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Croatia's Accession to the Eurozone and Schengen Area

Potential Impact on South East Europe

Predrag Jureković and Sandro Knezović (Eds.)

Study Group Information

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Potential Impact on South East Europe

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Croatia's Support for Macedonia's EU Integration: Between Opportunities and Expectations

Rade Rajkovchevski and Aleksandar Pavleski

Introduction

Relations between Croatia and North Macedonia are mainly positive, which is key to the further development of this cooperation and reflects North Macedonia's desire to be given continued Croatian support. An atmosphere of bilateral cooperation characterises North Macedonia's European integration process, as it did the process of accession to NATO.

The history of cooperation between the two countries covers a period of slightly more than three decades. It began when both countries gained independence from the former Yugoslavia (1991), continued with the countries joining the Stabilization and Association Process (2000–2001) and the EU and Euro-Atlantic integration process. Croatia made serious steps forward in joining NATO (2009), the EU (2013), and the Schengen Area (2023).

North Macedonia, pursuing similar strategic goals, made progress by joining NATO (2020), but has not yet achieved EU membership. The trajectory of North Macedonia's EU integration process has not only been burdened by disputes with neighbouring countries (Greece and Bulgaria), but also by internal problems (lack of skills in Macedonian diplomacy, numerous corruption scandals involving officials, and developments typical of young democracies) and EU issues related to inconsistent EU enlargement policy and unclear EU priorities.

The effectiveness of Croatia's support for North Macedonia and its commitment to it, in addition to the possibilities of benefiting from Croatia's experiences in the transformation and EU integration process, are conditioned by two real and separate components. The first involves domestic Macedonian processes and relates to national capacities. These factors may not only affect Croatian support, i.e. the way in which state policy is implemented *vis-à-vis* countries supporting North Macedonia in the integration, but also the

overall approach of the government in relation to EU requirements regarding aspirant countries, such as fighting corruption, guaranteeing the rule of law, etc.

The second component of the analysis is the way Croatia technically and politically supports North Macedonia in the European integration processes. This component depends on and is analysed in the context of Croatia's national policy regarding bilateral support and assistance to the countries of the Southeast European region and in the context of Croatia's role in the EU's approach to enlargement.

Current Tendencies Regarding Macedonia's EU Integration

Between April and May 2023, the International Republican Institute (IRI) conducted a survey in which citizens expressed their view of the situation in North Macedonia, their trust in politicians and the political system, as well as the country's European perspectives. Almost 80% of the citizens declared that they are in favour of EU membership, but half of the citizens do not support the current negotiation process, i.e. the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the Constitution and other concessions requested by Bulgaria (Kapital, 2023). Two thirds of the total number of respondents (65%) do not agree with the constitutional changes necessary to complete the phase of opening membership negotiations. A solid majority of 80% of ethnic Macedonians are against constitutional changes, 53% of respondents who identify as ethnic Albanians support these amendments (Velinovska, 2023).

Contrary to the indicated percentages, it is significant that EU officials state that they see the future of North Macedonia within the framework of the Union. In his statement given at the Bled Strategic Forum in 2023, the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, clearly indicated his conviction and confidence that the future of North Macedonia is in the EU. He stated that the relations between North Macedonia and the EU were excellent and he welcomed the decision to start the process required for the constitutional amendments. Together with Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski he declared that "the constitutional amendments represent a unique and unrepeatable chance for the progress and prosperity of North Macedonia within the EU" (Nova Makedonija, 2023a).

In fact, from the moment the issue of constitutional amendments regarding the Bulgarian minority was raised there has been wide international support for North Macedonia regarding the implementation of the amendments in the pursuit of EU membership. However, the Macedonian citizens witnessed the same kind of international support in the period before the Prespa Agreement (2018) and the name change to North Macedonia. This change was presented to the citizens as the last obstacle before the start of negotiations with the EU, and the question put to the voters in the 2018 Referendum was formulated to that end.

