

Europeanization Impact on Croatia's Course to Democracy

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Resumo

O Impacto da Europeização no Caminho da Croácia para a Democracia

A futura perspectiva de integração na União Europeia (UE) colocou os países dos Balcãs num caminho claro para a democracia. Este artigo incide na europeização, dinâmica própria da UE enquanto actor global, aplicada ao processo de transição pós comunista da Croácia. Procuram-se respostas sobre a forma como a europeização tem vindo a afectar o processo de transição na Croácia. Analisa-se o processo de democratização na Croácia, tendo em conta aspectos políticos, institucionais, sociais e económicos. Apesar de elementos de complementaridade e resistência na relação entre a europeização e as políticas governamentais, verifica-se que esta tem vindo a ter um grande impacto no processo de decisão política na Croácia.

Abstract

Due to the perspective of future integration into the European Union (EU), the Balkans countries are set on a clear course towards democracy.

Europeanization as a particular dynamic related to the EU role as a global actor, applied to the Croatia post-communist transition, constitute the vector of analysis. This essay aims to address the simultaneously interconnected and heterogeneous responses of Croatia's post-communist course of change to European integration. In this line of research, we search for answers to how Europeanization affected Croatia's post-communist transition. This will be pursued through an analysis of the democratization course, mainly regarding political, institutional and social aspects, and economic integration. Despite elements of complementarity and resistance in the working relationship among Europeanization and Croatia government policies, which are highly debatable, we find it has substantial implications on Croatia policy-making.

Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the desegregation of the Soviet bloc allowed a redrawing of the political landscape in Southeast Europe, with the states formerly under the communist regime redesigning policies and goals. With varying degrees of intensity, these states have been experiencing the spread of democratic ideals and liberal economic principles, conveyed, among others, by international organizations, such as the European Union (EU). In this post-communist transition process, the Europeanization as a particular dynamic related to the EU role as a global actor, constitute the vector of analysis.

This essay aims to address the simultaneously interconnected and heterogeneous responses of Croatia's post-communist course of change to regional process of European integration. In this line of research, we search for answers to how Europeanization works in the case of Croatia's post-communist transition. This will be pursued through an analysis of the democratization course, mainly regarding political, institutional and social aspects, and economic integration. Despite elements of complementarity and resistance in the working relationship among the EU and Croatia's, which are highly debatable, we find they have substantial implications on Croatia policy-making.

Following this line of research, the first part of this essay starts with the clarification of the conceptual framework - Europeanization. We draw on this concept as we explore the Croatia transition course towards democracy, and investigate how this transition has been affected by the Europeanization. Second, we apply this framework to the Croatia integration course into the EU, examining the role of the EU in post-communist change, particularly regarding democratization and economic aspects. This analysis underlines internal factors that characterize Croatia's evolution course, and external ones, whose influence in decision-making process has been determinant and evident at all levels. We conclude by tying up the post-communist transition in Croatia with the vector of analysis, identifying drivers for change and elements of hindrance in the process. Europeanization dynamics in a context of domestic reformulation constitute a new reality to Balkan states.

Europeanization: Framing the Concept

Integration into the EU as a fundamental expression of regionalization sets the context for the analysis of the EU influence in Croatia's post-communist transition. The issue pertains, among other aspects, to whether Croatian negotiations towards

accession are carried out in a symmetrical manner rather than by the imposition of a strategic use of norms and conditionalities enforced for reasons of self-interest (see Hettne & Soderbaum, 2005: 538-9; Jorgensen, 2004: 48-50).

Europeanization as a concept implies, thus, the fulfillment of membership criteria, which include meeting democratic standards such as the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law, along with economic indicators. It also means the

“development of networks of interactions among domestic and supranational actors to initiate and unfold the decision making process during the input base” and the “gradual and differentiated diffusion-penetration of values, general norms, and specific decisions from European institutions into the domestic politics, that is, into the working domestic institutions, decision-making processes and domestic policies at different levels” (Morlino 2002: 237-260).

In this way, Europeanization requires the socialization and internalization of EU norms and procedures both within the Union and as a pre-condition for those states applying to join.

Therefore, through a focus on the promotion of stability through democratization, institution-building and civic participation, Europeanization is understood here as a process of

“construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies (Radaelli, 2000: 4).

It goes further than regionalization by implying a process of gradual socialization and internalization of political and economic policies along side security measures as understood by the EU, through for example legal, institutional and structural adjustment. This deepening process is embedded in the criteria for accession to the EU, as well as in its Neighborhood Policy (European Neighborhood Policy - ENP), as a mechanism of harmonization of practices that might facilitate cooperation between the EU, accession candidates and its wide neighboring area (stretching to the Mediterranean, and through the Middle East to the Caucasus).

Croatia has been going through the Europeanization process, adopting and getting adapted to the EU *acquis communautaire* since Dayton Agreements. This process “externally driven, coercive and increasingly demanding” (Anastasakis, 2005: 70),

depends directly upon specific mechanisms and intervening confining conditions. In the short and medium-term, Europeanization may be linked with sacrifices and difficult socioeconomic and political choices for Croatia. But in the long run, it is identified with modernization, development, stability, and a sense of security based on soft power and the benefits of cooperation and co-existence.

These developments are further analyzed in the section on Croatian policy dynamics, looking at the driving forces behind change and questioning a process where, in instances, intentions and decisions have not matched expectations.

Within the EU the goals of promoting and expanding democratic practices (as a fundamental dimension implied in the Europeanization process) have been clearly stated in the organization's founding documents. Understanding democracy beyond the minimal definition of Schumpeter (1952), we add to the holding of free elections, good governance principles, particularly focusing on political accountability, ruling stability and civic participation, as fundamental elements in a democratic state. Economic development is also added to our analysis as a major EU goal. When looking at the Croatia case through this framing, a gradual maturation in the democratization of Croatia politics is noticeable, while acknowledging this as an arduous process still carrying many limitations, particularly regarding good governance principles and economic indicators.¹ These issues are further analyzed in the section devoted to the internal factors where more efforts are needed to accomplish Croatia's goal of integration in the EU.

