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FEUTURE EU 28 Country Report

Croatia

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1. History of EU-Turkey Relations¹

1.1. Croatia, in principle, supports Turkey's EU membership

Croatia and Turkey officially started negotiations with the European Union (EU) on the same day: 3 October 2005. Unlike Turkey, Croatia joined the EU in 2013. As a new member state, Croatia has not been an actor of relevance in the long history of negotiations between Turkey and the EU and seems to prefer to remain so. Aware of difficulties related to Turkey's accession to the EU and of the internal challenges that Turkey is facing today, Croatia appears to prefer to stay on the margins of the negotiation procedure. It seems that the enthusiastic support for Turkey's EU membership is becoming more cautious than in the past.

Croatia traditionally considers itself a friend of Turkey and empathizes with a country going through a lengthy and demanding accession process such as Turkey. Croatia, therefore, would not want to find itself in a situation in which it creates obstacles for Turkey. Additionally, there are no open bilateral issues between the two countries that would link the Turkish accession negotiations to Croatian domestic politics.

Croatia views EU-Turkey relations through several angles: there is a general understanding of Turkey as an important partner for the EU; at the same time, concerns expressed by some EU member states with regard to recent political and security developments in Turkey are being taken seriously.

The conservative coalition government of Croatian Democratic Union and The Bridge of Independent Lists (HDZ-MOST) along with the President of the Republic who comes from HDZ (a party established by the first Croatian President Franjo Tudjman) are generally more favourable to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Social-democrats and other more liberal political, academic and civic actors are much more critical with respect to media censoring and other authoritarian tendencies in Turkey.

As a pro-enlargement member state, Croatia supports accession of all candidate countries on the condition that they meet the criteria laid down by the EU. This is justified by its own experience since Croatia had to fulfill all conditions in order to qualify for EU membership.

The situation in Turkey is observed from a distance and EU-Turkey relations are judged in a broader framework of national interests and positions of other member states, in particular those to which Croatia feels close, such as Germany and Austria, as well as the Visegrad countries.

¹ The EU 28 Country Reports were completed before the Turkish Constitutional Referendum on 16 April 2017. Thus, the report does not take account of any potential changes in the national debate that might have occurred in the meantime.

1.2. A narrative oscillating between a recent and a more distant past

The debate on a potential membership of Turkey in the EU, as in most other countries, intertwines several lines of thinking. Traditionally, Croatia would identify itself as the “other” in relation to Turkey, being a country whose historical enemy was the Ottoman Empire and which built its national identity to a large extent on the history of battles against the Ottomans. Particularly, the battle in which Croatia, in cooperation with Venetians, defeated Ottomans at Sinj in Dalmatia in 1717 is commemorated.

A concept of *antemurale Christianitatis*, which sees Croatia as a country that stood at the borders of Europe defending it from the Ottoman invasions, therefore, resonates vividly in the country’s history.

However, today Croatia is building a new partnership with Turkey by acknowledging the Turkish support for its quest for independence in the 1990s and by recognizing Turkey as regional power linking Europe and Asia.

With respect to norms and values, conservative and liberal circles maintain expectedly divergent views on developments in Turkey. Conservative circles demonstrate a certain degree of understanding for the re-introduction of traditional values in the society (such as a prominent role for religion) and in general more tolerance for curbing liberal values that they consider as alien and imported in the Croatian society. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to focus on the suppression of freedoms, a faltering human rights record, squashing minority rights, media censoring and other forms of restrictions to liberal democracy. In their view, these changes warrant concern and justify the freezing of Turkey’s accession negotiations.

Both liberal and conservative circles, however, stress the importance of Turkey as a military power, an ally within NATO, an advancing economy and a country with growing foreign policy ambitions, situated in one of the most strategically relevant parts of the globe. Therefore, the dominant view is that Turkey cannot be ignored but, instead, the EU needs to find a way to constructively engage with an ever-changing Turkey.

1.3. Broad panoply of issues

Migration has been one of the most important areas of concern and policy debate, especially in the context of the 2015 refugee crisis. The general understanding is that Turkey itself is in an unfavourable position catering for nearly three million refugees, while the EU was also facing a breaking point after receiving a million refugees. Still, perception of Turkey is precarious, depending on a number of interrelated issues, not only a humanitarian one. While Croatian officials refrain from openly criticizing Turkey, media and independent analysts are adding to the migration debate views that assess also the Turkish role in the Syrian war and the politics of President Erdoğan, including the Kurdish question.

Possible visa liberalization is also discussed in the context of migration. This discussion includes Syrian refugees and potential Turkish asylum seekers alike. The perception is that, one way or

another, migration from Turkey will remain high: as a transit country as long as the war in Syria does not end and as a country of origin as long as the political situation in Turkey does not improve. Croatia officially supports the liberalization of the visa regime for Turkish citizens, following the fulfilment of benchmarks in the negotiation process.