The events which followed the name change – i.e. the start of the negotiation process vetoed by Bulgaria – had a significant impact on Macedonian citizens' acceptance of any new constitutional amendments. Hence, it is very likely that the ruling Macedonian political parties will initiate the constitutional changes, which will then be rejected in Parliament and face defeat in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

One of the (less likely) exit strategies is the proposal that the constitutional amendments will be made immediately after North Macedonia completes the negotiation process, in order not to face "additional conditions and demands of this nature" during the process. However, if the current coalition fails to secure a sufficient majority of votes in the National Assembly to process the constitutional amendments, it is highly likely that in the pre-election period (the first half of 2024), the intensity of the issue concerning the integration of North Macedonia in the EU will decrease.

Likewise, the opposition parties in North Macedonia do not have a clear strategy on how to proceed regarding Macedonian EU integration. Currently, they are loud in their pressure on the ruling coalition to call an early election, without offering any information on how they will manage the process of (not) making the Bulgarian minority a part of the Macedonian constitution. Their desire to head the government is larger than either their vision or their capacity to guide the country through this irrational bilateral dispute, which has become a part of the EU enlargement legend.

Macedonian Citizens' Perception of States and Organizations as Strategic Partners and Contributors to the Development of Macedonian Society

How Do Macedonian Citizens Perceive the Republic of Croatia and Its Political Authorities regarding Its Role and Influence in the Region and the EU?

The latest surveys show that Macedonian citizens do not identify Croatia as a strategic partner in the achievement of state interests related to European integration, and in other relevant spheres of cooperation and influence (economy, culture, support of democratic development etc.). 45.3% perceive Serbia as the friendliest country, the US is number 1 in terms of contributions to the country's democratic development, and the EU comes first regarding contributions to economic development, according to the initial results of the survey conducted by the PRESPA Institute (April–May 2023, sample: 1,500 respondents – NM, 2023; Gerov, 2023). The most important criteria for the perception of Serbia as the friendliest country are common values and "interests", not democracy or the economy. Accordingly, the USA, the EU and Serbia contributed the most to democratic and economic development. Culture, religion, and tradition are the most important values for all age groups, and relations with neighbours are neither good nor bad. Concerning the question which country or international alliance/union is the closest friend of North Macedonia (after Serbia), 9% state Kosovo, 6.8% the United States, with Turkey at fourth place with 6.7%. Albania is considered a friendly country by 5.6% of respondents, the EU by 5.1%, Germany by 1.5%, and 1.1% of respondents stated NATO.

In the responses, the perceptions and convictions concerning the way certain countries and international organizations act in relation to North Macedonia are striking. The respondents' views are closely related to the way citizens interpret the messages sent by the official representatives of the political authorities in the states and international organizations in the context of the internal developments in North Macedonia and/or in relation to the challenges faced by North Macedonia on the way to European integration. Thus, citizens' perceptions of certain countries and organizations based on statements made by their political representatives are perceived as friendly (messages of support), as messages that put pressure on North Macedonia, and

as messages neutral in character. The surveys/polls do not provide statistical data on how many of the citizens declare that they do not know or that they do not have an opinion in the context of determining their attitude about which country or international organization is perceived as the friendliest and which country or international organization has contributed to economic, democratic, and other development of North Macedonia.