Europeanization is internalized differently by the various states or national actors in the Western Balkans (WB), and its degree of success relies on their ability and willingness to change. Being a region of starkly contrasting levels of development, geographies, cultures, and strategic interests, the impact of Europe is different from state to state, resulting in diverse co-existing stages of association and integration with the EU. As it is stressed in the "Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans", adopted by the European Council in June 2003,

"the pace of further movement of the WB countries towards the EU lies in their own hands and will depend on each country's performance in implementing reforms, thus respecting the criteria set by the Copenhagen European Council of 1993 and the Stabilization and Association Process conditionality".

Regarding Croatia's case, we conclude that the country developed differently from the others Balkan countries. The combination of important structural preconditions

1 At this regard look to the data provided by the Freedom House report about Croatia democratic score. Freedom House - Nations in Transit - Croatia, 2007.

and a reasonably sustainable economy with political and policy decisions brought progress, development and stability to the country. Furthermore, the provision of legislative and institutional templates, monitoring, and benchmarking; aid and technical assistance; advice and twinning; and finally, the prospect of membership the EU had and still have a major external impact on the domestic discourse and the internal governance of Croatia.

After analyzing Europeanization, the following section looks at Croatian policy dynamics towards accession to the EU, identifying how domestic policies have been constrained and enhanced by this process.

Croatia's Policy Dynamics

Croatia was part of federal Yugoslavia before and after World War II. After its declaration of independence in June 1991, the country had to face a war with the troops from the remainder of Serbian-dominated Yugoslavia and with members of the ethnic Serb community inside Croatia itself. Therefore, we can argue that the country found itself fighting a defensive war on its territory at the same as it was undergoing three comprehensive transitions: from a constituent federal republic to a sovereign state; from an authoritarian one-party system to a multi-party democracy; from a central to a market economy.

The bid for independence was associated with the rise of nationalist forces whose ideology and political practice meant that the priority given to nation-building turned out to be at odds with the process of European integration.

After the war, and especially after the Dayton Peace Accords of 1995, Croatia tried to make a quick transition, being one of its priorities to distance itself from the negative label of "Balkan country". But it was included in the same international conflict management framework for the Balkans.

During the 1990's, Croatia expended efforts in different areas connected with the realization of social and economic development. But, this was not an easy path. Rather, it was a constant struggle to overcome a myriad of inherited international and domestic problems along with continuously delicate relationships among members of the ruling coalition. International relations were at a rudimentary level and Croatia was constantly on the defensive. International semi-isolation, although never proclaimed, kept Croatia out of the European mainstream. Non membership in the key security and economic institutions like North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) produced the situation of a gray zone. Unresolved problems with neighboring countries and the slowness in resolving

these issues, along with the constant concern with Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and its internal problems, kept Croatian politics anchored to the pandemonium in BiH. The political system, although semi-presidential in theory, was purely presidential in practice. The Parliament and the government were just operational tools in the hands of the President who directly jeopardized the functioning of the already fragile democratic institutions.² The economic system was heavily damaged by the war and additionally shaken with problematic privatization and omnipresent corruption. However, despite some unresolved problems, the results of Croatian government were satisfactory, and provide a firm basis for further improvement.

After the last occupied territories were effectively brought under Croatian rule in 1998 (with the successful reintegration of formerly occupied Eastern Slavonia), and the threat of war had diminished, policy had to change. The turning point came with the formation of a new political consensus within Croatia, with a genuine will on the part of the vast majority to live in a functioning democracy, and that membership of the EU was a vital national interest.

After the death of President Franjo Tuđman in November 1999, the demise of his government, and parliamentary and presidential elections in early 2000, which led to the formation of a coalition government of Social Democrats and liberals under former Prime Minister Ivica Račan, Croatia became an exception regarding the situation of states of former Yugoslavia. Issues like economy, rule of law, functioning of the state administration and civil freedoms superseded others like national identity, statehood and sovereignty.

In 2000, the Ivica Račan's government managed to overcome the international isolation of the Tuđman era, making significant steps in domestic reforms (amending the Constitution, changing the political system from a presidential to a parliamentary system, transferring most executive presidential powers from the president into the institutions of the Parliament and the Prime Minister) and gaining admittance to international institutions (became a World Trade Organization member in November 2000, signed an association agreement with the EU in October 2001, and applied for membership in February 2003). Constitutional changes created the conditions for parliamentary and public control of the executive branch of the government, especially in terms of the transparency of budgetary issues. As a result of democratization, the majority of the media became more professional and NGOs took their place within society which resulted in a tremendous improvement in the perception of Croatian achievements. Changes in the economic system followed but more slowly than expected. The chaotic economic situation needed more than

2 Cepanec, Željko - Croatia and Nato.

administrative measures to recover and to become stable so as to ensure a constant and sustainable economic growth. The poorly managed privatization produced a large number of politically privileged entrepreneurs whose ability to face open market competition was questionable, and almost the same happened to the state owned companies. Consequently, a new wave of restrictive measures were introduced what, in addition with the reorganization of the economic system at the macro and micro level, caused even higher unemployment along with dissatisfaction among the people with the government.

The coalition, characterized as highly heterogeneous, soon became rather dysfunctional, without a clear direction in the domestic policy and strength to follow through difficult reforms (Vlahutin, 2003: 25). Too much time was spent on intra-coalition bargaining about positions in the government and on finding adequate people from the respective parties to fill the higher posts in state institutions which resulted in insufficient expertise and slowed down the process of domestic changes.

The return of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) to power with Ivo Sanader as Prime Minister, in 2003, was not smooth. It raised some concerns about a possible resurgence of nationalism. The return to the politics of old elites, corrupt networks inherited from the war and clientelistic practices prosper unchecked by the judiciary, and nationalist reflexes were still detectable in the persistent tensions with neighboring Slovenia over territorial questions.³ But the legacy of democratic changes introduced by the previous government of Račan, the moderating influence of President Stipe Mešić, and constraint imposed by Croatia's European aspirations, have contributed to the transition from hard to soft nationalism.

One strategy of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader was to transform the HDZ from the nationalist-populist movement of the 1990s into a party of the conservative right. Nationalist forces were supplanted by democratic and modernizing coalitions that look forward to a European future. Furthermore, Croatian nationalism has achieved some of its goals: the creation of a nation-state controlling all of its territory; has embarked on a moderate course that marginalized the radical elements,⁴ the coalition governments attempted to break with the legacies of the Tuđman era. Finally, the opposition was democratic and pro-European. The prospect of integration has built

3 After a border incident in 2004, Slovenia promptly declared that it would cease to support Croatia's application for EU accession. The relations between Zagreb and Ljubljana had deteriorated since the 1994 law passed by the Croatian Parliament concerning territorial waters and the creation of a Croatian economic exclusion zone in the Adriatic.

