



Contrasting Euroscepticisms in Croatia and Serbia

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Policy Recommendations

1. Intensification of training activities and seminars for applicants of aid in the less developed peripheries of Croatia.
2. Updating and upgrading Croatia's state legislation on minority rights to protect it from any detrimental ›revisions‹.
3. Countering the anti-EU disinformation campaigns in Serbia.

Abstract

The emergence of Euroscepticism provides a common denominator between Croatia and Serbia. In Croatia, Euroscepticism revolves around economic anxieties, 'new' identity politics (mainly gender-related issues) and opposition to the legal provisions on minority rights. In Serbia, 'Euroscepticism outside of the EU' predominantly consists in geopolitical considerations, namely the desire to preserve the country's 'neutrality' between east and west. However, the informal 'division of labour' between the more pro-EU and

the soft Eurosceptic factions within the two governing parties (the, nominally centre-right, Croatian Democratic Community/HDZ and the Serbian Progressive Party/SNS) establishes another important common denominator between the two contexts. This tactical and 'internally-devolved' arrangement seems to differentiate HDZ and SNS from the more homogeneous, dominant parties of the conservative right in the Visegrad Four states (e.g. the Hungarian Civic Alliance/FIDESZ and Law and Justice/PiS).



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Euroscepticism in Croatia

Croatia's accession to the EU brought about several benefits for the country. The EU Structural Funds contributed towards the improvement of the infrastructure in Zagreb and the major urban centres (Split, Rijeka and Osijek). EU-membership has facilitated Croatia to promote and upgrade its tourist industry whereas, in light of the youth unemployment, it has enabled a younger generation of highly-qualified professionals to seek employment opportunities within the common European space¹. To this one should add the remittance flows from wealthier West European countries towards Croatia. These realities largely account for the relative increase in the pro-EU stances among the Croatian public, as indicated in the results of the most recent Eurobarometer surveys².

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Nevertheless, the purchasing power of Croatian citizens remains relatively weak³. The collateral damage of free mobility within the EU space often corresponds to the emigration of highly-qualified personnel out of Croatia and the ensuing brain-drain. Moreover, the more peripheral and less developed parts of the country do not seem to have taken adequate advantage of the EU Structural Funds, their

technical infrastructure remains outdated and scarce employment opportunities have been created⁴. In several rural localities of Slavonia, the complexities of interethnic reconciliation seem to combine with economic malfunction, blue-collar emigration to Western Europe (usually Germany, the UK and Ireland) and depopulation⁵. Moreover, the aftermath of the latest economic crisis across the EU-south renders a non-negligible segment among the Croatian public skeptical over the actual timing of joining the Union.

Under the leadership of Ivan Vilibor Sincic, the party of Zivi Zid ('Live Wall') is represented by 4 deputies (out of 151) at the Sabor (Parliament) and its popularity is increasing⁶. Zivi Zid promotes an agenda of economic Euroscepticism and holds that 'the EU is not run by the elected representatives of the people but by an impersonal bureaucracy and corporations'⁷. The party-manifesto contends that the EU is structured in accordance to the 'neo-feudal and neocolonial principle', rejects the austerity measures and underlines that 'we do not desire Croatia's isolation however neither would we desire our country to become a colony of foreign interests to the detriment of its citizens'. In addition to its quasi-leftist standpoints on the economy and the principle of Croatia's 'global neutrality', Zivi Zid pledges to sa-

1) <https://tradingeconomics.com/croatia/youth-unemployment-rate>

2) <http://hr.n1info.com/Vijesti/a340304/Znacajan-rast-potpore-gradjana-Hrvatske-clanstvu-u-EU.html>

3) Tica, J. (2011). 'Kriza 2008-20XY: Populizam i puna zaposlenost kao sukobljeni ciljevi' in EFZG Working Papers, No. 05, p.p. 1-19, (<https://hrcak.srce.hr/136805>).

