

The Croats should approve European Membership accession of their country in the referendum on 22nd January

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J-7
7 days before
the poll

On 9th December last Croatia signed its accession treaty to the European Union. Jadranka Kosor (Democratic Union, HDZ), the then Prime Minister, devoted that day to the veterans and the families of the Croatian war of independence (1991-1995). *"Without them free Croatia would not exist and there would not have been any membership negotiations."* On 23rd December the Hrvatski Sabor, the only chamber in Parliament, approved the organisation of a referendum on the country's membership of the EU on 22nd January, 124 votes in support, 12 against.

The electoral campaign for the referendum started on 3rd January. Two million brochures were distributed; a telephone line (0800622622) was opened to enable voters to find information. The Foreign and European Ministry opened an internet site devoted to the referendum www.eu-referendum.hr, it created *Facebook* www.facebook.com/eureferendum.hr and *Twitter* www.twitter.com/eureferendumhr pages as well as a *Youtube* channel www.youtube.com/mveprh. 17 local televisions and 80 radio stations have been involved in the campaign.

Around 4.2 million Croats are about to say "yes" or "no" to the following question: "Do you agree for Croatia to become a member of the European Union?"

Croatia's wish to join Europe goes back a long way. It emerged at the same time as the war of independence in 1991. According to political expert Zarko Puhovski, this can be explained in part by the fact that *"the Croats have never fully accepted their identity as a Balkan State"*. The country's road to EU membership has been long, complex and more difficult because of previous problems with the entry of Romania and Bulgaria. Brussels have forced the Croatian authorities to work in total cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY) and demanded results in the fight to counter organised crime – two major scourges in Croatia. On the day that Zagreb signed its membership treaty on 9th December the Bureau to Counter Organised Crime (USKOK) charged the Democratic Union (HDZ), the party of former Prime Minister (2009-2011) Jadranka Kosor, of having embezzled 10 million euros. Likewise on 3rd November last the trial of former Prime Minister (2003-2009) Ivo Sanader (HDZ) opened in Zagreb. The latter is on trial on six counts including

corruption, illegal funding, abuse of power; he faces a maximum of 10 years in prison.

Although the international economic crisis has dampened Croatian enthusiasm somewhat, the latter's European dream is still strong. The new Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic (Social Democratic Party, SDP), declared that Croatia will receive 200 million euros from Brussels so that it can adapt to European standards as well as 449 million euros from the Cohesion Fund in the first six months of 2013 (and more than one billion euros the following year). In all Zagreb will receive 3.5 billion euros in European funds between 2013 and 2015. *"People are wrong if they think that belonging to the EU will solve all of our problems. It is a great opportunity but our success is entirely in our hands,"* warned the President of the Republic, Ivo Josipovic. *"Some see Brussels as hell and want to fight it, others are expecting too much from membership,"* indicated the Head of State. He believes that the *"advantages that Zagreb will gain from membership will be significant"* and that *"refusal by Croatia would be irresponsible, notably for the future generations"*. He hopes that the "yes" will take 60% of the vote on 22nd January so that the government and parliament acquires the legitimacy to complete the necessary reforms.

The head of the EU's delegation in Croatia, Paul Vandoren recalled that chapters 8 (competition policy) and 23 (fundamental laws) and 24 (justice, freedom and security) were still the European Commission's priorities and that progress still had to be made.

The Federation of Independent Unions of Croatia (SSSH) called on Croats to vote on 22nd January. *"Historically, culturally and economically Croatia belongs to the European Union but the confirmation of this is in the hands of the electorate,"* reads its press release.

Referendum in Croatia 22nd January 2012

As for the opponents of EU membership there is the Council for Croatia – No to the European Union, which rallies 12 parties that are not represented in Parliament, including the Rights Party (HSP) led by Daniel Srb and the Pure Rights Party (HCSP), a far right movement led by Josip Miljak, and 11 NGO's.

The Rights Party has asked for the postponement of the referendum, saying that the Croats are not ready to vote on such a sensitive issue. The Council is demanding the organisation of debates between supporters of the "yes" vote and those against it, accusing the government led by new Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic (SDP) of leading a non-democratic electoral campaign. He suggests that "*19 days are not enough to debate on an issue as important as joining the European Union,*" according to Roko Sikic, leader of "*I love Croatia*" an anti-European, sovereignist movement.

This party also likes to point out that historically there has never been a union that favours Croatia, whether this was the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Yugoslavia. "*The European Union will be another disappointment for the Croatian nation,*" says Marjan Bosnjak of Only Croatia-Movement for Croatia (JH-PzH). The leader of the Autonomous Rights Party (A-HSP) Drazen Keleminec has protested against the Croatian political leaders who support Croatia's entry into the European Union. He also says that 90% of Croats, notably those who live in rural areas, are against the country's accession to the Union.

"*Croatia can live independently as Switzerland does,*" declares Dejan Golubic, founder and leader of the National Democrats, a party founded in 2009, positioned on the right and against Zagreb's entry into the Union. He warns that there "*is a danger of Croats becoming a cheap source of labour within their own country which would no longer belong to them.*" He also accuses the authorities in Zagreb of lacking transparency and says that the elites are hiding things from the people, notably with regard to the truth about the consequences of membership. Opponents to Croatia's entry into the Union organised a demonstration in the main square of Zagreb on 14th January.

Around one thousand intellectuals and politicians, who lie rather more to the right, including former Foreign Minister and Ambassador for Croatia at the UN, Zvonimir Separovic, signed a petition asking for the postponement of the referendum at least until the ICTY has given its final verdict in the trial of two generals, Ante Gotovina, former Inspector General of the Croatian Army and Mladen Markac, former police commander of the Interior Ministry (special police force), who were convicted on 15th April 2011 to 24 and 18 years in prison respectively for crimes against humanity and infringements of the laws governing war (murder, persecution, pillaging), committed during the Storm Operation (Oluja) between July and September 1995. Both men appealed in May.

The petitioners, like many Croats, consider Anti Gotovina and Mladen Markac to be national heroes and that the ICTY is turning Croatia and the war of independence into a criminal structure and that it wants to punish the country for freeing itself of its occupants. "*It is an historical example of dishonour and infringement of Christian values,*" write the petitioners who accuse the EU of being "racist".

Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic warned the Croats that another referendum may be organised if the "no" vote won on 22nd January, but that Brussels might also decide, if this were the case, that Croatia would only be able to join the 27 later with a group of other countries. "*The referendum will be a chance to show that Croatia belongs politically, and not just geographically, historically and culturally, to Europe,*" she said.

According to the latest poll by CRO-Demoskop 55.1% of the Croats are about to vote in support of their country's membership of the EU against one third (33.3%) who would vote against. One Croat in 10 (11.6%) says that he/she has not yet decided.

If the Croats accept their country's accession to the EU on 22nd January the membership treaty signed by Zagreb still has to be ratified by the 27 EU Member States. We recall that it will be the last time that France will ratify a new member's accession to the EU by parliament. The following membership bids will be submitted to referendum.

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