

Crowds gather
and fireworks
light the sky
in Bregana to
celebrate Croatia's
entry into the
European Union
on July 1, 2013.





Croatia Advances

Western Balkan nations can look to Croatia for a path into the EU

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On July 1, 2013, less than two decades after a bloody war for independence killed tens of thousands and destroyed substantial infrastructure and much of its economy, Croatia joined the European Union. Few countries have experienced such a dynamic recent history. One might compare Croatia's path to that followed by most Western European nations after World War II. It is marked by the struggle for freedom, institution building and the application of democratic standards in society. It is also marked by adjustment to a new political, economic and security environment.

Croatia's path began with a period in which it strove for independence and international recognition. Unfortunately, to achieve these noble goals, Croatia had to fight a war imposed upon it. The nation organized a defense against external aggression while its diplomats strived to show the world the real reasons for the wars in the former Yugoslavia. This was no simple task during a time of historical change to the maps of Europe and the world.

These changes were largely peaceful elsewhere, but in the former Yugoslavia two concepts clashed: liberal-democratic transformation, represented by Slovenia and Croatia, and the unitarian-socialist status quo supported by Serbia. The West advocated changes to the communist matrix but also the preservation of Yugoslavia, a contradiction in itself. Over time, to maintain their credibility in accordance with their core values, the Western powers abandoned their advocacy for a single state. That Slovenia and Croatia are the only former Yugoslav states to join NATO and the EU clearly negates Western attitudes from the early 1990s on the separatist nature of the war. If Belgrade's policies had had any democratic potential, Serbia would today be at the end, rather than the beginning, of the demanding process of European integration.¹

The struggle claimed many victims. Tens of thousands of people lost their lives, and even more were wounded. Multitudes lost or abandoned their homes. However, through successful defense and international recognition, Croatia achieved its goals and emerged a free state with internationally recognized borders and membership in the United Nations and other major international organizations.

The next period in Croatia's evolution was marked by efforts to define its place within the international community. This was facilitated by a consensus in Croatian society that the country's future lay within the framework of NATO and the EU. However, years of hard work were required to develop state institutions to meet the requirements imposed on candidate countries by both bodies.



A comprehensive reform process started with the aim of establishing standards for functioning institutions, and society as a whole, compatible with the basic principles of Euro-Atlantic integration. It was also necessary to gain sufficient support from the Croatian public, because at the time of Croatian accession, NATO and the EU were enduring the most serious internal crises in their respective histories. NATO was divided over Iraq, and the EU suffered its worst financial and economic crisis. Despite these adversities, a substantial majority of Croatia's citizens endorsed membership.

The EU negotiation and accession process was particularly demanding and stressful. Shortcomings recognized from previous accessions, combined with waning enthusiasm for EU expansion and the increasing complexity of its internal difficulties, led EU leaders to take an extremely rigorous position in negotiations with Croatia. But after years of talks, Croatia became a member of both NATO

and the EU, achieving its goals at the completion of the second decade of its recent history.

With accession to the EU, Croatia has entered a new period in its post-independence history. Croatia no longer struggles for basic survival, but faces the tedious process of positioning itself within NATO and EU structures and politics. EU membership will undoubtedly mark development for years to come. Now, at the beginning, it is necessary to ask: What are Croatia's priorities within the EU? What kind of strategy does Croatia need to develop in relation to the EU?

Croatia is one of the smaller member states, which in itself represents a special challenge. Thucydides, the 5th century Greek historian and Athenian general, once said, "In international relations the strong do what they have the power to do, and the weak accept what they have to accept." Yielding national sovereignty, inherent in EU membership, is a sensitive issue even for much larger states. For those countries that joined before, this issue was easier to manage



LEFT: Eurocorps soldiers raise the Croatian flag during Croatia's European Union accession ceremony at the European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, on July 1, 2013.

RIGHT: A border police officer patrols the Croatia-Serbia border in Tovarnik in 2013. Croatia became the European Union's 28th member and shares a 1,400-kilometer land border with non-EU neighbors Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro.

REUTERS

because economic and other indicators seemed to justify the creation of supranational European structures. But the political backdrop to the economic and financial crisis of 2009 included growing displeasure seen on the streets of European cities, resulting in a strengthening of radical, xenophobic and essentially anti-European political forces. Croatia, a relatively small country, has joined the Union at a most crucial point in its history. However, Croatia could and should try to play an active role because there is always a place for smaller states in international decision-making.