4 Some have left the political stage; others have left the HDZ for small groups with little electoral backing, such as the Party of Rights.

a consensus among political groups and citizens around democracy being the basis of the country's political system, which is still important to concretize the political and economic reforms that are needed.

The government of Ivo Sanader did not do much to improve the rule of law internally, but it has not reversed three major policy shifts inaugurated in the post-Tudjman era that became test issues for the EU's attitude to Croatia. The first was the change of policy towards BiH and the end of Zagreb's support for HDZ nationalist extremists in Herzegovina. The second was the cooperation with the ICTY, including the delivery of Croatian military personnel widely seen as heroes. Finally, the return of members of the Serbian minority to Croatia, expelled in 1995 military campaign in the Krajina, was an important change that allowed a better relationship between the two communities.⁵

The EU has played a fundamental role in all this evolution. Acting as the main generator of change and reform, offering models, guidelines, and financial assistance for reconstruction, development, and transition,⁶ the EU helped Croatia to succeed in its process of transition.

The HDZ government, headed by Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, was narrowly re-elected in November 2007,⁷ and assumed office on January 12, 2008. The Sanader government's priorities remain membership for Croatia in the EU and in NATO, what seems to happen in the end of the decade.

In order to provide an evaluation of the internal factors that characterize the political development and the promotion of good governance norms in Croatia, we will analyze the progress made by the country regarding the Copenhagen political and economic criteria. The first one requires stability of institutions guaranteeing

5 In early August 1995, the Croatian invasion of Serbian Krajina precipitated the worst refugee crisis of the Yugoslav civil war. Within days, more than two hundred thousand Serbs, virtually the entire population of Krajina, fled their homes, and 14,000 Serbian civilians lost their lives. Available at <http://www.emperors-clothes.com/articles/elich/krajina.html>

6 Financial assistance is provided under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) from 2007. The 2007-2009 Multi-Annual Indicative Planning Document (MIPD) for Croatia was adopted in June 2007. The 2007 IPA national program amounted to 141 million euros. This assistance is concentrated on institution building and preparation for the implementation of the EU's common agricultural policy and cohesion policy (European Commission, 2007: 6).

7 The HDZ-led government that assumed Office in January 2008 represents a coalition agreement between the HDZ (66 seats), the HSS (6 seats), the HSLs (2 seats), the SDSS (3 seats), other minority representatives and the lone representative of the HSU. The centre-right coalition led by HDZ has a majority of 83 seats out of 153. For the first time the eight minority MPs are official coalition partners and a member of the Serb party, the SDSS, took one of the Deputy Prime Minister posts and became a member of the cabinet (EC, 2008: 7).

democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. The second, the existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. The aim of this analysis is evaluate the democratic development (electoral process, rule of law, civil society, independent media, and judicial system) and the respect of human rights in Croatia.

Internal Factors: More Efforts are Needed

The desire to become an EU member has influenced the fulfillment of democratic principles of governance in Croatia. The country has been progressing towards democracy, incorporating democratic practices in their internal policies. As a result of this “good behavior” it has been rewarded with the candidate status in 2004.

In fact, after 2003, the HDZ government has managed to strengthen state institutions and maintain internal security better than the previous center-left government, but it continues to fall short of expectations in its ability to implement macro-level reforms in such areas as the judiciary or to fight corruption, which remains entrenched in the country’s institutions. These are, in fact, the two most complicated issues for the long-term democratization of Croatia, inherited from the process of transition and the building of the state during a time of war.

Regarding one of the first indicators of democratization level, the electoral process, Croatia met some democratic standards like the OSCE commitments for democratic elections. Accordingly to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR), 2007 Parliamentary elections in Croatia were “administered transparently and professionally” (OSCE/ODIHR 2008: 1). Also Croatia 2008 Progress Report from the European Commission states that “...the elections were free and fair” (EC, 2008: 6).

The actual legal framework provides overall an adequate basis for the conduct of a democratic election process. Previously incomplete aspects of the election legislation, which created challenges for the administration bodies, have been addressed by the enactment of new laws on the State Election Commission (SEC), voters’ lists, and financing of political parties.⁸ But, although these electoral reforms strengthen

⁸ In 2006 and 2007 these three election-related laws were enacted: the Law on the State Electoral Commission of the Republic of Croatia (2006) formally reconstituted the State Election Commission (SEC) as a permanent body exercising advisory and administrative functions, in addition to its role

the legal basis for the proper conduct of elections, there are still some constraints at this regard. The SEC is already operational at state level but adequate staff has not been recruited at the local level (EC, 2008: 7). Effects of the Law on Financing of Political Parties will only be evident during 2009 when annual reports are due. Furthermore, certain deficits of democratization are appointed by Freedom House, namely shortcomings in the management of voter lists and lack of clarity on how to implement provisions of the constitutional Law on National Minorities concerning the allocation of reserved seats for minority representatives.

At the decentralization level, the country is still running a large and complicated set of regional and local government institutions that are far more expensive than efficient.⁹ EU pressure to decentralize has resulted in a larger distribution of duties and responsibilities but the lack of resources makes impossible its effective implementation. At this regard, one important provision was adopted allowing the direct election of mayors and zupans (county prefects), making the mayor more accountable to people at the local level what may eventually help to improve local accountability in general.¹⁰

Regarding public administration, some progress has been made. The adoption of the Public Administration Reform Strategy for the period 2008-2011 and the amendment of the Civil Service Law allow the planned de-politicization but they are still in an early stage. The legal basis for building a modern and professional civil service in Croatia is still incomplete. The weak management and administrative capacity of institutions in charge of public administration reform remains a reality.

Similar to other countries on the region, the political field in Croatia is too fragmented, with an excessive number of political parties (102 officially registered).¹¹ Since the last Croatian governments are the result of coalitions, it is frequent some

during elections; the Law on Voters' Lists (2007) introduced new safeguards to address concerns in previous elections that insufficient safeguards were in place to control the addition of voter lists at the polling stations on election day, raising the potential for multiple voting; the Law on the Financing of Political Parties (2006), provides an expanded basis to all monitoring the financing of political parties It includes restrictions on the amount and source of contributions (OSCE/ODIHR 2008: 4).