Reasons for Serbia being regarded as the friendliest country are the messages sent by Serbian political authorities on good neighbourliness, the absence of unresolved issues (in May 2022 the Serbian Orthodox Church recognized the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and ended the long-term dispute between the two states/churches), the ethnic, cultural, and religious similarities, and the number of mixed marriages. The political authorities in Serbia skilfully exploit the situation of North Macedonia's relations with its neighbours. For example, the fact that Macedonia was forced to change its name (in the context of the dispute with Greece), the demands made by Bulgaria regarding constitutional changes, as well as the dysfunctional cooperation in criminal matters between North Macedonia and Kosovo. For many years, the latter has resulted in the non-extradition of convicted persons by the Kosovar courts in cases related to terrorism and of persons against whom North Macedonia has issued international arrest warrants. Although North Macedonia and Kosovo have signed an agreement on mutual legal assistance in criminal cases, which entered into force in 2012, the practice so far shows a slow and insufficient application of this agreement, primarily by Kosovo. Probably the best proof of this is the fact that North Macedonia has been waiting for 10 years for a positive response from Kosovo on the extradition of two persons (of Albanian nationality) accused of terrorism, i.e. for an event in April 2012 when four young and one middle-aged person (of Macedonian nationality) were killed near Skopje.

The choice of the EU as the international organization that makes the greatest contribution to the economic development of North Macedonia shows that the citizens have a clearer idea of the economic and trade relations between the EU and North Macedonia, because a large share of exports go to the EU, and trade takes place with EU countries.

The contribution of the United States to the democratic development in North Macedonia is reflected in the efforts to promote democratic processes

in the country, the influence and statements of the embassy, but also the overall role of the United States as a strategic partner of North Macedonia. The USA has continued to support democratic processes, also after North Macedonia's accession to NATO. These include measures which benefit society as a whole, such as putting politicians, businesspersons and other public figures on the US blacklist.[1] Usually this happens in response to their participation in major corruption processes, misappropriation of public assets, expropriation of private assets for personal gain or political purposes, or bribery. A place on the US blacklist is also likely in the case of extremism, terrorism and the undermining of the US-sponsored Ohrid Framework Agreement which ended the inter-ethnic clashes in the Republic of Macedonia in 2001 (Price, 2022; Marusic, 2023; Euronews Albania, 2023; CNN World Biographies, 2023; RFE/RL's Balkan Service, 2022, BIRN, 2009).

How the citizens perceive certain countries (such as Kosovo) which do not contribute to the development of Macedonian society is surprising. In the case of Albania and Turkey, the citizens recognize the support of the political authorities of both countries in relation to the disputes which Greece and Bulgaria have in North Macedonia, but also the continued support provided by Turkey until North Macedonia's full membership of NATO.

Germany ranks relatively low in the public survey results (1.5%), which is in contrast to the economic parameters, i.e., the majority of Macedonian exports go to Germany. Germany supported many of the current EU countries and members states from the Balkans during the EU enlargement process and was proactive in shaping public opinion in North Macedonia concerning the adoption of the Prespa Agreement. Macedonian citizens probably expected Germany to be more proactive regarding the French proposal signed by the EU and North Macedonia and adopted by the Parliaments of North Macedonia and Bulgaria (mid 2022) concerning negotiations with EU.

Austria is not among the countries and organizations which Macedonian citizens consider friendly and which contribute to a certain form of development of North Macedonia, although it is actually the most dynamic and

[1] Putting people on the US blacklist effectively bans them from entering, but in addition, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) imposes economic sanctions on them.

consistent country in terms of supporting the integration of the countries of the Western Balkans (and Southeast Europe in general) into the EU. The situation is similar with Slovenia and Croatia, which are expected to provide the greatest support to Macedonia on the road to the EU. North Macedonia has no open disputes with either country and shares many similarities, based on common values and a shared past.

The History and Developments of the Bilateral Relations between North Macedonia and Croatia

Diplomatic relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Croatia were established on 30 March 1992. Regarding the available data on the bilateral relations of both countries, it can be noted that the cooperation covers a wide range of areas, but also fields which prove to be key for the development of regional cooperation in areas related to the accomplishment of the EU membership criteria (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021; Embassy of the Republic of Croatia in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2010). A number of agreements and memoranda of understanding/cooperation were therefore signed between 1992 and 2016 concerning cooperation in economy, education, culture, social care and policy, science and technology, traffic, communications, environment, health, trade and economy, but also in juridical and police/criminal matters, disaster prevention and response, military affairs and Euro-Atlantic issues, minority rights, classified information exchange and others.