4) Szilard, R. (2014). 'Regional Development in Croatia from the Turn of the Millenium to EU Accession' in Regional Statistics, 4 (2), p.p. 87-105, (<http://www.ksh.hu/docs/hun/xftp/terstat/2014/RS04206.pdf>).

5) Cipin, I. and Ilijeva, N. (2017). 'Coping with Demographic Decline in Croatia and Bulgaria', November 2017, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung-Croatia, (<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kroati-en/13814.pdf>).

6) <https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/crobarometar-hdz-najjaci-zivi-zid-za-dlaku-ispred-sdp-20181224>; https://europee-lects.eu/european-union/croatia-2/?fbclid=IwAR3Oz1Nm61qOq7vwsAa8ZcrT2CfSsMvm2-i_Rz83YfdnnHOKl_t4dkwLSzM

7) <https://www.zivizid.hr/program/>



feguard 'national values' and 'generate the proper circumstances for boosting the birthrate'.

In regard to gender-related issues, one should take into account the pact between Croatia's religious authorities and the political establishment; as also stipulated in the Vatican Contract⁸. As part of this semi-formal arrangement, the governing HDZ had granted its assent to the constitutional referendum on the same-sex marriage ban (2013)⁹ and condones the Church's opposition to sexual education. Most recently, the ruling party's 'right-wing faction' opposed the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (2017); its guidelines on civic partnerships for LGBT couples, in particular¹⁰. In compliance with the party-line to portray Croatia as a 'Christian and European country', HDZ's 'right-wing faction' criticizes the Istanbul Convention from a predominantly gender-related angle. However, HDZ backbenchers still allude to the external 'imposition' of alien ethical norms on the Croatian society and issue calls for the reformation of the EU to return to its original ('European and Christian') principles and values¹¹.

Political mobilization around the migration crisis has been rather feeble. Even though the HDZ-led government scrutinizes the long-term viability of the EU quotas for refugees, it objected to razor-wire fences along Croatia's borders¹². Unlike FIDESZ in Hungary or PiS in Poland, HDZ does not perceive any interest in the 'weaponization' of the refugee issue, largely as a consequence of Croatia's more re-

cent entry to the EU. Meanwhile, conforming to the universal trend among the European far right, the Croatian Party of Rights/HSP and smaller groupings commenced a mobilization process dubbing refugees and migrants 'potential rapists'.

"The fact that most refugees and other migrants tend to view Croatia as a transit country reduces the public interest."

Yet, as result of the fragmentation and lack of coordination among the Croatian far right, this attempt at mass mobilization cannot compare to the precedents of Hungary (Movement for a Better Hungary/Jobbik) and Slovakia ('Our Slovakia'/Nase Slovensko) throughout 2015 and 2016. Moreover, the fact that most refugees and other migrants tend to view Croatia as a transit country reduces the public interest. However, researchers from the GONG NGO (Zagreb) assess that the refugee question may become more important in the next elections as part of HDZ's endeavor to claim target-groups who perceive themselves 'left behind' by the official party-line¹³.

Regarding minority issues, the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script in Vukovar, and other municipalities of Slavonia where the ethnic Serb population meets the prescribed 30 percent threshold, has not been implemented. In addition to the controversy over whether quite a few of the registered Serbs actually reside in these municipalities, its implementation of the legislation has been obstructed by the systematic mobilization of the War Veterans Association/UHRV (2013-2016)¹⁴. Opposition to the public use of the Serb Cyrillic script prompted the formation of a nexus which comprises actors as diverse as the UHRV, former HDZ-affiliates (the former Minister of Culture, Zlatko Hasanbegovic)¹⁵ and local repre-

8) <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/31604-vatican-praises-its-contracts-with-croatia>

9) <https://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/vasilis-petsinis/competing-conservatism-in-serbia-and-croatia>

10) <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/anti-istanbul-convention-protesters-turn-against-croatian-pm-04-13-2018>

11) Cepo, D. (2017). 'Breeding Ground for Croatia's Conservative Social Movements' in I. Mujanovic, The Democratic Potential of Emerging Social Movements in Southeastern Europe, (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung: Sarajevo).

