

Highlights

- ★ The expectations of Croat citizens are modest since the country entered the EU in the midst of the financial crisis and the popular feeling is one of cautious optimism. The membership serves as a catalyst for the creation of national identity as one rooted in the West. It should also boost growth in the country, which Croatia is only starting to see having entered the EU in the midst of the crisis.
- ★ Croatia sees its capacity to influence EU policy making as limited. However, it shows willingness to deepen integration and to play its role in certain policies, in particular vis-à-vis enlargement. Widening the EU in the Western Balkans is seen as a key national interest to facilitate peace and prosperity in the region.
- ★ Education and mobility are two important elements to develop a European public sphere along with more common actions, rules and debates at the European level. A focus on the youth would be particularly welcome in Croatia.

Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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About Building Bridges

Called “Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union”, the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others’ from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



This project is supported by the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Union.

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

Croatia became the 28th member of the European Union (EU) on July 1st 2013 after almost a decade-long negotiation. It also became the first country to enter the Union in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association process that the European Commission designed for the countries of the Western Balkans. It is also the first post-war country that entered the EU in recent history. All this played strongly on the political will to carry out the negotiations and on the expectations of citizens regarding their EU membership.

Croatia is a relatively small country of roughly 4.3 million citizens, almost 90% of which are ethnic Croats. Being a former member of ex-Yugoslavia which broke apart in a violent conflict in the early 1990s, it had to go through multiple transitions to achieve its current status as an EU and NATO member. This included a transition from a communist one-party system to a democratic multi-party political system, from a state-run to a market economy, from one of the six members of a federal union to an independent state, and from war to peace. Once these goals were achieved, Croatia set out to become a member of the EU and NATO. It joined NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013.

Now in the Union, the question still remains how Croatia will consume its membership and how it will contribute to the EU's progress. The expectations of Croat citizens are modest since the country entered the EU in the midst of the financial crisis and the popular feeling is one of cautious optimism.

Euro-Atlantic integrations have also been seen as a way to confirm Croatia's identity as being more rooted in the West and less in the

Balkans. Thus, the membership also serves as a catalyst for the creation of national identity.

The largest challenge for Croatia remains its economic prosperity. EU membership is associated with economic growth but, in the case of Croatia, this was interrupted by the severe economic crisis, thus delaying the most tangible benefits. Hence, Croatia did not experience the same economic take-off as did the ten states that entered the Union in 2004.

Yet, the first effects of economic reforms have started to pick up in the third year of membership. The government reported the growth of exports, the growth of foreign investments, industrial production, personal consumption, and an increase of employment in the tourism sector. The growth of exports to EU member states is noted to be almost 11%, most notably towards Latvia, Portugal and Spain, and not only towards traditional partners such as Germany, Italy and Austria. Despite the negative expectations, the trade towards CEFTA (Central European Free Trade Agreement) members in 2014, in comparison to 2013, is showing a growth of 11.5%, most notably towards Montenegro, Serbia and Moldova.¹

Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?

The accession to the Union was supported by all relevant political parties and this remains the case. Citizens, of course, are less directly related to EU daily affairs than politicians, but that does not mean that they are not aware of its influence. What perhaps remains as the biggest challenge in Croatia, and it may also be true for some other, particularly new, member states, is for the membership to be more clearly viewed in terms of being a commitment to strengthening the common policies,

contributing to the betterment of the EU project, and sharing responsibility for the future of the Union. Croatia still feels quite detached from the EU-core and sees membership more as a way to receive certain benefits, such as access to the EU funds, rather than considering membership in a more holistic way.

According to the Strategy of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs 2014 – 2016, “the affirmation and the protection of the interests of the Republic of Croatia in the upcoming three year period will be directed at the functioning in the conditions of the membership in the European Union and NATO”. Furthermore, the Strategy for 2015-2017 period states that “Active and engaged participation in articulation and implementation of European policies, as well as deciding on important global questions, especially in the area of ensuring world peace and peaceful resolution of international crisis situations, will define the further actions of the Republic of Croatia as a member of the European Union and the NATO”.²

development and 253 million euros for the development of fisheries.³

However, slow preparation of national policies and investment projects led to limited capacities for the use of EU funds. Until December 1st 2014 Croatia used 45% of available funds.⁴ This has, however, improved recently. According to the Government data, Croatia now has a positive account with the EU, where it paid 952.2 million euros into the European budget, and used 1.057 billion euros from EU funds.⁵

Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country, both politically and economically?

