



# BULLETIN

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## Will Croatia Become a Champion of EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans?

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*The accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU that will be launched on 21 January will test Croatia's regional policy. Although Zagreb has pledged not to use its status as an EU member as leverage in its bilateral disputes with its neighbours, unresolved problems with Serbia will sorely tempt it to break this principle. If Croatia manages to stick to its approach, whilst deepening cooperation with the Western Balkan countries, in particular with its neighbours, such a strategy may allow it to become the regional patron of EU enlargement. As such, it would replace Slovenia, which has shown a negative tendency to bilateralise the EU accession process.*

**Assumptions behind Croatia's Regional Policy.** Central European countries such as Poland began the convention for acceding to EU membership following accession to NATO. After securing its own accession to NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013, Croatia has made it a priority to pursue stabilization of the rest of the Western Balkans through a similar two-step process and has been conducting a particularly active policy towards Macedonia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the region's NATO candidates. For instance, last June's agreement on the joint patrolling of their airspace is a step towards a regional air-defence system integrated with NATO structures. Because this initiative is in line with NATO's "smart defence" approach (where each state acts in the common interest and in cooperation with others), its success would facilitate enlargement and strengthen Croatia's position in NATO.

Still, the EU remains the long-term focus. Croatia supports EU enlargement in particular in the Balkans and has announced its intention to provide political and technical assistance for its neighbours in order to smooth their path to membership. This approach was reinforced by the Croatian parliament's declaration from 2011 not to exploit its position as an EU member state in ending bilateral disputes with its neighbours. The parliament adopted this position after Croatia had itself experienced a freeze in its negotiations with the EU for almost a year and the threat of seeing its planned accession date postponed, both times as a result of a bilateral dispute with Slovenia. The commitment gives Croatia's eastern neighbours the peace of mind necessary to focus primarily on their internal reforms. This is significant given the number of bilateral problems that remain unsolved between Croatia and the other countries of former Yugoslavia.

**Relations with Neighbours.** Although Croatia emphasises the significance of relations with all of the Western Balkan countries, in practice its contacts with Macedonia (NATO cooperation notwithstanding), Albania and Kosovo are secondary. Not only are these countries geographically and culturally more distant, relations with them are not subject to outstanding disputes. Croatia's links to its neighbours are more intense.

With Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, Croatia is not allowing unresolved questions about the course of their shared border to affect cooperation. The government in Zagreb sees the country as its most important neighbour, home to a half-million-strong Croatian community. Good political relations have in turn increased economic ties: Bosnia and Herzegovina is, after Italy, the main destination for Croatian exports (about 13%). Border issues have not been allowed to affect contacts with Montenegro, either. The government in Podgorica—engaged for one and a half years in membership talks with the EU—already benefits from technical and political consultations with Zagreb, and this cooperation will certainly be intensified in the coming years. Close political relations are again strengthened by economic cooperation—more than 20% of Montenegrin exports go to the Croatian market.

The recent Croatian experience with EU accession negotiations should be helpful as well for other countries in the region, particularly for Serbia, which will launch its accession process in January 2014 without first applying to join NATO. At present, however, Zagreb's relations with Belgrade are very fragile and unresolved political issues have resulted in modest trade exchanges (Croatia accounts for 3% of Serbia's imports/exports). Both countries are struggling with the aftermath of the war in the Balkans, including missing persons and refugees, the disputed border on the Danube and mutual accusations of genocide before the International Court of Justice. Croatia's readiness to a conditional transfer of this last issue from the court to bilateral discussions is a manifestation of goodwill and was expressed just recently, but the fact that both countries remain convinced the tribunal would rule in their favour is hardly conducive to compromise.

Still, these tensions at the highest level do not wholly cloud over smooth cooperation at the working level. Technical cooperation works quite well in education, agriculture and civil protection, and increasingly also in the economy and industry, as well as defence and security (for example, the exchange of experience with regard to participation in international peacekeeping missions and the transformation of the armed forces). This bottom-up approach has, moreover, become more viable in recent years as most Croats and Serbs have worked to break down stereotypes of the other and focus more on common attitudes and interests than on differences (80% of Serbs and Croats living in areas of mixed populations consider separate education an obstacle to inter-ethnic relations, and more than 50% of Serbia's population believes Croatia will help them on their road to the EU). It will now, however, fall to the political elites in Croatia to safeguard the reconciliation process in the face of occasional popular pressure. An example of this was a petition with nearly 700,000 signatures that was recently delivered to parliament in Zagreb. It calls for a referendum to make it harder for minorities to have their language officially recognised at the municipal level, demanding that they make up not 33% as the law stands now, but 50% of the local population. The aim of the petition signers is to remove items in Serbian from Vukovar, but since the authorities have already criticised the idea, it has no chance of success.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** Closer cooperation with neighbours in particular and that which is built on measures to increase regional security relations is part of Croatia's broader strategy to support EU enlargement policy in the Western Balkans. Of course, Croatia is aware of its smaller population, and thus of its lower institutional clout within the EU, and will seek to utilise as effectively as possible its commitment to this policy to bolster its status within the bloc. Croatia's geographical and cultural conditions provide a solid basis for it to replace Slovenia in the role of regional promoter of EU enlargement. After all, Slovenia no longer directly borders countries aspiring to membership, and—by the earlier blocking of Brussels' talks with Zagreb—has also undermined its image as an unalloyed supporter of enlargement policy.

Croatia thus has the potential to be a bridge between the EU and the Western Balkans, and thereby strengthen its position in Europe, but only if it refrains from linking bilateral issues with EU-related ones. The success of this strategy will largely depend on the relationship with Serbia. Since finding solutions to key accession issues will be a long process, the temptation to use its EU leverage will remain on standby. Resorting to such behaviour seems unlikely today, primarily because slowing down the pace of accession negotiations would undermine Croatia's plan for regional integration. Yet, recourse to this leverage cannot be excluded as there is precedent. Finding quick solutions to open issues will be dependent on both countries' political will, and besides averting the danger of a transfer of bilateral problems to the European level, it would also allow for closer economic cooperation and offer a wider range of existing joint actions at lower levels.

The accession of Croatia to the EU should strengthen the Union's impact in the Balkans and open up new possibilities for Member States interested in effective EU enlargement policy. Firm cooperation between the Visegrad Group and Croatia—notably in providing the Balkans with the experience needed to smooth their path to membership—therefore seems natural. Since the accession process has undergone changes since the Visegrad Four joined, Croatia will be best versed in the technical aspects of negotiations with the EU (for example, the mechanisms that check the progress of reforms throughout the accession process). However, on substantive issues, the Balkan countries will strive to put in place the best practices and systemic solutions implementable given the local conditions. And here, the experience of Central European countries may prove useful. Poland in particular possesses solid solutions in the field of home affairs, which is a problematic area in the Balkans.

The exchange of best practices on police cooperation, including but not limited to border-crossing management, may be desirable to both Croatia and its Balkan neighbours. Police cooperation is an important pre-condition for Croatia's accession to the Schengen area and is thus a field of particular interest to Zagreb because of the role of tourism in the country. Efficient border management in the Balkans is also in the interest of Poland, since Warsaw advocates both for improving the regular movement of people within the Union and for greater openness on visa liberalisation issues with the EU's eastern neighbours. Problems with migration in the Balkans will strengthen calls for the reintroduction of the EU visa regime for the beneficiaries of visa liberalization. In addition, Croatia's membership is an opportunity for cooperation between Polish and Croatian think tanks on this and other matters, which may result in a more audible voice on the promotion of enlargement and a greater EU openness towards its neighbours.