⁹ Croatia is divided into 20 counties that represent an executive power between national and city (or municipal) levels. This is considered by many specialists a territorial and bureaucratic division instituted during Tudjam years and has been criticized both domestically and internationally. Accordingly to Freedom House report, the power structures between the national level, the Zupanija (administrative regions - county) and city levels are highly improvised and easy to manipulate (FH, 2009: 3).

¹⁰ Until 2006, mayors had been chosen by political parties that won or controlled a majority within city parliaments.

¹¹ Available at [<http://www.hidra.hr/strankee/501int4.htm>].

political maneuvering within or between parties which led to policy paralysis and held up reform in the past. This generates frequent amendments to legal acts and difficulties in its implementation. Also, the use of public sector employment as a tool of patronage has led to an overstaffed and inefficient public sector. These practices negatively impact transparency in public procurement, the development of a market economy, and consistency in respecting the law.

One of Croatia's main challenges is to turn the judicial system into a reliable and efficient one. The excessive amount of time needed to hand down and enforce rulings, the overloaded Courts, and the impartiality of the judicial system are some of the persistent problems in this area.¹² Despite efforts at reform, many local courts are much lower than the national standard and continue to produce questionable results. Although the adoption of some practical reforms to help efficiency in 2007,¹³ their effects are considered marginal and modest (FH, 2009: 5). According to numerous public opinion polls, the judiciary system in Croatia is perceived as corrupt. This problematic status is partly a legacy of the 1990s and partly the result of attempts by the ruling party to influence the appointment of judges and the functioning of the courts.

Corruption represents a threat to the stability of democratic institutions and the rule of law in all the WB countries, including Croatia. It is the reflection of lack of transparency and accountability in public administration and lack of ethic codes of conduct in the public and private sectors. In Croatia, this is one of the most problematic areas in the negotiations with the EU. Numerous surveys highlight a public perception that corruption has actually gotten worse over the past year, is widespread, even at high level, among political parties, in the judiciary,¹⁴ with representative bodies, and in land registration.¹⁵

The government's efforts at this regard led to the adoption of a National Program for the Fight Against Corruption, and several anticorruption policies.¹⁶

12 See FH, 2007: 224, where whole judicial system of Croatia is considered "slow, corrupt and often partisan".

13 During 2007 the government consolidated similar local courts into one larger for better efficiency and to reduce case backlogs. A Code of conduct was adopted for judges, and there have been some improvements in making free legal aid more accessible to those who can not pay (FH, 2008:).

14 According to a 2006 survey taken by Zagreb's Office of Transparency International, more than 40 percent of complaints from local citizens regarding corruption were connected with the judicial system (FH, 2007: 226).

15 Croatia was ranked 64 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index (FW, 2009:3).

16 The adoption of the national anticorruption program, the increased penalties and the strengthened of the independence and capacities of the special unit USKOK (Office for Fighting Corruption and Organized Crime) resulted in successful investigations.

Also, a revised Anti-Corruption Strategy accompanied by an Action Plan (June 2008) containing specific measures in a number of fields prone to corruption was adopted. Nevertheless, they have not yet yielded visible results. Its implementation lacks strong coordination and efficient non-partisan monitoring (EC, 2008: 9). At this regard, Transparency International Croatia states that anticorruption measures have been undertaken more to satisfy EU demands than to develop domestic anticorruption forces (FH, 2008: 4). The deficit of accountability is shown in the public perception that some groups especially politicians are untouchable by law.

At this regard, accordingly to the European Commission (EC) "there is a need for greater efforts to prevent, detect and prosecute corruption" (EC, 2007: 10). Also the European Parliament considers unacceptable the "high level of corruption, which undermines the economic development of the country".¹⁷

Freedom of expression and information in the media is an essential requirement of democracy. In Croatia, the situation in this sector is also similar to the other Balkan countries. The pressure and intimidation of journalists is a reality, specially to the ones that are reporting on war crimes and other sensitive topics.¹⁸ The media remains vulnerable to political pressure and several acts of journalist intimidation were reported in last years.¹⁹

Other domestic factor with an increased importance in the Croatia's process of democratization, is the participation of civil society in public life, which is considered a precondition for and a result of effective and legitimate democratic institutions.

In WB countries, the low participation of society in the definition and development of public politic results from the lack of confidence in the institutions, the low process of democratization and the negative effects of economic reforms (inflation, stagnation, high unemployment, low purchase capability, corruption). In Croatia, civil society and public opinion have become an important element in the decision-making process, and internal political pressures are now much more effective that a few years ago.

The EU's financial support to civil society in sectors like environment and sustainable development, democratization and human rights and youth, was essential to promote a greater involvement of citizens in Croatia's public life (EC, 2007: 6).

17 Euroactiv (April 10, 2008) "Croatia progress towards EU".

18 Threats, assaults and murders of journalists were reported during 2008 (HRW, 2009: 356).

19 Accordingly to the Croatian journalists' association, the mafia had massively expanded in Croatia, and journalists are frequently target of physical attacks. The murder of journalist Ivo Pukanic, the arrest of journalist Peratovic and the murder attempt of journalist Dusana Miljusa are some of the examples of the situation. Euroactiv (October 24, 2008) "Murder of top journalist exposes Croatia's mafia surge".

Nevertheless, the legislative framework for civil society is not yet consolidated. Civil society organizations continue to have difficulty influencing policy debate and remain relatively weak in analytical capacity due to, among other reasons, the quality of media, which is considered weak. The participation in democratic life requires that the public is well informed and has the possibility of freely discussing different opinions, where the media has great responsibilities.

