

Croatia in the EU, the EU in Croatia

Monday 17 February 2020, by [KOSTANIĆ Marko](#) (Date first published: 22 January 2020).

Croatia recently assumed the presidency of the Council of the EU, but has Europe had any effect on the country since it joined the EU in 2013? Marko Kostanić of the Croatian magazine Bilten takes stock of the last eight years.

The role of the European Union in Croatian political life is a peculiar one indeed. Or, to put it bluntly: its role is not properly “political” at all, in the sense that the EU, its structures, policies, and ideological preferences were never part of proper political debates or political programmes.

Looking back at the 1990s and early 2000s, the EU (or “the West”) was almost treated as a kind of religious entity by both nationalists and liberals alike. The consensual narrative went something like this: we were always part of Europe, but somehow Communists managed to drag us into the Balkans and now, as an independent state, we were coming “home” to civilization. For the nationalists, Communism was identified with the Serbs and our alleged “belonging” to the West was a mark of distinction. For the liberals, on the other hand, Europe represented a holy grail: merely by joining the EU, Croatia would achieve economic prosperity, political stability, and cultural sophistication – all of which were denied to us during the socialist period. Of course, the irony being that these middle-class liberals mostly achieved their social ascent through socialist modernization.

The Crisis Hits

Nevertheless, these predictions seemed plausible for at least a few years. In the mid-2000s everything was in its right place: Croatia was an independent state with no Serbs or Communists dragging us down, hard-core nationalism was “domesticated” by negotiations with the EU, corruption was allegedly on the brink of elimination, and GDP was skyrocketing. That is, until the economic crisis came.

As if in a cheesy horror movie, no one saw it coming – but the effects were devastating. Unemployment reached record highs; alongside evictions and bankruptcies, Croatia (together with Greece) underwent the longest recessionary period in the EU and took years to return to positive growth. Yet as expected, the EU was not to blame for the crisis – especially after it became evident that Croatia’s recovery was extremely slow. This fact was cited as evidence that Croatians were still living in socialism (i.e., still had a public sector) and trapped in a socialist mentality without entrepreneurial spirit or a knack for innovation.

Intervening from the Left

Although the EU’s role and public status have not changed, the political climate in the last decade witnessed several major shifts. The referendum on joining the EU took place on 22 January 2012 and delivered a landslide victory for “Yes”, but with little popular enthusiasm. Turnout was very low: only 43.51 percent of eligible voters cast a vote. The campaign preceding the referendum was somewhat bizarre. Consensus was prevalent, particularly among elites, but there were nevertheless two options on the ballot, and thus – on those rare occasions when a debate took place – someone had to represent the other side.

At the time, the Croatian far-right lacked a coherent position against the EU and its organizational capacities were still embryonic as far as being a proper part of civil society was concerned. Right-wing criticism of the EU had mostly concerned the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction over former Yugoslavia in The Hague, Netherlands, and the Croatian Right was mostly preoccupied with extradition requests for individuals accused for war crimes. During negotiations, these extraditions were treated as a precondition for accession. Concerning this poor "anti-imperialist" tradition on the Croatian Right, it was predictable that their case against the EU would not be very convincing. Based on a deeply opaque concept of sovereignty and conspiracy theories that suggested the EU was somehow a new version of the Soviet Union, its influence was limited – especially in a context in which Croatian nationalism was and still is largely based on hatred of the Serbs and anti-Communism. Moreover, the right-wingers engaged in the campaign were obscure figures who are now mostly forgotten.

In an attempt to intervene in this empty space, a new initiative was established on the Left. Informal and ad hoc, the "Democratic Initiative against the European Union" was mostly comprised of the student Left formed out of campus occupations three years earlier. Its goal was to provide the broader public with a left-wing critique of the EU. This was a difficult task, as the Left in Croatia was (and to some extent still is) identified with liberalism and thus surely had nothing critical to say about the EU, itself a deeply liberal institution.

The initiative published two dossiers in the bi-weekly cultural magazine *Zarez* covering critical analyses of the EU on fiscal policy, monetary policy, immigration policy, its democratic deficit, as well as economic and regional inequality. The initiative's influence was, of course, marginal in convincing people to vote "No", but in a context in which any proper debate was suspended it did receive some space in the mainstream media and managed to communicate its basic idea: the EU would not solve Croatia's political and economic problems. In a way, the initiative achieved its goal and showed that EU could and should be criticized from a left-wing perspective.

Croatia in the EU

Croatia joined the EU in 2013. Since then, nothing has changed: European politics failed to move into the country's political debates, even in the run-up to elections to the European Parliament. The country has voted for the EP twice since joining, but questions concerning European politics were never part of debates, programmes, or a matter of public interest. Most of the political parties and media treated the elections as an opinion poll and signal for parties of whether they need to change something before the parliamentary elections. The only two instances where European politics appeared in broader focus were in 2015: the Greek crisis and the so-called "migrant crisis".

