

Jumping Hurdles

Croatia Continues EU Membership Bid

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Croatia continues its progress through the European Union accession process, despite an ongoing border dispute with neighboring Slovenia. Overcoming hurdles is not uncommon in the process and Croatia now expects to enter the union by 2011.

Slovenian Prime Minister Borut Pahor said in September 2009 that his country would stop blocking Croatia's membership talks with the union. Slovenia's previous actions were due to a border dispute between the two former Yugoslav republics.

The dispute concerns pockets of land along the Adriatic Sea that could play an important role in determining access to the sea. Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor, according to reports, sent an official statement to her Swedish counterpart — who held the rotating EU presidency until December 2009 — affirming that any mention of Croatia's borders in its EU application materials does

not legally prejudice the dispute it has with Slovenia. This essentially satisfied Slovenia's demand to force Croatia not to use the EU accession process as a way to make a claim on the border dispute.

With Croatia succumbing to Slovenian pressure, the Croatian accession process to the EU can now continue. Croatia's entry into the union will most likely be the last one before 2013, when the current six-year EU budget ends. Because of Croatian-German ties, Croatia's accession will be a boost for Germany under the new decision-making rules dictated by the Lisbon Treaty. However, the Slovenian-Croatian dispute will spell trouble for subsequent Balkan entries, particularly if Croatia decides to play the same role as Slovenia in threatening to blackball its eastern neighbors.

To become EU members, countries must complete, or "close," 35 negotiating chapters that cover a wide array of policy issues, from core EU concerns, such as free movement of goods and workers, to taxation, transportation and energy.

Croatia was progressing at a brisk pace until Slovenia blocked its accession negotiations in 2008 over the border dispute, thus preventing nine new chapters from opening and five from closing. As of late November Croatia had opened 28 of the chapters and closed 15. With the dispute abated, Croatia can continue negotiating the remaining chapters, with the European Commission hoping it can conclude negotiations by the end of 2010, paving the way for Croatia to enter the union by 2011.

The Slovenian veto of Croatian membership is not an unusual development in a long line of EU accessions. The 1973 Austrian free trade agreement with the European Economic Community (an early EU incarnation) — Austria's first step toward its eventual membership in 1995



Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor, left, and Slovenian Prime Minister Borut Pahor held a joint news conference in September 2009 to announce Slovenia's decision to stop blocking Croatia's European Union membership bid.

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The city of Rovinj, Croatia, is in an area involved in a border dispute with Slovenia that had delayed Croatia's EU accession process.



— was blocked by Italy in the early 1970s due to Rome's insistence that Vienna stop interfering in the affairs of its northern Bolzano-Bozen province (or South Tyrol, as Austria refers to it).

The United Kingdom had to give up most of its trade privileges with the Commonwealth before its own accession to the community in 1973, while Slovakia, Lithuania and Bulgaria had to promise to close down certain Soviet-era nuclear reactors.

The bottom line is that the acceding country has no choice but to accept the demands of the countries already in the union, no matter how small or geopolitically irrelevant that country may seem. For example, in the future, regional powerhouse Turkey will have to recognize the tiny island of Cyprus if Turkey ever reaches the point of accession, despite the fact that Cyprus is not normally a key player in world affairs.

The border issue with Slovenia, however, became a serious political issue internally for the Croatian government, with Kosor likely to come under heat for succumbing to pressure from Slovenia. Kosor replaced her boss, Ivo Sanader, as prime minister of Croatia when he suddenly retired from politics in July 2009. It is possible Sanader retired so that Kosor would take the combined political heat of the recession and acquiescing to Slovenian demands, allowing the former prime minister to launch a presidential bid in 2010 when his party brings Croatia to the EU doorstep.

Overall, Croatian entry into the union generally has wide approval among the EU member states' governments and even the expansion-wary public. All the latest Eurobarometers — EU public opinion surveys — indicate acceptance of Croatia's accession is widespread, even in Slovenia, with Croatia being the only



western Balkan country to consistently garner 50 percent approval for expansion from the European public. Europeans trust Croatia more than its Serbian and Bosnian Balkan neighbors. Many from Western Europe have visited the country because of its burgeoning tourism industry. Croatia joined NATO in April 2009, further establishing its credibility as a member of the Western alliance system.

But hurdles still remain. The EU has stated that Croatian entrance is still contingent on the resolution of the border dispute. The basis for the Slovenian veto, thus far, is Croatia accepting that its application materials to the union do not prejudice the dispute. But the actual dispute still remains and Slovenia could use its veto if it feels Croatia is not cooperating in border dispute negotiations that will now run parallel to Croatian accession talks.

However, Croatia has a powerful patron and traditional ally in Berlin. One of the first foreign policy stands by a united Germany in 1991 was a strong support for Croatian independence and support for the Croatian war effort, without which Croatia might not exist as an independent state today. Germany lobbied hard for Croatia with its EU allies, as well as with the skeptical United States, which initially was not enamored with the idea of a dissolved Yugoslavia. For Germany, independent Croatia was a domestic issue (with the presence of a formidable Croatian diaspora in Bavaria) and a geopolitical one, since an independent Croatia would afford Berlin easier power projection into the Balkans with its traditional ally as a conduit. But Germany remains a powerful ally to Croatia, one other EU hopefuls do not have.

For Germany this is not just about exerting political pressure to help its ally. Croatia will come in handy for Berlin now that the Lisbon Treaty took effect on Dec. 1, 2009, and changed the EU's decision-making process. Under the previous qualified majority voting system, EU decisions could be blocked if the opposing countries constituted either 26 percent of the votes or 38 percent of the



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population. Because the union weighed votes in such a way that they benefited small member states (small countries got proportionally more votes per population than large ones), the population-blocking mechanism was an important device by which large states could block legislation. Germany, with its population of 82 million (about 17 percent of the EU total), needed only two other large member states (France, the U.K., Italy, Spain or Poland) to join it to make a vetoing bloc on the basis of their population, thus blocking a legislation that is otherwise agreed upon by the other 24 member states.

Lisbon reformed these rules by introducing the requirement that at least four member states have to vote against legislation to block it. The intent is to force large countries to make a coalition of more than three states with the sufficient blocking population. But if Germany can count on Croatian support to aid its opposition to key votes, it will

not have a problem continuing to use its population advantage to block legislation, provided it can still ally with two large member states. Before the treaty, Germany could not really count on any EU member state to provide it with that nearly assured extra vote, a luxury some other member states have. For example, Greece can always count on Cyprus, Finland on Estonia and Italy on Malta, most of the time. As of November 2009, Greece has also agreed to support the Croatian accession.

Finally, Croatian accession will mean that with future Balkan memberships to the EU, Croatia will be a key hurdle for Serbia and Bosnia to overcome. While Croatia has publicly shunned Slovenia's vetoing tactics and promised it would not use the same strategy when Serbia and Bosnia attempt accession to the EU, there is no guarantee this will in fact be the case. □

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