There is no doubt that the agreements and memoranda open a wide scope for the establishment and development of bilateral cooperation between North Macedonia and Croatia. In addition, the nurturing and development of cooperation between the two countries can be monitored through the evaluation which North Macedonia receives in the annual reports of the European Commission (EC) on the country's progress. Since 2006, the cooperation between North Macedonia and Croatia has continuously been evaluated as good and without any open issues between the two countries. Former Croatian President Ivo Josipović once stated that although Croatia is not a physical neighbour of North Macedonia, it is still a "neighbour at a distance", due to its history, but also its present (Josipović, 2020). He also pointed out that it is not only the coexistence in the former Yugoslavia that contributes to this closeness between peoples and states, but also numerous

friendships, marriages, cooperation of all kinds and finally the fact that there is no significant dispute between Croatia and North Macedonia.

The similarity between the languages is also a precondition for good cooperation between the public administrations involved in the screening and potentially in the accession negotiations, as many civil servants in North Macedonia cannot speak, write or read English. The language similarity makes it easier to read and understand EU documents in Croatian.

In particular, the analysis of the annual reports of the EC shows that relations with Croatia continue to develop positively and that there is a particularly strong **political cooperation** regarding the EU integration process, with a regular exchange of information on a technical as well as a political level. The 2007 report emphasized that relations with Croatia continue to develop intensively, highlighting the points of the first meeting of the Joint Committee established for the implementation of the bilateral agreement under Article 10 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). In the following reports, covering the period 2008–2014, relations with Croatia were positively evaluated. The reports emphasized that bilateral relations with Croatia were close, which was confirmed by regular bilateral visits at the highest level. The reports also indicated that North Macedonia had a trade surplus with Croatia, one of the country's most important trading partners. The 2014 report noted that relations were further developed by high-level visits and the entry into force of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Agreement (Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023).

The EC reports from 2015–2022 also confirmed the positive relations and cooperation between North Macedonia and Croatia, complemented by more frequent meetings between representatives of the two countries at the highest level (Sitel, 2018; Sitel, 2022). At the same time, it is particularly significant that at such meetings, Croatia continuously highlights its commitment to full support for North Macedonia's full membership in the EU. The exceptionally good cooperation with Croatia is emphasized in the statements made by the political representatives of the two countries (President of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022; President of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021; V.J., 2023). The media coverage in North Macedonia regarding the political meetings and events in relation to the bilateral cooperation between North Macedonia and Croatia has been positive so far.

At the meeting held in Zagreb in 2021 between the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and the President of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski, it was emphasized that Croatia supports the opening of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia, and at the same time the desire for a further strengthening of the economic cooperation and the cooperation in the sphere of the military industry between the two countries (Trkanjec, 2021). At the same meeting, President Pendarovski stated that the two countries are connected by "deep geographical and cultural ties" and that Croatia is one of Skopje's greatest allies.

At the last meeting between the Macedonian and Croatian presidents, at the beginning of April 2023 in Skopje, the good cooperation between the Macedonian and Croatian institutions was confirmed, especially from the aspect of using the Croatian experience in the process of preparations for the start of EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia. On this occasion, the Macedonian President once again expressed his gratitude to Croatia for its overall support for the membership aspirations of North Macedonia in the EU (President of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023). One month later (on 23 May 2023) at the meeting between the ministers of justice on cooperation in the area of capacity building concerning negotiations within the framework of Chapter 23, judiciary and fundamental rights were the main topic of discussion. Additionally, the ministers talked about the possibility of sharing the Croatian experience in the fight against organized crime and corruption (Kocovska, 2023).

The chronology and development of bilateral relations between Croatia and North Macedonia show stable and continuous interstate relations. Croatia's approach to North Macedonia in certain periods deviated from Croatia's general approach to regional cooperation. As the Croatian constitution stipulates that the government and the president are responsible for foreign policy, there is, in contrast to other issues, unity between both political actors regarding North Macedonia.