The number of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is considerable (more than 20,000)²⁰ but, with some exceptions, its influence on government policy remains limited.²¹ The National Foundation for Civil Society Development,²² which aims to promote and develop civil society in Croatia, is accused of biased and nontransparent procedures in distributing funds to civil associations.²³ Official financial support is given to cultural, social, and humanitarian associations, but public funding is less forthcoming for human rights and civic NGOs, which nonetheless play an important role in the democratic evolution of the society. According to a survey carried out by the Ivo Pilar Institute, citizens have a generally positive perception of NGOs and consider them useful for society.²⁴ Most of those surveyed feel that associations make a pronounced contribution to raising awareness about citizen's rights and the development of democracy in Croatia, but at the same time, feel that they do not contribute much to solve concrete existential issues. Croatian citizens are more skeptical of their influence on important decisions at the regional (61 percent) and national (63 percent) levels (FH, 2007: 218). At this regard, we must not forget that the attitudes and

20 FH, 2007: 218.

21 One success of NGO performance was the adoption of the amendments that introduced the term hate crime into the Croatian Criminal Code in 2006. These amendments were presented by two human rights-oriented NGOs - Iskorak and Kontra, and represented a significant step for the domestic legal framework. However, they have yet to be put into practice, since many supporting laws and regulations have to be changed in order to act on them. Other important actor in Croatia civil society is the Catholic Church which has a strong influence on both the state and society.

22 The National Foundation for Civil Society Development was founded by a special Act (NN 173/03) by the Croatian Parliament on 16 October 2003, as a public foundation with the basic purpose of promoting and developing the civil society in the Republic of Croatia. In order to fulfill its basic purpose, the National Foundation offers expert and financial support to programs which encourage the sustainability of the not-for-profit sector, inter-sector cooperation, civil initiatives, philanthropy, voluntary work and the improvement of the democratic institutions of society. [http://zaklada.civilnodrustvo.hr/index.php?p=eng_o_zakladi&s=31]

23 The adoption of the Code of Good Practice, Standards and Measures for the Realization of Financial Support to NGO Programs followed by adoption of the Law on Volunteerism in 2007, brought greater transparency in the allocation of State funds for NGOs and further stimulate the development of civil society (OSCE, 2007: 4).

24 Ivo Pilar Institute—a comprehensive survey of public attitudes, perception, and understanding of NGOs for the Academy for Educational Development, July 2005.

the assessments of democratic regimes by the citizens themselves are seen as important instruments to evaluate the quality of democracy.

Croatia made modest improvements in human rights in the last years. It adopted a legal framework that provides the protection of fundamental political civil and human rights and equality under law. Nevertheless, reforms are still in an early stage. Their implementation and enforcement has been a difficult task. A revised Action Plan addressing all major reform issues was adopted in June 2008, but in certain areas the action plan lacks measurable objectives that will allow effective monitoring of its implementation (EC, 2008: 8).²⁵ The positive work of the Human Rights Ombudsman was undermined by the frequent failure of national and local authorities to respond to its recommendations and information requests (HRW, 2009: 357).

Another important issue for the stability and democracy of Croatia is interethnic relations and the question of minority rights. Although some progress made in this area, interethnic relations still constitutes a common and potential source of conflict. Croatia is accused of violations in the right to a fair trial and the length of proceedings.²⁶ The implementation of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities continues to be slow despite the adoption of an action plan in June 2008.²⁷ Problems persist particularly in terms of under-representation of minorities in state administration, the judiciary and the police. Although some progress regarding political representation, clarification is needed on how minority quotas should be reached.²⁸ According to European Commission, the Serb minority is still discriminated in what concerns the access to employment particularly in the public sector (EC, 2008: 13), and there are still obstacles to the reintegration of Serb returnees in the country (HRW, 2009: 354). Also the Amnesty International Report states that "Croatian Serbs continued to be victims of discrimination in realizing some economic and social rights".²⁹ Furthermore, despite the adoption of a special

25 Accordingly to Human Rights Watch, the closure of the OSCE Mission in Croatia on December 2007 created a significant human rights monitoring gap in the country (HRW, 2009: 358). This was replaced by an Office in Zagreb. Its functions are available at www.osce.org/zagreb/29459.html.

26 Accordingly to Amnesty International Report "many prosecutions and trials against Serbs remain of questionable standard, with concerns relating to fairness - particularly for those tried in absentia or prosecuted in areas where the crimes occurred - and about the effectiveness of the court-appointed defense lawyers". Available at [<http://amnesty.org/en/region/croatia/report-2008>]

27 The Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities guarantees employment of national minorities at all levels of public service - including State and local administration, which incorporates the police - and the judiciary

28 For the first time, an ethnic Serb has been appointed to one of the Deputy Prime Minister posts (EC, 2008: 13).

29 Amnesty International Report. Available at [<http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/regions/europe-and-central-asia/croatia>]

action plan to improve the situation of the Roma minority in the country in 2005, this continues to be a problem in terms of access to employment, social protection and healthcare. Discriminatory attitudes prevail towards Roma and other vulnerable groups (EC, 2008:15).

The full alignment with EU *acquis* obliged Croatia to adopt an important anti-discrimination law in July 2008, but its application is not easy. Accordingly to European Commission “the level of protection against discrimination in practice and its judicial prosecution is not in line with EU standards” (EC, 2008: 12). The European Court of Human Rights continues to condemn Croatia for violation of Article 3 – inhuman and degrading treatment concerning prison conditions.³⁰

Croatia adopted in November 2007 and Action Plan for the protection and promotion of human rights during 2008-2011, but the enforcement of rights continued to negatively affected by shortcomings in the judicial system (EC, 2008:10).

The Croatian judiciary continued to investigate and prosecute war crimes. But in the majority of cases criminal proceedings were related to cases where the victims were ethnic Croats. There continued to be widespread impunity for crimes allegedly committed by members of the Croatian Army and Croatian police forces, despite some steps taken to investigate and prosecute war crimes against Croatian Serbs.³¹

Economic and social problems make difficult the relations between minorities. The Eurofound report reveals that levels of trust and social cohesion are low, with a third of Croatians believing that caution is necessary in dealing with others, 35% claiming that there are tensions between ethnic groups, and 62% expressing concern over tensions between rich and poor.³² Accordingly to a Human Rights Watch report,³³ violence and tension are still common, particularly in the Lika region, northern Dalmatia and western and eastern Slavonia.

Looking to the economic sector, Croatia is in a good position regarding the social and economic development, and the future integration into the EU. Accordingly with

30 A total of 636 new applications to the ECtHR were made during 2008 (EC, 2008: 10). Accordingly to Freedom House report on “Freedom in the World”, prison conditions in Croatia do not fully meet international standards due to overcrowding and poor medical care (FH, 2009: 4).

