

The Croats approve their country's entry into the European Union

From **Corinne Deloy**
Translated by Helen Levy

RESULTS

The Croats approved their country's entry into the European Union by a wide majority in a referendum that took place on 22nd January. Two thirds of voters (66.67%) supported membership and 33.33% voted "no" to the question that was asked of them ("Do you approve of the Republic of Croatia's membership of the European Union?"). Turnout however was low, totalling 43.54%. Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic (Social Democratic Party, SDP) deplored this high abstention rate believing that it was a "message to his government from a share of the population which is suffering because of Croatia's difficult economic situation." There was no minimal turnout threshold necessary for the election to be deemed valid.

The President of the Republic, Ivo Josipovic welcomed the "great day for Croatia". "Croatia has chosen Europe and the association of all European democratic countries," he said happily, adding "2013 will herald a turning point in our history. I am impatient for the day when I can consider all of Europe as my home." "It is an historic decision," said the Head of Government, Zoran Milanovic.

The President of the Republic reminded his fellow countrymen to "find the courage and wisdom to say yes" as he spoke for the last time on television before the referendum. "Europe will not solve all of our problems but it is a great opportunity. Like the 27 other countries of Europe Croatia will not be giving up its sovereignty by joining the EU. Croatia is investing some of its sovereignty intelligently into the most prosperous political and economic community in the world," he said. "The situation is not fantastic but Croatia does not have a better option at present outside of the EU," said Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic.

Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic (SDP) did not hesitate to threaten, speaking of "a life and death situation" about the referendum. "To a certain degree the decision taken during the referendum is about Croatia's economic survival," she declared, mentioning the country's sovereign debt rating, the cancellation of investments and job losses as the possible effects of a "no" victory on 22nd January.

In a country in which nine people in ten say they are Catholic, the Church also took position in support of membership, qualified to be of strategic national interest. "Croatia belongs to European culture and civilisation that is over a thousand years old," read a press release signed by the bishops which repeated the words of Pope Benedict XVI when he visited the country on 4th and 5th June last. The Catholic hierar-

chy called on the Croats to "reject fear and all resignation and to open up to the future courageously."

Nearly all of the Croatian political parties supported membership. Both left and rightwing MPs campaigned on the fact that Zagreb's entry into the EU would bring "a stable financial and macroeconomic environment and an effective legal system," and that it would "revive economic development." The country hopes to receive around 450 million € i.e. 1% of its GDP for its economic development projects. In all Croatia should receive 3.5 billion € in European funds between 2013 and 2015. « Only European money can revive the country's growth. The country has not and will not have enough money alone to fund infrastructures, develop rural areas and finance the reform of the labour market, » maintained Zavko Petak, professor of political science.

Membership was also approved by the Serbs of Croatia who see in the EU a body that can guarantee the respect of their rights. 132,000 of the 250,000 Serbs who fled the country during the war between the Croats and Serbs (1991-1995) returned home after the conflict. The Serb community represents 4.5% of the country's population.

The population's enthusiasm, which achieved a peak in 2003 when 80% declared that they supported membership declined during the membership negotiations (2005-2011), notably because of the international economic, the euro zone and European debt crisis. "That a country of the European Union is a source of problems and not of solutions is obviously not a vector that supports integration. More widely Greece has brought a terrible blow to enlargement in the Balkans because it was put forward as an example - today it is a discouragement. The countries of former Yugoslavia will now have to prove that they are not Greece. The time is not

Referendum in Croatia

22nd January 2012

ripe for euro-dreaming but euro-realism," says Jacques Rupnik, director of the CERI-CNRS, in an interview with the newspaper, La Croix on 20th January last. *"The European Union stands before a series of economic and structural failures and the hope that it might offer something else to Croatia is fading,"* stressed Radovan Vukadinovic an international relations expert. Many Croats also deemed the terms set by Brussels for their country to join the European Union excessive, notably full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia in The Hague (ICTY) and the prosecution of those who had committed war crimes. Some Croats accuse the EU of considering the war of independence (which led to around 20,000 deaths) as a simple criminal enterprise. *"For the countries which had just regained their independence at the cost of the terrible trauma of war, the idea of sharing their sovereignty again within the EU is not to be taken for granted,"* stresses Jacques Rupnik. *"I shall vote in support of Croatia's accession to the EU because we belong to the European Union,"* said Ante Gotovina (by way of his lawyers) – the latter was convicted by the ICTY on 15th April to 24 years in prison.

The Croats said "yes" to their entry into the European Union just some days after celebrating the 20th anniversary of the international acknowledgement of their independence and 5 days after the OSCE announced the end of its mission in the country (started in 1996).

Croatia's membership treaty now has to be ratified by the 27 Member States before 1st July 2013, when Zagreb will become the second of the six former Republics of Yugoslavia to join the EU. All of the Western Balkan States are invited to join the 27. Montenegro and Macedonia have achieved candidate status but their membership negotiations have not yet started. Skopje is in conflict with Athens over the name of Macedonia; the European authorities have asked Podgorica to continue its reforms and to make progress in terms of the fight to counter corruption and organised crime, which are vital for the launch of negotiations in June 2012. Albania and Serbia are waiting. On 9th December last, when Zagreb signed the membership treaty, Belgrade was refused the status of official candidate. Brussels invited the Serbs to make progress in terms of their dialogue with their Kosovar neighbours and promised to look at their claim in February.

Referendum Results on Croatia's Membership of the EU – 22nd January 2012

Turnout: 43.54%

Question submitted to referendum	% of « yes » votes (the number of votes is in brackets)	% of "no" votes (the number of votes is in brackets)	% of blank or invalid votes (the number of votes is in brackets)
"Do you approve of the Republic of Croatia's membership of the European Union?"	66.67 (1 298 904)	33.33 (649 409)	0.6 (11 732)

Source : National Croatian Electoral Commission

See all of our publications on our site:
www.robert-schuman.eu

Publishing director : Pascale JOANNIN

THE ROBERT SCHUMAN FOUNDATION, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organization of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.