Croatia's EU Presidency (from 1 January to 30 June 2020) was marked by the Corona crisis, but there is no doubt that Croatia tried to play a proactive role regarding EU enlargement of the region. On the basis of the fourth priority titled "An influential Europe" (Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Croatia, 2020) and included in the Programme of the Croatian Presidency, Croatia

declared that it was committed to a "continued credible and effective enlargement policy, as a pledge towards stability, security and further economic development and mutual connection on the European continent" (ibid.).

In a practical way, the efforts of Croatia's diplomacy can be considered a serious step forward regarding support for North Macedonia's EU integration. Croatian diplomacy significantly contributed to the decision to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania on 24 March 2020, when EU ministers in charge of European issues reached a political agreement to this effect. (Vidačak and Milošić, 2020). Cipek states that the revised methodology for EU membership negotiations is another thing Croatian diplomacy regards as one of its successes. France had a key role in implementing the revised methodology, but sent confusing signals (Cipek, 2020). Against this backdrop, Croatia was consistent during its EU Presidency in its proactive approach towards enlargement policy.

In addition, on 6 May 2020, the EU-Western Balkans Zagreb Summit was held as a high-level political event, which brought the leaders of the EU27, EU institutions, the six leaders of the Western Balkan countries and representatives of international organisations together online. One outcome was a strong message regarding the European prospects for the region and support for the reform efforts of the Western Balkans. Hence, EU member states expressed their commitment to further intensify the EU's engagement by supporting the political, economic, and social transformation of the Western Balkan countries. EU leaders and Western Balkan partners agreed with the Zagreb declaration that "the EU once again reaffirms its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans … [and] the Western Balkans partners reiterated their commitment to the European perspective as their firm strategic choice" (Bandov, 2020).

Croatia's current approach (October 2023) to North Macedonia fits into the EU's general strategic approach to the countries of the Western Balkans and the implementation of the Berlin process which is aimed at overall stability, economic progress, and development. Croatia's efforts and strategic interests in regional cooperation are focused on speeding up the European integration of the Western Balkans. Referring to the main objectives of the Berlin Process (European Commission, 2022), Croatia has been highlighting the need for a stronger regional connectivity at all levels: energy, transport, digital and

human, as some of the crucial factors contributing to economic development, prospects, and jobs. At the end of November 2022, the Croatian Minister of Foreign and European Affairs stated that "the present energy crisis could be managed through a stronger regional cooperation, where Croatia, thanks to its geostrategic position, has the potential to become an energy hub for Central and Southeast Europe, including the Western Balkans" (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia, 2022).

North Macedonia is at the beginning of its accession negotiations with the EU and of the screening process, before the concrete negotiation chapters with the EU are opened (conditioned by the constitutional changes regarding the Bulgarian minority). Practically, the technical cooperation and support provided by Croatia to North Macedonia can be seen through the involvement of the Croatian expert Vladimir Drobnjak in the next processes related to to EU integration (Government of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2022). He, as a former Croatian main negotiator, together with the Macedonian Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European affairs and chief negotiator, started the coordination meetings with the ministers who oversee the clusters and the Working Commission for European integration at the beginning of September 2022.

North Macedonia and Croatia have excellent cooperation in the field of culture, with guest appearances, participation in festivals, poetry readings etc. The two countries continuously sign agreements and memoranda of cooperation in culture, reflected in multi-year cooperation programs (Makfax, 2011; Milchevski and Koroveshovska, 2017). Additionally, through specific initiatives, Croatia provides support to North Macedonia with advice on preserving North Macedonia's rich cultural heritage and the possibility of it being included in the UNESCO list.