The economic and trade relations with Turkey also represent a focal interest. The EU has been for years the biggest investor in Turkey. Political rifts may affect economic relations, yet it is unclear to which extent. The relationship between Turkey and Croatia are good, but the potentials significantly exceed the level of current economic cooperation. Since bilateral trade is relatively low, business opportunities were seen primarily through a prism of possible Turkish investments in Croatia, primarily in tourism. With the perception of a deterioration of the security situation in Turkey following the attempted coup in July 2016, Croatia's tourist industry expects to profit from tourists who will, instead of Turkey, choose Croatia as destination for their summer vacation.

Finally, Turkey's role in European efforts to diversify energy supply is noted. Croatia considers Turkey as one of the key actors in the realization of the Southern Gas Corridor projects and monitors with great attention the implementation of the TAP-TANAP (Trans-Adriatic Pipeline-Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline) project and its link with IAP (Ionian-Adriatic Pipeline). Finally, Turkey's relations with Russia are also closely watched. This is largely linked to security in Europe and in the region of South-Eastern Europe in particular. With respect to the prospects of EU accession for candidate and potential candidate countries in the Western Balkans, both Russia and Turkey are now perceived by a number of analysts as countries that do not support the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans any longer unconditionally. They compete with the EU for influence in the Western Balkans and this competition may be a source of various tensions.

2. Future of EU-Turkey Relations

2.1. Traditional support for Turkey's EU membership in new circumstances

General views on the future of EU-Turkey relations in Croatia seem to be influenced by the traditionally good own bilateral relationship without open issues, as well as by Turkey's role in the security and stability of South-Eastern Europe. Turkey is perceived as a specific country in the European neighbourhood: a member of G20 and a regional power with a unique relationship with the EU. The country is considered to be an important partner in solving the refugee crisis, and an important actor in the energy sector.

The main concerns of independent analysts and civil society activists regarding a possible Turkish EU membership relate to its readiness and ability to carry out necessary reforms and sustain democratic standards, respect for human rights and a functional secular state.

Some Croatian politicians fear that Turkey's EU accession might cause institutional problems in the EU, noting that Turkey would become the second "biggest" member state after Germany according to number of votes in the Council and number of seats in the European Parliament. Serious concerns also relate to different attitudes of citizens in countries like Germany and France, which are not supportive of Turkey's membership for different reasons.

The Ottoman historical heritage has not raised ideological concerns in Croatia related to an eventual EU membership of Turkey. Religious reasons are neither triggering wide-range concerns nor seen as crucial obstacles. However, numerous concerns were raised by independent analysts and civil society representatives regarding developments that followed the failed military coup attempt on 15 July 2016, i.e. extensive suspensions, dismissals, arrests and detentions. Problems related to the rule of law and respect of fundamental rights, freedom of expression and media, as well as the possibility of reintroducing the death penalty raised concerns in Croatia. Another issue that attracted attention is the process of negotiations regarding the re-unification of Cyprus.

There does not seem to be a significant difference between the position of political and economic elites and the population as a whole. Political and economic elites seem to be more supportive of Turkey than in some other EU member states. The same applies to the public support, according the Eurobarometer reports. The support for Turkey's accession to the EU in Croatia in the period 2005-2010 was almost twice as high as the EU average. Namely, in 2005 some 57 percent of Croatian citizens supported the idea of Turkey becoming a part of the EU in the future (whilst the EU average was 32 percent only). In 2010, the support for Turkey's membership was 64 percent in Croatia, while the EU average was less than a half of it (30.5 percent). Secondly, it can be observed that support for Turkey in Croatia increased in the mentioned five-year period, whilst the EU average slightly decreased.

2.2. Focusing on the open-ended nature of accession negotiations

Concepts of differentiated integration such as "privileged" or "strategic" partnership, were not widely debated in Croatia. However, in discussions on Turkey's prospects regarding eventual EU membership, the substance of its specific Negotiation Framework is frequently mentioned, as a relevant starting position. The Negotiation Framework of Croatia, which started negotiations with the EU on the same day as Turkey, guaranteed full membership as its final outcome. Turkey was in a quite different position. Although the shared objective of the negotiations with Turkey was accession, the negotiations were envisaged to be an open-ended process, whose outcome was not guaranteed beforehand. Turkey still had the obligation to fulfil all Copenhagen accession criteria but, in case the country would not be in a position to fully assume all obligations of membership, it should be guaranteed that Turkey would be "fully anchored in the European structures through the strongest possible bond" (see: Negotiation Framework for Turkey, point 2). According to Croatian politicians, a certain kind of privileged partnership might be beneficial

in any case, given the demographic and economic size of the country. Considering current developments, the step towards such a solution could be an upgrade of trade relations with Turkey at the EU level, or by other means currently discussed at the Council of the EU. Finally, there are opinions in academic circles in Croatia that, whatever the outcome of accession negotiations, the Turkish case might be too complex to be admitted, primarily because of its potential influence in EU institutions due to the size of the country, but also its heterogeneity. At the same time, Turkey itself is questioning its willingness to become a full EU member state. Most of the observers perceive that the future relations between EU and Turkey will continue to be determined through slow negotiations, obstacles and delays in the coming years.