31 Accordingly with the Amnesty International Report, “despite significant developments with regard to crimes committed against Croatian Serbs in Osijek, elsewhere in Croatia no meaningful steps were taken to tackle impunity for crimes allegedly committed by members of the Croatian Army and police forces”. Available at <http://thereport.amnesty.org/eng/regions/europe-and-central-asia/croatia>.

32 Euroactiv (27 July 2007) “Croatians pessimistic about future – survey”. Available at [<http://www.euroactiv.com/en/opinion/croatians-pessimistic-future-survey/article-165822>].

33 Human Rights Watch (September 1, 2006) “Croatia: Plight of Returning Serb Refugees May Slow EU bid”. Available at [<http://hrw.org/english/docs/2006/09/01/croati14114.htm>].

the Copenhagen criteria of 1993, membership in the Union requires the existence of a functioning market economy, and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. This means that candidate's states like Croatia needs to be capable of assuming economic obligations of membership in a way that the single market functions smoothly and fairly, and that the economy must have flexibility and sufficient level of human and physical capital, especially infrastructure.

Knowing that economic development provides a milieu favorable to democracy, sustainable internal political stability in the region is primarily dependent on urgently needed improvement of economic and social conditions. However, the economies of the WB countries have in common two severe legacies: the arrangements of the old socialist semi-planned economy and the damaged structures of the war economies of the 1990s (Altmann, 2003: 69).

Among these group of countries, Croatia, as well as Montenegro, lead the group of the non-EU Balkans countries that are in better position regarding accession country average. Its efforts towards ensuring its sustainable development, its financial services and network industries, related to the good quality of infrastructure are the main reasons appointed by the World Economic Forum for this situation (WEF, 2008: 12). Macroeconomic policies have, on the whole, been appropriate to contain potential external vulnerability.

In general, stability has been maintained (6.8% increase in the GDP in 2007, an average inflation rate of 6.4% in December 2008, and reduced unemployment)³⁴ and has allowed economic agents to make decisions in a climate of stability and predictability, thus supporting the functioning of market mechanisms. Consequently, foreign direct investment remains the main source of foreign financing, representing 7.7% of GDP (EC, 2008: 18). Social exclusion is relatively small, and social disparities can be considered moderate comparing with other countries of the region (Altmann, 2003: 79).

The essential features of a market economy and competition have been achieved, but not always the rules are applied. Although the legal framework for a functioning private sector exists, there is still a strong state enterprise sector. In this sense, one of the priorities established by the European Council to Croatia is "to improve the institutional framework for privatization with a view to significantly advancing the privatization of companies held under the State Privatization Fund" (European Council, 2008: 3).

³⁴ The officially registered unemployment rate showed a marked decline from 11.1% in 2006 to 9.6% in 2007. It declined for all age groups, but still remained high for the young population (24%) (EC, 2008: 19).

Until now, the international financial crisis has only mildly affected the Croatian economy and its financial sector. However, its economy is vulnerable to possible disruptions in capital flows (EC, 2008: 19). Financial and economic ties of Balkan countries with the exterior are strait. More than 90% of Croatia Banks are foreign institutions with difficulties. The exportations tend to be low as well as the foreign investments.

All these political, social, and economic factors are related and are part of an important journey that Croatia took in the beginning of this century towards democratization and modernization. Legal security, equality before the law, transparency and accountability are some of the values for a democratic society.³⁵ Citizens' trust in their public institutions is based on such values. Business can flourish and real competition can develop itself only if the judicial system and the public administration are efficient, impartial, independent and accountable.

The membership of the EU is a common goal in Croatia, and this shared commitment has been important to support government's efforts to meet the accession standards which involve sometimes radical but extremely beneficial reforms. If it succeeds, Croatia can show the other countries that the promise of membership is real, tangible and, most importantly, within reach.³⁶

External Factors: Decisive Elements in Croatia's Course Towards the EU

It's difficult to separate domestic policy and foreign policy agenda since internal reforms are driven by foreign policy goals, particularly Croatia's intent to joint the

35 To be accountable means to have the duty to provide an account: that is, to explain and justify one's actions in terms of appropriate criteria and in sufficient detail. The criteria and level of detail that are required depend, of course, on the context. Accountability is, therefore, not the same as, though it includes, answerability; that is to say, a duty - which may be legal, political, or moral - to respond to questions about a particular matter. The concept of accountability also includes liability to some form of sanction if the performance revealed by the account is considered unsatisfactory. The sanction may be legal or, in a broad sense, political. As I will explain later, public criticism can be a significant form of sanction in a democracy. The basic idea of transparency is that citizens should easily be able to obtain the information they need in order to call public authorities to account, whether at elections, or between elections. At least until recently, many modern democracies have tended to assume that sufficient information would emerge as a by-product of the exercise of traditional political freedoms, in particular the freedom of expression. This approach can be seen in the European Convention on Human Rights, which was adopted just over half a century ago. The Convention affords especially strong protection to the Press as regards freedom of expression, because of the role of the Press in imparting information and ideas to the public and the right of the public to receive them. Diamandouras, 2006.

36 Delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament to Croatia (Zagreb) - 6-7 February 2008.

EU. In Croatia's case the most important inductive cause of democratic transition was external, not internal. The accession perspective to the EU has been a crucial factor in all the process of transition to democracy, and is used to introduce necessary democratization changes. However, the current status of negotiations with the EU regarding Croatia's eventual accession is much slower than it was desire and expected. So, there is a certain fatigue on the side of Croats regarding the demanded reforms, and this can be a problem if the EU does not provide concrete assurance of membership (FH, 2007: 216).

WB countries have several dissimilarities regarding the process of membership the EU. "Generic Balkan trends also fail to acknowledge the heterogeneity of outcomes, ranging from Croatia fulfilling the preconditions for EU accession negotiations to other states and entities failing to meet basic European criteria" (Van Meurs, 2004).

Thus, these countries present differences in the speed and modalities of the political change and some dynamics remain country specific. In Croatia's the application for EU membership was an important generator of administrative and legislative reform. Since 2003, the HDZ tackled the most sensitive issues, such as full cooperation with the ICTY, and the return of refugees. Legislative and executive efforts focus on achieving the priorities set out in the European Partnership and in fulfilling the conditions set by the Commission. Thus, Croatian leaders were committed to build a strong national consensus in favor of a European reform agenda. These efforts cross party lines and involved civil society.