The Macedonian Ministry of Culture also supports the Croatian community in Macedonia, while the Croatian-Macedonian friendship society Tangenta is very active in Croatia. Many Macedonian women and men (doctors, artists, businesspeople, etc.) contribute to Croatian society (Josipović, 2020). At the end of October 2022, North Macedonia and Croatia signed the last Agreement on Cultural Cooperation, i.e., the Program for Cultural Cooperation between the Ministry of Culture and Media of the Republic of Croatia and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of North Macedonia for the period

2022–2025 (TRT Balkan, 2022). The two countries see this as a continuation of the tradition of friendship between the two countries and cultures, whereby numerous successful cultural projects are realized between the two countries, between the artists, in theatre, music, literature, film and visual arts, very often in the form of institutional cooperation. At the same time, the act of signing the cooperation agreement was used to open the Cultural and Information Centre of the Republic of North Macedonia in Zagreb.

The economic indicators regarding the cooperation between the two countries do not show strong dynamics and intensity of cooperation.

		Jan–Jul 2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018
Export	Total	4,947.8	8,299.6	6,969.8	5,781.1	6,433.3	5,872.5
	Croatia	66.4	109.0	96.7	81.9	75.5	85.6
Import	Total	6,435.0	12,125.2	9,648.1	7,599.4	8,441.0	7,676.3
	Croatia	68.4	108.6	91.8	93.6	83.2	94.9

Table 1: Exports and imports from the Republic of North Macedonia to the Republic of Croatia and the total trade volume according to the Sectors of Standard International Trade Classification, cumulative data (in million EUR) (State Statistical Office, 2023)

In the analysed period, the trade exchange between the two countries has not exceeded 1.5% in terms of imports and exports. According to the data presented at the meeting between the prime ministers of the two countries in April 2023, Croatia has invested about 108 million euro in Macedonia, and according to the structure of the investments, the biggest investments are in the service/tertiary and food sectors (Racin, 2023). Thus, unlike political and cultural ties, cooperation in industry and trade cannot be said to be a priority in the relations between the two countries.

It is particularly evident that bilateral cooperation and experience sharing is mainly implemented within the framework of various EU funded projects. This means that, out of a total of 50 twinning projects (with North Macedonia as a beneficiary) between 2004 and 2019, Austria appears as the most frequent partner with eight projects, while Germany is in second place, with six projects. Croatia appears as a partner in four projects, generally related to legal and economic issues. Specifically, the projects which involve Croatia focus on (Secretariat for European Affairs, 2019):

1. Strengthening the rule of law.

2. Further development and strengthening of the organizational, administrative and technical capacities of the Audit Authority.

3. Further institutionalization of structured mechanism(s) for cooperation between the Government and civil society.

4. Strengthening the institutional capacity of the National Bank on the road towards membership in the European System of Central Banks (ESCB).

There is no doubt that such EU projects are of great importance for countries because they enable them to achieve concrete and operational results related to the Acquis Communautaire or to match their policies with that of the Union. Such projects make it possible to create new or reformed systems under the full responsibility of the beneficiary countries. At the same time, participation in these projects also makes it possible to establish closer cooperation, develop constructive relations, and build trust between the beneficiary and EU member state partners.

For example, regarding the project "Strengthening the institutional capacity of the National Bank on the road to its membership in the ESCB", the Governor of the National Bank of North Macedonia stated that "the project has achieved significant results in four project components: payment services and systems, banking regulation and supervision, financial account statistics and policy analysis research activities" (National Bank of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2019). This project supported the Macedonian central bank on its way towards alignment with the best European practices and standards, and thus towards membership in the European family of central banks. The Ambassador of the Republic of Croatia in North Macedonia also stated that "the project is tool for bringing peoples together, for developing good and close neighbourly relations, as well as for learning from the beneficiary countries".

There is no doubt that such project-led examples increase the awareness of the benefits arising from participation in the cooperative engagement of all social entities in North Macedonia, especially from an EU integration point

of view. At the same time, it is significant that the positive experience gained from previous cooperation with Croatia also influences other areas and direct local initiatives.