In the Greek case, everything appeared clear. Politicians, pundits, and journalists repeated the standard arguments from the Troika and cited Greece as a warning: the same could happen to Croatia if the country dared to question austerity measures, fiscal responsibility, balanced budgets, and not living beyond one's means. On the migrant question there was more space for debate, but at that time the far-right still was not "prepared" for the question, as were they preoccupied with Serbs, Communists, and "unborn children". Later on, however, they managed to include – or to be more precise: import – the anti-migrant stance of the Western far-right.

Beyond these two occasions, uninformed observers reading and watching Croatian media could be forgiven for thinking that Croatia is still part of Yugoslavia. Most political debates are concerned with socialist history and dictated by the far-right and liberals, even the "problem" is an economic one. This may sound bizarre and completely detached from political reality, as a kind of political Disneyland, but these debates and trends are deeply rooted in European political reality – only ideologically adapted and historically translated for our own political purposes. These adaptations

and translations are twofold: they are “displaced” reactions to political and economic effects of Croatia’s European trajectory, and also “adjusted” imports of new political trends in Europe, especially those on far right.

Croatia’s EU membership was imagined to be an epilogue of a predetermined historical trajectory: an independent national state integrated in the West and achieving a “European standard of living”. Yet something went terribly wrong. The desired “convergence”, in EU bureaucratic jargon, failed to take place. Notorious foreign direct investments – invoked constantly during last thirty years as a *deus ex machine* – were scarce and highly selective, mostly going to finance, real estate, telecommunications, and other sectors which were not heavily exposed to market competition. Moreover, the banks (mostly foreign-owned) are not interested in financing local industry, as is suggested by the interest rates they offer. They mainly finance household consumption and public debt. The Croatian economy is thus heavily dependent on tourism, and no mainstream political party has anything approach an industrial strategy.

In the last few years we have witnessed a kind historical irony: while waiting for European capital to make Croatia rich, Croatian workers went to Western Europe to make European capital more competitive. It is hard to provide exact numbers on how many people left Croatia after European labour markets opened up, but estimates suggest hundreds of thousands of people. Moreover, during the so-called “recovery”, Croatia became the European leader in precarious jobs, particularly among young people. This is partly due to tourism’s seasonal nature: most of the new jobs generated in that period were low-wage jobs in the service sector. Although unemployment is at historic lows, the rate of employment is still lower than in 2008 before the crisis – due to emigration. Or, as Boris Vujčić, the head of Croatian central bank, put it: Croatia finally managed to achieve competitive labour costs, but there are no more workers left to perform that labour. Evidently, they were dissatisfied with their price tag and went abroad instead. To add a further layer of irony, Croatian police engage in brutal treatment of migrants on the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina in order to prevent them from “contaminating” the country’s diminished population. Of course, migrants from Asia and Africa do not wish to stay in Croatia – just like their Croatian counterparts.

In that context, it makes sense that nationalists and conservatives focus so much on socialist Yugoslavia. They must depict it as poorly as possible in order to legitimize the current conditions which emerged from the ruins of Yugoslavia. In order to do that, they have to start at the beginning: World War II, the antifascist struggle led by Communists, and the social revolution which formed the foundation of socialist Yugoslavia. Their revisionist offensive is internationally acknowledged by “anti-totalitarian” resolutions from the European Parliament and part of a wider European trend based on anti-Communist hysteria. In that regard, the situation in Croatia is not endemic in the European context. Different organizations on the Croatian right, especially in civil society, have adopted the international conservative explanation for social problems: a sinister coalition between the elites and various minorities (ethnic, sexual, etc.). In the Croatian case, these elites are mostly portrayed as Yugoslav elites (the “red bourgeoisie”), which for some reasons are still alive and brokering secret deals with Serbs, the LGBTI community, migrants, or whomever else at the expense of “ordinary people”. Such rhetoric might seem convincing for some “ordinary people” because almost no one provides a more plausible explanation for their everyday struggles.

Liberals are still convinced that these tendencies have nothing to do with EU structures and Croatia’s integration into the global market. They continue to believe that chauvinism and corruption are remnants of Balkan tradition and socialist heritage, and that these tendencies were suppressed during the negotiation process in order to trick European bureaucrats into letting Croatia in. Again – no politics at all. In that context, the current Croatian presidency of the Council of the EU really means nothing: its only significance can be found in internal struggles within the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), which is currently in power. Prime Minister Andrej

Plenković will use it as a lever in his struggle against internal opponents who regard him as insufficiently nationalist. Ultimately, the EU has been decisive in shaping Croatian economic and political life, but in Croatian politics the EU serves as little more than an ideological tool for clashes which have no actual connection to the EU itself.

Marko Kostanić works as an editor at Bilten, a Zagreb-based online magazine. He is also a member and co-founder of the Center for Labor Studies in Zagreb.

Marko Kostanić

[Click here](#) to subscribe to our weekly newsletters in English and or French. You will receive one email every Monday containing links to all articles published in the last 7 days.

P.S.

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung

<https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/41618/croatia-in-the-eu-the-eu-in-croatia/>