2.3. Events in Turkey and in Croatia that affected the debate

One of the recent events that influenced the public debate on EU-Turkey relations was the visit of President Erdoğan along with a large delegation to Croatia (April 2016), on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the recognition of Islam as an official religion in Croatia. The aim of this state visit was also to strengthen mutual economic relations, particularly the Turkish investments in Croatia. It was orchestrated with great pomp including security precautions and a ceremonial reception in the national theatre. The conservative Croatian government and the Turkish President stressed the importance of good relations between the two nations and discussed potentials for increasing bilateral cooperation.

Vocal criticism was raised by civil society activists, who protested against the fact that Croatia was hosting the Turkish President, who they held responsible for gross violations of human rights and media freedom.

A series of events following the attempted military coup in Turkey in July 2016 attracted much attention and raised serious concerns of analysts and civil society regarding the direction the country was taking. In this context, the sudden withdrawal of the Turkish Ambassador in the autumn 2016 from Croatia, without clear explanation, was an additional reason for concern.

3. EU-Turkey Relations and the Neighbourhood/Global Scene

3.1. The war in Syria as a game changer

Croatia perceives Turkey as a country with justified ambitions to conduct an active foreign policy in its neighbourhood and the broader region. In light of the large population, strong economy and strategic geopolitical position, it is not surprising that Turkey wants to emancipate its foreign policy and present itself as a regional power.

However, in light of Turkey's unsuccessful "strategic depth" doctrine, this perception has slightly changed in Croatia. Now, there is understanding that Turkey may have miscalculated its power

and ability to change the situation in the neighbourhood to its own advantage. Its actions, moreover, have been seen as detrimental not only to Turkey but also the EU.

Turkey's backing of the opposition in Syria was initially supported by Croatia. The latter joined the Friends of Syria Group and the then foreign minister Vesna Pusić attended the second Group's conference in Istanbul in 2012. Since then, however, Croatia has distanced itself from Turkey and the anti-Assad policies of the Turkish government.

Turkey's clashes with the Kurdish minority and its military operations in the neighbourhood directed against the Kurds are also not met with support from some Croatian analysts, although such views are not widely expressed. Croatian politicians are silent on this topic, both in the government and in the opposition.

3.2. Active role in the Balkans

Turkey has been described as an ally of Croatia during the violent break-up of the former Yugoslavia. The former foreign minister Mate Granić explained that Turkey played a positive role in ending the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H): namely, the friendship of late presidents of Croatia and Turkey Franjo Tuđman and Süleyman Demirel was instrumental in ending the war between Croats and Bosnians in B&H. Indeed, Demirel was the only foreign dignitary who attended Tuđman's funeral.

Yet, the partnership from the recent past has been affected by the new developments in Southeastern Europe. Croatia supports EU enlargement in the region, with particular attention to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Turkey, drifting away from the EU and with growing authoritarian and conservative tendencies, is no longer viewed exclusively as a stabilizing actor in the Balkans. Indeed, while there was a prospect for active Turkish accession negotiations with the EU, interests in the region of both the EU and Turkey converged. Currently, the perception in Croatia is that its neighbours in the Western Balkans may no longer view Turkey as a partner of the EU but as an alternative to it, much in the same light as Russia is.

It is the official position of Croatia that Turkey and the EU still share the same goal of stability in the region and support the membership of the Western Balkan countries in the EU. Therefore, a "wait and see" approach is adopted for the time being by Croatia. There is understanding that Turkey is struggling with serious issues of internal and external security as well as authoritarian trends and that its foreign policy activities in Southeastern Europe may be on hold for a while.

3.3. Pragmatic partnership

Relations between the United States and Russia affect Europe, in particular Turkey due to its geographical position. The view in Croatia is that the conflict in Syria and the situation in the Middle East engage global and regional powers, with Turkey being one of the key actors in these events. Moreover, it is pointed out in Croatia that, in order to find solutions for a successful approach to migration and to enhance Europe's energy security, the EU needs Turkey.

The EU's global ambitions would have a higher prospect of success if the European Union had a stable, prosperous and democratic Turkey on its side. It is believed in Croatia that both the EU and Turkey have benefitted from the accession process thus far. Thus, it seems obvious that it is in the interest of both sides to foster good relations and overcome the existing obstacles. Creativity in politics with respect for the position of the other may lead to new solutions that would be mutually beneficial.

However, authoritarian tendencies, weakening secularism and curbing minority rights has its backlash on Turkey. Its security is already shaken, with the economy to follow. The EU counts on the resilience of the Turkish people to prevail over the current and upcoming challenges.

Yet, for the time being, the ultimate issue in the Croatian debate remains the fear of ISIS, its sowing of terror and propaganda for further radicalization among Muslims in the Middle East, Europe as well as in Southeastern Europe. Although not officially stated, there is a sense that if Turkey would stand unequivocally and without reservation in fighting ISIS and radicalization, the understanding of its own hardships and tolerance for some of its oddities would grow. As always in politics, pragmatism prevails.

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