In general, the absence of direct local initiatives (outside of EU projects as drivers for cooperation) by Macedonian authorities and stakeholders with regard to the use of the potential and experience of the Republic of Croatia in the European integration process is noticeable. There are various reasons for this, but they mostly relate to the following factors: insufficient political will (only declarative statements and commitments), absence of financial resources necessary for the implementation of such processes, lack of motivation, commitment and readiness involved in such processes etc.

Croatia's (Strategic) Role in the Integration Processes of the Republic of North Macedonia

What Is the Influence of Croatia's Diplomatic and Political Capacities in the EU? What Influence Do Croatian Diplomats and Politicians Have and at What Level Do They Manifest Their Influence in the Support of Macedonia's European Integration?

Several factors affect the role and influence of Croatia in the EU, such as the fact that Croatia was the last state to join the EU and it may be assumed that Croatia as a small EU country has only limited influence in the EU bodies, conditioned also by low to moderate representativeness.

There are currently (October 2023) twelve Croatian members of the European Parliament. Croatia has the Vice-Chair and two members in the Committee of Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament. In the Council of the EU, national ministers meet regularly to adopt EU laws and coordinate policies. Council meetings are regularly attended by representatives from the Croatian government, depending on the policy area being addressed. The Commissioner nominated by Croatia to the European Commission is Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President for Demography and Democracy. Croatia has nine representatives in the European Economic and Social Committee. This advisory body – representing employers, workers and other interest groups – is consulted on proposed laws, to get a better idea of the possible affects

on work and social situations in member countries. Croatia has nine representatives in the European Committee of the Regions, the EU's assembly of regional and local representatives. This advisory body is consulted on proposed laws, to ensure that these laws take account of the perspective from each region of the EU. Croatia also communicates with the EU institutions through its permanent representation in Brussels (European Union, 2023; European Parliament, 2023).

The question remains as to whether and how Croatia could influence Bulgaria's veto, i.e., the demand for an inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the Macedonian Constitution, which became an integral part of the requirements in the negotiation framework for the opening of the negotiation chapters. Thus, on one occasion, former Croatian president Ivo Josipović (2010–2015) commented:

> It is unfortunate that Croatia, unlike several other EU members, did not react to the Memorandum, which is actually a nationalist pamphlet with which Bulgaria abuses the fact that it is a member of the EU and wants to deny the existence of an established nation with completely unacceptable blackmail… Some say that Bulgarian Prime Minister Borissov is baiting his public to divert attention from corruption scandals. Even if it is so, it is incorrect, un-European (Josipović, 2020).

Conclusion

There is no difference in terms of technical and political support provided by Croatia to North Macedonia. The relations between Croatia and North Macedonia are expected to deepen, and the Croatian technical support of North Macedonia is expected to become much more concrete once the negotiation chapters are opened. The positions of the current and former political authorities in Croatia are also expected to remain consistent and to further enable the deepening of the cooperation and support of North Macedonia in the European integration process.

Continued support for EU membership directly depends on the way the EU and the EU states formulate their relations with North Macedonia, related to the European integration process and the Bulgarian agenda within EU enlargement policy.

The blockades of and concessions made by North Macedonia show that there is indifference regarding the future of North Macedonia's integration into the EU. These circumstances are attended by internal factors which further complicate the situation and contribute to North Macedonia receiving no more than adequate support from the partner countries in the EU, including Croatia. Thus, the amateurism in the implementation of foreign policy by the Macedonian authorities is evident, as are frequent corruption scandals, the absence of the rule of law, the impunity with which serious crimes are committed and the way the state deals with these crimes, etc.

The key question of the quality of support provided by Croatia and other EU members to North Macedonia depends on how the Macedonian authorities manage to achieve the criteria for EU membership, irrespective of the Bulgarian agenda. This question is essential.

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