

CROATIA'S POLICY TOWARD BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Stuck in Transition?

In the latest report from Democratization Policy Council, authors Bodo Weber and Kurt Bassuener argue that Croatia's policy toward BiH has had little or no positive impact on relations between the two countries

When a new Croatian government was formed at the end of 2011 under SDP leadership, Prime Minister Zoran Milanovic and Minister for Foreign and European Affairs, Vesna Pusic, took office and shortly thereafter announced their intention to make good relations with neighboring Bosnia and Herzegovina a top priority of their policy of strong regional engagement. This decision to re-engage in BiH came after years of inactivity due to official Zagreb's all-consuming focus on its preparations for EU membership and at a time when the on-going structural political crisis in BiH had reached new heights.

Hopes for Change Dashed

There were growing demands for action on the crisis from individual EU member states despite the EU itself being not willing to seriously re-engage and take action. The new government's BiH policy was to be a "principled policy" – one that would follow the state policy defined by former President Stipe Mesic in 2000 and accepted by all subsequent governments which was based on respect for the territorial integrity and sovereign-

**By Bodo Weber and Kurt Bassuener
Democratization Policy Council**

ty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and making it clear to BiH Croats that their capital is Sarajevo, not Zagreb. There was real hope in Zagreb that this was a new beginning. New opposition HDZ leader Tomislav Karamarko had generated further hope in a stronger, constructive BiH policy, on account of his political biography. But it soon became evident that there was no developed thinking or cohesive plan behind the basic declarations. Three years on, and hopes for change have been dashed. Croatia's policy toward BiH has had little or no positive impact on relations between the two countries. Prime Minister Milanovic's efforts got mired in the conflictual relations among the key political actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Like former President Ivo Josipovic's earlier BiH policy initiative, it demonstrates that Croatia's leverage in Bosnia and Herzegovina, particularly over BiH Croat politics, has substantially diminished since the 1990s.

Foreign and European Affairs Minister Pusic attempted to make an impact working within the framework of the EU

after Croatia became its 28th member, but her BiH plan received little support among member states, despite the fact that its main elements were almost identical to those of the later German-British initiative – now the EU's new and much-touted BiH policy. Pusic could do little more than insist that she thought of it first. The Pusic plan had presented a dramatic policy U-turn that left the BiH experts within her ministry largely marginalized. Now, toward the end of Pusic's term in office, those in her ministry in charge of BiH and the wider region appear to be skeptical of the prospects for the EU's new BiH initiative to succeed.

The Lens of Ethno-Politics

The BiH policy of all the top political players in today's Croatia – the Prime Minister, the Foreign and European Affairs Minister, the President, the opposition leader – seems to be schizophrenic. They seem to possess closely-held views that are both moderate and reality-based. They reject the idea of a third entity, repudiate the HDZ BiH's cooperation with the government in the Republika Srpska, and see the BiH Croat

political leadership, along with the country's entire political elite, as corrupt and part of the problem - not a part of the solution. Yet these views hardly ever translate into public performance or policy. Instead, the government, president, and opposition repeatedly allow themselves to get drawn into paying public tribute to Croatia's 1990s policy legacy on BiH, which views the country solely through the lens of ethno-politics.

While this conduct is considerably less invasive than it was under Croatian BiH policy in the 1990s, it nevertheless prevents Croatia from completely breaking with the past and setting aside the war legacy – which could now be done at a very low political price due to the current general disinterest of Croatian citizens regarding BiH. As a consequence, Croatia's already limited potential impact as an honest broker on Bosnia and Herzegovina both in its direct relations with BiH and within the EU framework is further reduced.



Vesna Pusic

Another policy remnant of the recent past is the constitutional right granted to BiH Croats with dual citizenship to vote in Croatian elections. The practice of this right undermines the sovereignty and democratic development of both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

False Assumption

The baseline policies adopted by President Mesic fifteen years ago – respect for BiH's territorial integrity,

support for its EU integration path, making it clear to BiH Croats that their capital is Sarajevo – remain in place. Yet Croatia's policy since 2010 has been almost wholly counterproductive. The efforts of first Josipovic and then Milanovic and finally Pusic with respect to improving relations with BiH were doomed from the start, and ended up with little to no palpable effect or even provoked conflicts with some elements of the BiH political elite and some BiH officials. These policies were predicated on the false assumption that BiH Croats are somehow uniquely disadvantaged by non-representation. But lack of representation and accountability are fundamental principles enshrined in the Dayton system – they are disadvantageous for all BiH's citizens and constituent peoples. Furthermore, Croatia (like Serbia) was encouraged within the EU to involve itself as a moderating influence on co-ethnics in BiH, because the EU was itself unwilling to directly confront political malpractice with the power and influence it has at its disposal. On the EU stage, in Brussels, Croatia failed at this task for reasons that are mostly common among all previous new member states, while demonstrating a parochial fervor which alienated many member states and MEPs.

This is most visible in the ruling SDP's and HDZ's support for "federalization" of BiH. While a majority of the proponents of the idea are probably well-intentioned, they either can't or don't want to understand that such an undefined and unsuitable idea in the BiH political context will be understood and used by the HDZ BiH as support for some form of third entity, while at the same time will be perceived in Sarajevo precisely the same way. That once hopeful promise of constructive and positive engagement in BiH was lost, but it can be recovered.

Recommendations

For the next Croatian government and other relevant elements of the Croatian polity to be in a position to exert constructive influence on the EU's BiH policy, several policy adjustments must be undertaken:

- ❖ The new Croatian government and opposition politicians should take a firm and united stance against creation of a third entity in BiH and against further cooperation with the destabilizing political leadership in the Republika Srpska.
- ❖ Croatian government officials should end the practice of quiet, unofficial consultations with BiH Croat parties' representatives, and instead make relations with all BiH political actors – and civil society as well – transparent.
- ❖ Croatian government officials and opposition politicians should promote equality for BiH Croats through their support for initiatives and reform proposals that aim to create a more functional constitutional system in BiH by balancing collective and individual citizens' right in a way that secures a stable democracy, strong rule of law, and political accountability – not through an exclusively ethnic Croat filter.
- ❖ The new Croatian government and opposition politicians need to agree on

constitutional changes to abolish the diaspora electoral unit for the Sabor as well as the voting rights of BiH citizens with dual citizenship and residence in BiH in Croatian presidential and parliamentary elections.

- ❖ The new Croatian government and opposition politicians need to agree on legislative changes to abolish the right of BiH citizens with dual citizenship and residency in BiH to run as candidates in Croatian elections, including elections for Croatian members in the European Parliament.
- ❖ The State Office for Croats Living outside the Republic of Croatia should be dissolved and its role integrated with the foreign ministry's departments for developmental aid.
- ❖ Croatia must abandon its current maximalist approach regarding the dispute on the re-negotiation of BiH's interim trade agreement with the EU and negotiate a good faith compromise solution.
- ❖ Within the framework of the Berlin process and the most recent Western Balkans summit in Vienna, and based on the findings of the completed and forthcoming feasibility studies, Zagreb should seek a good faith compromise solution to the Peljesac bridge dispute.