medieval capital. Some days later a poll by Ipsos Puls for the television channel Nova TV revealed that 52% of those interviewed were against accession and 38% still supported membership.

Finally a border dispute with neighbouring Slovenia that involved just a few kilometres of coastline and some marine miles in Piran Bay in the Adriatic, delayed the membership process for a long time. Ljubljana wanted to extend its territorial waters so that it had its own international maritime access, which Zagreb opposed for a long time, before reviewing its position in 2009. An agreement was ratified by the Slovenian and Croatian parliaments and approved by the Slovenians in a referendum on 6th June 2010 (51.49% of the population voted "yes", with a turnout of 42.36%). The result of this vote enabled Zagreb to continue its progress towards joining the EU.

The agreement signed in Stockholm on 4th November 2009 by both countries plans for the creation of

a special court that will finally put an end to the dispute between the two States. Learning from the Cypriot situation that has still not been settled seven years after Nicosia's entry into the EU, Brussels absolutely wants to finalise settlement to the conflict between Slovenia and Croatia before the latter joins the EU.

Croatia's progress will be followed closely by the Europeans, who will be able to address warnings to the Croatian authorities, if they do not keep to the commitments they have made, and these might be followed by sanctions (for example the freezing of European funds).

On 9th December last during the signature of the membership treaty the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy gave Croatia a warm welcome "to the European family" declaring that "Croatia's membership is proof to the entire region that hard work, political courage and determination means that access to the EU is possible." He did however say that the membership treaty was not "the end of the road". Likewise the President of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek said "all marathons end in a final sprint. It is important to cross the finishing line by 1st July 2013."

Until 1st July 2013, when Zagreb finally joins the EU, Croatia will enjoy observer status within the European institutions. Croatia will send 12 representatives to the European Parliament, who will be able to take part in the sessions and work undertaken by the committees, but they will not be entitled to vote.

The referendum electoral campaign

The signature of Croatia's membership treaty to the EU finalises a longstanding national goal. However the economic crisis has diminished Croatian enthusiasm somewhat. Likewise, because of the problems that the EU is experiencing, Zagreb may not experience the economic boom witnessed by other candidate countries before it joins. The EU's present situation may indeed affect the referendum results on 22nd January next. "We have received little money from the European funds, notably with regard to the development of rural areas and the railways, but Poland, which was in the same situation received a great amount from the Cohesion Fund after it entered the Union," repeats Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic. Croatia is due to receive 3.5 billion € as part of the European Structural Funds over 2 years when it joins in 2013.

Most political parties support the country's accession to the EU.

According to a poll by Ipsos Puls for the television channel Nova TV, that was published on 27th December last, 60% of the Croats are about to vote in support of their country joining the EU. One third (33%) are planning to vote against the motion and 7% have still not decided.

Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic said that the question put to the Croats will be a simple one: *"Are you for or against Croatia's membership of the EU?"* If the Croats say "yes" on 22nd January, their country, after Slovenia, will become the 2nd of the 6 former Yugoslav republics to join the EU.

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