After 2001, the country was determinate to entrench democratic values and made progress on the main outstanding political questions, particularly minority rights. The Stabilization and Association Process (SAP),³⁷ which provides a framework for the developments of relations between the WB countries and the EU, favoring their gradual integration into the structures of the Union, was an essential external ingredient of Croatia's change of course, with its policy of differentiation (Vlahutin,

37 All the members of the EU gave their support to the SAP at the Feira European Council in June 2000: "The European Council confirms that its objective remains the fullest possible integration of the countries of the region into the political and economic mainstream of Europe through the SAP. All the countries concerned are potential candidates for EU membership". The SAP is the EU's policy framework for the countries of the WB. The main elements of this long-term commitment to the region were proposed in a Commission Communication (COM (99)235) of 26 May 1999. The SAP supports the WB countries' development and preparations for future EU membership by combining three main instruments: the Stabilization and Association Agreements, autonomous trade measures and substantial financial assistance. Is a step-by-step approach, based on aid, trade preferences, dialogue, technical advice and contractual relations. It also sets political and economic conditions, like regional cooperation and the respect of fundamental rights.

2003: 25).³⁸ It brought new dynamics to Croatia's internal affairs and foreign relations, and culminated in the European Commission's approval of Croatia's application for membership in April 2004, followed in June by the European Council's decision to grant Croatia the status of EU candidate country. Accession negotiations between Croatia and the EU were launched in October 2005 after a seven-month postponement resulting from Croatia's failure to meet all of its obligations in cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Only with a positive assessment from the ICTY Chief Prosecutor, EU-Croatia relations entered a new phase with the confirmation by the Council that the outstanding condition for the start of accession negotiations was met. In the same day the Council decided to open accession negotiations with Croatia, and agreed that less than full cooperation with ICTY at any stage would affect the overall progress of negotiations and could be grounds for their suspension.

EU financial assistance under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) amounted to 146 million Euros in 2008. This assistance is concentrated on institution building and preparation for the implementation of the EU's common agricultural policy and cohesion policy. Also a 3 million Euros grant scheme will be launched to civil society projects in sectors for democracy such as transparency and accountability of public administration and fight against corruption, anti discrimination and sustainable development.

During the last years, the EU's policy of Stabilization and Association has contributed critically to the progress achieved in Croatia in promoting stability and in bringing the country closer to the Union. After the launch of membership talks, Croatia underwent "screening" - an in - depth analysis to conform its legislation to that of the EU - before concrete negotiations on each chapter.³⁹ But, although the SAP has produced sufficient progress to validate the overall policy approach, it is clearly not enough to allow complacency. Democratic structures and the rule of law remain fragile. Organized crime and corruption obstruct economic and democratic

³⁸ The significance of that huge step forward was emphasized in the speech delivered by the EU Commissioner Chris Patten on 29 October when he stated, "The signature of this agreement today shows just how far Croatia has come in 22 months. I pay warm tribute to the Croatian people for all they have achieved in such a short time. They set the ball of democracy rolling in South East Europe two years ago: this agreement shows that their country is moving forward at an impressive pace" Statement of Commissioner Chris Patten at the signing ceremony of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between EU and Croatia. Available at [http://www.eu.int/comm/external_relations/see/news/index.htm].

³⁹ Negotiations have been opened on 21 out of 35 chapters and provisionally closed on four (science and research, education and culture, enterprise and industrial policy, external relations (EC, 2008: 5).

development alike. Accordingly to the European Commission, the judiciary reform, the return of refugees, the respect of minority rights, the fight against corruption, and the public administration reform, are some of the country's main challenges in the process of joining the EU.⁴⁰

The perspective of EU membership can be a powerful motor for reform, but it does not work alone. Without significant institutional and financial engagement, the prospect of membership can easily turn into an empty rhetorical exercise. On the other hand, the EU must also remain credible in keeping the promises set out in the Thessaloniki summit declaration. If the EU membership does not seem realistic, and the benefits tangible, that could undermine the government's motivation for pursuing policies and reforms that are still needed in this region like the establishment of a secure self-government; foster justice and reconciliation; promote longer-term social progress across the region, find mutually acceptable solutions and guarantee peaceful coexistence of the main ethnic groups.

Cooperation with the ICTY is one of the most controversial issues in Croatian political life. The Croats' negative perception of the ICTY and the policy of Croatian government to pay the legal fees of Croatian army generals that are being accused by the court are seen as two factors that undermine the EU condition of cooperation with the ICTY.⁴¹ The Tribunal requirements are perceived as highly political and in many respects unjust, given Croatia's defensive role in the war.

The parliamentary consensus reached after the death of President Tudjman produced the Declaration of the Homeland War in 2000, where almost all political parties united to declare that the Croatian war was legitimate defense against Serbia's aggression and necessary for the liberation of the country. The relevancy of the 2000 Declaration grew when more public attention was given to indictments by the ICTY against several highly ranked Croats, currently in custody in The Hague, as allegedly involved in a criminal organization led by President Tudjman that aimed at building up a "Greater Croatia". If these accusations are proved by the International Tribunal, we will assist to the shift of an image from "father of the nation" to "war criminal" of President Tudjman what will affect also a large group of his close associates, who still hold top political, legal, and economic posts in the country. Such a ruling could have a profound effect on the government's legitimacy and the institutions in place today. While the EU remains Croatia's key political point of consensus, this issue could hamper Croatia's pace of reform.

40 European Commission "EU Partnership with Croatia". Available at [<http://www.delhrv.ec.europa.eu/en/static/view/id/33>].

41 The most notably beneficiary of these legal costs could be Croatian Army General Ante Gotovina, considered a hero by many Croats.