12) <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2015/sep/18/refugee-crisis-hungary-builds-border-fence-with-croatia-live-updates#block-55f6ea61e4b0c46d88e0313a>

13) Interview with a senior researcher at the GONG NGO, Zagreb (13-11-2018).

14) <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/vukovar-bilingualism-introduce-faces-violent-resistance>

15) <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/18796-hasanbegovic-evicted-from-hdz>



representatives of the HDZ's 'right-wing faction' (the Vukovar mayor, Ivan Penava). This development enabled these actors to voice their opposition to certain decisions of the political establishment as well as to any 'external interference to Croatia's domestic affairs'¹⁶.

In addition to the provision of endorsement to the UHRV, Penava has also been accused of 'sabotaging' the Nova Skola ('New School') project¹⁷. This EU-sponsored, and funded by the Norwegian government, initiative aimed at breaking down segregation and promoting integrated schooling for pupils of all ethnic backgrounds in Vukovar. Most recently, the HDZ's 'right-wing faction' has been spearheading the proposal to restrict the mandate of the ethnic minorities representatives at the Sabor, as this is stipulated in the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities (2002). This motion is said to be indirectly targeted at deputies from the ethnic Serb community¹⁸.

Euroscepticism in Serbia

The ruling SNS subscribes to Serbia's EU-accession process as a trajectory which is expected to enhance the country's democratic institutions, accelerate economic growth and modernize the state's infrastructure¹⁹. The governing party opts for military neutrality and envisages Serbia's global role as 'a bridge between east and west' which should be open to cooperation with global actors as diverse

as the US, China, Japan and Russia. In regard to the bilateral relations with Russia, the party-manifesto underlines the necessity to promote the Orthodox and Slavic cultural bonds between the two nations.

As, the former party-chairman and Serbian President, Tomislav Nikolic stated on a series of occasions: 'Serbia wants to join the EU because it is an organized family of nations but, at the same time, we have a close historical and religious connection to the Russian Federation'²⁰. The Serbian government's quest for a geopolitical equilibrium is subject to pragmatic and timely considerations. In addition to the promotion of political and economic stability, the accession process to the EU is legitimized through reference to the existence of a vibrant Serb diaspora in Central and Northwestern Europe and the 'remittances factor', as well as to the export-import ratio between the EU and Serbia²¹.

"Serbian politicians may often reflect upon the Croatian precedent and the widespread belief that Croatia did not reap all the economic benefits that it anticipated from EU-membership."

Nevertheless, Russia remains Serbia's staunchest ally at the UN Security Council in regards to the question of Kosovo and a key-partner in energy cooperation²². Moreover, the ongoing impact of the economic and migration crises throughout the EU functions as an additional incentive for Serbian policymakers to prolong Serbia's geopolitical oscillation between east and west. Serbian politicians may often reflect upon the Croatian precedent and the widespread belief that Croatia did not reap all the economic benefits that it anticipated from EU-

16) <https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/135837>

<https://hr.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a337004/Upcoming-protest-in-Vukovar-divides-right-wing-groups.html>

17) <https://euractiv.jutarnji.hr/PiD/obrazovanje/skola-koja-je-trebala-biti-primjer-integracije-i-dijaloga-nema-ni-jednog-ucenika/7965822/>

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/interkulturalna-skola-vukovar-nezeljeno-dijete/29559596.html>

18) Interview with representative of the Serbian Independent Democratic Party, Pakrac (14-11-2018).

19) <https://www.sns.org.rs/sites/default/files/bela-knjiga.pdf>

20) <https://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojaazeera/2016/11/tomislav-nikolic-serbia-won-align-east-west-161124105054362.html>

21) <http://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/vesti/20180928-spoljnotrgovinska-robna-razmena-avgust-2018/?s=1701>

22) <http://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2018/october/article461916/>



membership. The aggregate of all aforementioned catalysts has resulted in the consolidation of a conditional and soft version of Euroscepticism, with a primarily geopolitical profile²³. This mainly consists in the occasional criticism of the EU's alleged bias over the collective status of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo and the relations between Serbia and Republika Srpska in Bosnia, which is frequently coupled with statements of allegiance to Russia as Serbia's most powerful patron over Kosovo²⁴.