Croatia is not a part of the Schengen area and the Eurozone which makes it, obviously, less fully integrated into the EU-core. It has expressed its intention to join both policy areas, but at the moment of entry in 2013 there were additional conditions that Croatia needed to meet to qualify for joining both Schengen and

Statement	I support a European economic and monetary Union with a single currency - euro	I support a common European foreign and security policy	I support further enlargement to include other countries in the future years	I support a common defence and security policy	I support a common energy policy	I am in favour or somewhat in favour of a common European army	I feel more decisions should be taken at the EU level
EU Average	57%	66%	39%	74%	72%	55%	53%
Croatia	56%	74%	61%	81%	78%	68%	65%

Table created by the authors according to Eurobarometer data

The membership of the European Union opened the possibility of using the EU funds. In the financial period 2014 – 2020, over 10 billion euros are available for Croatia from the European Structural and Investment Funds. Out of that amount, 8.397 billion euros are foreseen for the aims of the cohesion policy, 2.026 billion euros for agriculture and rural

the Eurozone. The initial plan was to join Schengen in 2015 while the entry into the Eurozone was not specified. With the Greek and the migrant crises occurring in the meantime, there is less public debate on the need to press for joining these two policy areas. However, official documents keep these two

goals open and reiterate Croatia's ambition to realise them.⁶

The public opinion polls show a high level of approval for certain aspects of political and economic integration.

Generally, Croatia sees its capacity to influence EU policy making as limited. At the same time, however, it has expressed a desire to contribute more substantially to the functioning of the Union through certain policies where it has recognised its comparative strengths and distinct interests. These include the effective administration of external borders of the European Union, as well as establishing itself as an active member within the Common Foreign and Security Policy.⁷ Unlike the majority in the EU, Croatia is a staunch supporter of further enlargement of the six Western Balkan countries. This is seen as a national interest because it would facilitate peace and prosperity. With neighbours to the south and the east in the Union, Croatia would cease to be a country on the external borders of the EU, while being in the same organisation would mitigate some open issues that Croatia has with these neighbours. The bottom-line is that enlargement of the Western Balkans into the EU is seen as a way to increase the security and stability of the European Southeast as a precondition for fostering economic growth.

Furthermore, Croatia sees its active role in the area of development cooperation. It believes it has a comparative advantage as a former aid recipient who is now a donor with specific knowledge that can be effectively used. Having stated its ambition to "share its knowledge and experiences acquired during peacebuilding and post conflict democratic transition", ⁸ it has made development cooperation an important part of its foreign policy.

A new Development Cooperation Strategy for the period 2015 – 2020 foresees projects in several key partner countries: Southeast Europe (programme country: Bosnia and Herzegovina), North Africa and the Middle East (programme country: Jordan), and in less developed countries and countries in transition (programme country: Afghanistan). Special attention will be paid to Columbia, Myanmar, Tajikistan, Tanzania and Ukraine.⁹ Key priority sectors are war and post-war democratic transition and personal development, with special attention awarded to education, health, protection and the empowerment of women, children and youth as well as sustainable economic development.¹⁰

Tackling the migrant crisis has become a significant challenge. In September 2015 Croatia accepted the quotas proposed by the Commission for relocation of 160,000 refugees. However, being geographically located on the so-called Western Balkan route, it also had to deal with several hundred thousand migrants transiting its territory in the Autumn of 2015, which has caused internal turmoil and frictions with neighbours. Lacking European answers to the migration challenge, the public pressed for national answers. The unity of the EU has been seriously questioned as a result.

According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?