All the Croatian Army commanders that are now prosecuted by the Tribunal are regarded by many in Croatia as national heroes, thus creating major popular discontent against the external interference of the International Tribunal.⁴² Also in most parties the local leadership has mixed feelings regarding ICTY cooperation. During Tudjman Government, the Tribunal was viewed with suspicion, and there was a regime preference for non-cooperation with the court. This policy changed only when both the United States and the EU stated that future military and political assistance will depend on Croatian government full cooperation with the ICTY. Linking cooperation with the Tribunal to integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions was a crucial and decisive factor to bring about state compliance in post-Tudjman Croatia. After 2003, a gradual process of reconciliation between the Croatia state and the ICTY gained force. Ivo Sanader favored the rapid pursuit of EU and NATO membership and saw compliance with United Nations Security Council resolutions as a means by which Croatia could accelerate membership negotiations with both institutions. At this time, the elite consensus in favor of Croatian accession to the Union was important to the success of this domestic policy. In fact, EU conditionality played an instrumental role in bringing about Croatia cooperation with the ICTY. But the ICTY's dependence upon external coercion leaves a question mark surrounding the long-term of this cooperation. In this context, we also can question how "deep" the changes that result from external pressures are, on other words, if they reach society or not. Use of conditionality to influence society in general might be considered an impossible task, even being broadly supportive of the EU accession process.

Regional cooperation and good neighborly relations form an essential part of the process of Croatia's moving towards the EU. Croatia has participated in the transition from the Stability Pact to a more regionally owned framework with the South East European Cooperation Process and the Regional Cooperation Council, in the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative and the Migration Asylum and Refugees Regional Initiative. Croatia is also part of the Energy Community Treaty and the Central European Free Trade Agreement.

In Croatia's course towards the EU, further concrete steps are still needed on three external issues: the dispute about the Protected Ecological Fishery Zone (ZERP), the Slovenia Croatia border disagreement, and environmental concerns.

ZERP regulates an area of sea in Croatia's territorial and international waters in the Adriatic and came into force at the beginning of this year. According to

⁴² General Ante Gotovina, indicted in 2001 by the ICTY, is generally viewed as national hero, as he led an operation that ended the war. He is accused of a "joint enterprise" in an effort to expel Krajina Serbs from Croatia in 1995 during Operation Storm at the end of the Croatian War. He was captured on December 2005.

Croatian authorities, the zone is intended to preserve fishing stocks and reduce pollution. But Italy and Slovenia state that the area has to be shared between the three countries in accordance with EU cooperation.

Another complicating factor in Zagreb's EU hopes is its ongoing border dispute with Slovenia. The two countries have been arguing over maritime areas and fishing rights since their independence, which could threaten Slovenia relation with Croatia.⁴³

Finally, the application of the Aarhus Convention on public access to environmental information and the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol on the reduction of greenhouse gases are also two sensitive issues that Croatia needs to fulfill. The main conditions imposed by the EU are the adoption of a clear and transparent procedure in the environment sector and the implementation of Community environmental legislation.

Ending this part of external factors, it is important to argue that Croatia North Atlantic Organization (NATO) membership can benefit and stimulate Croatia's accession into the EU. Last April (2008), in the Bucharest Summit, Croatia was invited to start accession talks with the Alliance. This means that all the NATO countries recognized that Croatia has achieved the criteria imposed and emphasized by the Alliance for membership that are quite similar to those defended by the EU, namely, the importance of free and fair elections, human rights, a market economy, relationships with neighboring countries and civilian supervision over the military. This constitutes a strong motivating factor for the Croatian Government to proceed with the development of political and economic reforms that will conduct the country to join the EU, probably in 2010.⁴⁴ In this sense, NATO, along with the EU, is another international organization who helps to promote democracy and the respect for human rights in Europe and in the World.

Conclusion

Since the end of Cold War, the EU has strengthened its international role by developing external relations which include a wide range of political, economic, trade,

43 The border dispute between Slovenia and Croatia concerns small pockets of land along the Adriatic coast, which could prove important if they include exclusive rights to deep sea zones. Unlike Slovenia, Croatia has a long coastline, prompting Ljubljana to attempt to assert its rights as a "geographically disadvantage state". If the bilateral dispute is not resolved, Slovenia May block Croatia's EU entry. At this regard, please see Euroactiv (January 27, 2009) "Slovenia threatens to end Croatia's EU hopes". Available at [www.euroactiv.com/en/enlargement/slovenia-threatens-croatia-eu-hopes/article].

44 As it was reiterated by EU Enlargement Commission Olli Rehn, the EU objective of finalizing the negotiations with Croatia by the end of 2009, would allow the country to join the Union in 2010.

humanitarian and diplomatic initiatives reflecting EU common values and norms. Through the Europeanization process, the EU export to WB countries democratic values and practices, rule of law, human rights standards and political dialogue, which all together constitute the good governance norms. This process of institution building and the subsequent absorption of the EU rules (*acquis communautaire*) are fundamental for the gradual and lengthier process of democratization, and consequently, the future membership of Croatia in the EU. The Union is thus acting as an external actor of democratization, offering the incentives to adopt rules of good governance with the enlargement tool, but political change cannot be only externally driven. Nevertheless, in this process, the involvement of local actors remains the essential factor to foster a real democratic change. The Europeanization of institutions and national legislations are not enough to change social, political, administrative and judiciary practices. It is up to the local political elite to seize the opportunity to democratize and allow the democratic contagion to produce its effects at all levels (from the institutional to the civil society one) via real reform process of the domestic political system.

After a decade dominated by the logic of war and the politics of radical ethno-nationalism, the WB have entered a period of stability and democratization. At different speeds and with distinct goals, this group of states embarked upon a process of transformation in political, economic, social and security terms. This was an enormous challenge in a context where the quest for integration into Western organizations, such as the EU or NATO, became a priority. In Croatia, the post-communist transition course involved profound changes in governance and polity that followed liberal democratic principles. This implied the strengthening of the civil society; the reconfiguration of legislative and institutional practices, including the development of political parties, and the adaptation of a transparent electoral system; and, the gradual liberalization of the economy (economic reforms based on privatization and competitive practices). These political and economic procedures and practices at the state level were influenced by the conditionality and opportunities associated with membership in the EU.

Croatia is experiencing an improvement in human rights protection and advancement in the democratic standards performance. This tendency emerged more clearly since the EU offered the candidate status. The perspective of EU membership seems like a worthwhile reward for the country and it has become a vital objective for all the political elites. The positive trend in the political reform process and the improvement of democratic performance in Croatia since 2000 confirm that an eventual membership represents a real incentive to proceed with difficult domestic political reforms. However, the development has been limited by

continued regional instability and by internal structural constraints at the political, economic and social levels, what reminds us that the positive political changes are not self-sustainable, long-standing and really embedded within the societies.

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