"Since 2014, a decline in the favourable attitudes towards Serbia's accession process to the EU has been observed."

Since 2014, a decline in the favourable attitudes towards Serbia's accession process to the EU has been observed. The pro-EU respondents in the public surveys have been fluctuating between 55 and 45 percent²⁵. The reluctant or negative attitudes vis-à-vis the EU seem to correlate with the Serbian government's oscillation between east and west: perceived controversies with the EU policies on Kosovo and other issues in regional geopolitics²⁶; fears that the EU-membership may not substantially contribute to the improvement of Serbia's economic situation²⁷. To these, one should add the impact of the 'conditionality fatigue' and the disillusionment among a considerable number of Serbian citizens

over their country's delayed and non-linear integration into the European structures.

Recommendations

Croatia already is an EU member-state; therefore, greater attention is paid to this country. In order to tackle any deficiencies in the utilization of the EU Structural Funds in the less developed peripheries of the country, it is recommended that the responsible employees with operational privileges in the Croatian ministries intensify training seminars and other informative activities. These training seminars can be organized jointly by the responsible units at the state agencies and NGOs with an expertise in contemporary management. They should teach the municipal authorities, as well as the regional entrepreneurs, about how to apply for European aid on a 'local' basis without time-consuming negotiations with governmental and other agencies based in Zagreb.

With regard to the management of interethnic relations, it should be borne in mind that the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities and its supplementary legislation where drafted and entered into force, after consultation with the Venice Commission at the Council of Europe, between 2000 and 2002²⁸. Therefore, the legal framework on minority rights should be updated and upgraded with an emphasis on safeguarding its clauses from any detrimental 'revision'. This should be subject to the enhancement of the accountability principle at the pan-European level with the objective to monitor and effectively prevent any symptoms of 'post-accession non-compliance', all over the 'new' Europe.

In the case of Serbia, attention should be paid to the engagement of a wide range of Russian-funded NGOs with a generally pro-Kremlin profile. These NGOs often tend to disseminate hard Eurosceptic

23) https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/07/26/serbs-are-not-little-russians/?fbclid=IwAR3FaT3ttKWZkeX5rZHTXcOt3I-vB5F_Yc5owFghnnBGkaT24gvT4LDwxvo

24) Interview with Former Serbian Minister of National Defense, Belgrade (20-11-2018).

25) http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/javno_mnjenje_15.pdf

26) http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/istrazivanje_jul_2018.pdf

27) http://www.mei.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/javno_mnjenje_decembar_17.pdf

28) Interview with a senior functionary at the Council for National Minorities, Government of Croatia, Zagreb (06-11-2018).



propaganda²⁹. Therefore, it becomes an imperative for local NGOs with an interest in European integration to counter this disinformation campaign and objectively inform the Serbian public about the pros and cons for Serbia in its accession process (e.g. the economic transactions between the EU and Serbia, freedom of movement and the facilitation of foreign investment).

As a secondary remark, it should be borne in mind that, since the intensification of the refugee crisis in autumn 2015, neither President Aleksandar Vucic nor any other government officials objected to the passage of refugees through Serbia or endeavored to 'weaponize' this issue. Most importantly, the period since autumn 2015 saw the efficient coordination and mobilization of the state administration (including the regional and municipal levels) and Serbia's civic society towards the successful accommodation of the refugee and migrant waves³⁰.

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29) Interviews with: a group of researchers at the Novi Sad School of Journalism, Novi Sad (28-11-2018); Director at the NDNV NGO, Novi Sad (01-12-2018).

30) <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/03/20/serbian-population-and-refugee-crisis-strong-humanitarian-approach/>

<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/125/drustvo/2624739/u-srbiji-pretvezno-pozitivan-stav-prema-izbeglicama.html>



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