William Wallace, a British international affairs academic, would say that smaller states have traditionally pursued two strategies when coping with this weakness: hiding and binding.² States following a hiding strategy aim to stay out of trouble by staying out of sight. They quietly conduct their own affairs, hoping not to get entangled in the quarrels of the great powers. The vulnerability of the hiding strategy became apparent during the two world wars, and growing

interdependence during the Cold War made it increasingly costly to follow this strategy.

The binding strategy is more ambitious. Whereas the primary aim of the hiding strategy is to stay out of trouble, the binding strategy seeks to prevent trouble from occurring by creating and strengthening international rules and institutions. This has been the fundamental strategy of small European states since the end of the Cold War, and the EU may be seen as the most significant example of its success.

Still, power asymmetry and its effects do not end with institutionalization. In the EU, small states are still more dependent on European integration than great powers are. Their limited domestic markets make their economies more trade dependent, so lowering trade barriers and, more broadly, cooperating on economic and security affairs within the EU, is highly beneficial. According to international relations experts Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel, small states' efforts should be focused on issues in which traditional



The European Parliament honors Croatia during a ceremony marking the country's joining the EU in July 2013.

material power plays only a secondary role. In so doing, “they can directly enhance their status as legitimate and reliable partners to the extent that they become indispensable ‘pieces of the puzzle.’ Their expertise and actions will become increasingly relied upon in the future.”³

History and geography allow Croatia to develop a multidimensional foreign policy that could make it an indispensable contributor to the EU’s Central European and Mediterranean policies. Croatia is also well-placed, through membership in the Southeast European neighborhood, to work with countries of the Western Balkans to aid their integration into European structures as a part of a wider NATO and EU strategy for the region.

Here are three ways for Croatia to maximize its impact:

- Croatia is already using its experience in EU accession to benefit its neighbors, symbolically represented by passing on the Croatian translation of the EU’s *acquis communautaire*. Numerous meetings continue between Croatian officials, experts and former negotiators, with inside knowledge of all 35 chapters, and their regional counterparts. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs established a Centre for Excellence to pool available knowledge to help new EU candidate countries.
- Croatia is geographically and culturally the closest EU member state to the Western Balkans. This grants it the deepest knowledge of the traditions, history, habits and the actual situation in the region. As an EU member state, Croatia is positioned to bring regional issues, expectations, concerns and complaints to various EU forums and institutions. And vice versa, Croatia can serve as a facilitator for transferring European expectations, demands, conditions and concerns to the Balkans.
- Croatia exemplifies to its European partners what is possible in the region. This is at least as important as the previous two examples. Croatia has transitioned through

war and Yugoslav communist rule and is now well along in developing advanced democratic institutions and a genuine free-trade economy based on the rule of law and the protection

of minorities. Croatia’s fine performance as a new EU member state could increase the readiness among other member states to accelerate accession for Western Balkan countries. This is especially relevant now, given the generally negative mood in Europe regarding enlargement. Poor performance by Croatia in such unfavorable circumstances, however, could have adverse effects.

Croatia can most positively influence the countries of the Western Balkans by acting as a reliable EU member, a country that precisely elaborates its positions in alignment with European law; by honoring its obligations; adhering to the basic values of the EU; and implementing structural reforms creating a more efficient public sector and a better functioning economy.

The three branches of Croatia’s EU-regional policy, 1) institutional cooperation, 2) serving as the “voice from the region, about the region,” and 3) reinforcing an image of a reliable European state, make up a complete policy approach to serving both a European purpose and Croatian interests, while forwarding the goals of the Western Balkan countries in this magnificent project of creating a whole, free and prosperous Europe.

Even as a smaller EU state, Croatia can find its niche within the Union by following these policies and conducting a “smart state” strategy that allows the country to play a more active and influential role in European policymaking. □

1. George Schöpflin says: “A proper understanding of the sociology and cultural norms of the region, including both short-term and longue durée legacies of the past, would help to account for the shortcomings and failures that have been evident in the reconciliation of form and content and the corresponding move towards democratic values,” in Kymlicka, Will and Opalski, Magda, ed.; *Can Liberal Pluralism Be Exported? Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe*, 2002, Oxford; 131.

2. Wivel, Anders; “From Small State to Smart State: Devising a Strategy for Influence in the European Union,” 2010; Chapter 2 in *Small States in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel, 2010, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., England and USA; 15-17.

3. Robert Steinmetz and Anders Wivel, ed.; *Small States in Europe: Challenges and Opportunities*, 2010, Ashgate Publishing Ltd., England and USA; 220.