Education and mobility are ways to strengthen the idea of sharing the European common sphere, today and in the future. Expanding the area of common legislation, increasing the number of shared regulations, debating on mutual goals, and building coalitions for joint actions are necessary if we want to achieve a more functional EU.

However, the long-term effort, the one that will create the mental space for the creation of a common European identity, is through education and the ability of citizens to move and work across the EU territory. Visions of the future of the EU and related strategies on how to realise these visions need to be more coherent. There is no common agreement on either the visions and/or the strategies, but one thing is clear – a united, strong and viable EU can survive only if its citizens believe in it.

Statistically, the support for EU membership has remained stable in the two years since Croatia’s entry, at above 50%. Young people expect greater mobility, more employment and education opportunities. One liability of membership is decreased sovereignty, but this is not (yet) a political issue in the country, rather an acknowledgement of facts. There is also no strong eurosceptic political party.

Further investment in programmes of student exchange, traineeships and academic and research exchange supports this goal. Research shows that the benefits of European integration are most strongly felt among the population through these exact policies.

the most tangible benefits of European integration and contribute directly to the quality of life of European citizens. A set of policies that could be translated into global leadership on foreign policy issues and climate change actions is also needed.

Furthermore, reducing the democratic deficit would contribute to a sense of civic participation and ownership, thus contributing to the legitimacy of the European project. Much work has already been done through the institutional empowerment of the European Parliament. In addition, the Croatian Parliament “expressed its belief that further improvement of cooperation and coordination of national parliaments in the enforcement of review over legislative procedures of the European Union, with full participation of all stakeholders, would contribute to the strengthening of trust of citizens in EU policies, and consequentially, their engagement at European Parliament elections...”.

In the context of recent crises in the European Union, such as *Grexit*, the migration crisis and the potential *Brexit*, it seems essential that the EU works on policies that enable common European

What does the EU mean to you personally?	Freedom to study, travel and work anywhere in the EU	Economic Prosperity	Democracy	I feel, at least to some extent, EU citizens	I see myself as only (my nationality)	I see myself as (my nationality) and European	I see myself as European and (my nationality)	I see myself as European only
<i>EU average</i>	49%	14%	19%	67%	38%	52%	6%	2%
<i>Croatia</i>	49%	26%	25%	63%	30%	63%	5%	1%

Tables created by the authors in accordance with the Eurobarometer data

Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?

The European Union needs to continue its work on the strengthening of the internal market and designing policies that will further enhance the four freedoms, as these represent

solutions, while protecting the national interests of its member states. Of course, this is easier said than done. What we can hope for is that the crises will lead to a breakthrough regarding how we conceive of the common European framing of thoughts and actions.

If we are able to remind ourselves of the fundamental reasons why the EU was created, why we began the European project, why we have been ready to devolve parts of national sovereignty to the European level and why it is important to continue to do so, then we have a chance to overcome the obstacles we are

currently facing and will be exposed to in the future. If we care strongly enough in a common European future, we shall give legitimacy to leaders who are able to overcome conflicting interests and instead focus on fostering mutual solutions.

Endnotes

1. Government, "Two Years of EU Membership" (in Croatian), website, <https://vlada.gov.hr/>.
2. Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, *Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Strategy 2015 – 2017* (in Croatian), 2015, <http://www.mvep.hr/>, p. 1.
3. "EU fondovi", Europski Strukturni I Investicijski Fondovi, website, <http://www.strukturnifondovi.hr/>.
4. Božica Babić, "Hrvatska iskoristila tek 45 posto novca iz fondova Europske unije", *Poslovni*, 7 December 2014, <http://www.poslovni.hr/>.
5. Government, "Two Years of EU Membership", *op. cit.*
6. Croatian integration into the Schengen Area is emphasised as an important goal in the work of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs in all strategies from 2014 – 2018, available at: <http://www.mvep.hr/>.
7. Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, *Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Strategy 2015 – 2017*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
8. Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, "Razvojna suradnja", website, <http://www.mvep.hr/>.
9. Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, *Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs Strategy 2015 – 2017*, *op. cit.*, p. 19
10. *Ibid*, p. 21.