

## Croatia assumes a tougher stance towards Serbia

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On 8th April Croatia blocked the process of considering an opening another chapter in the accession negotiations between Serbia and the EU. The Croatian government did not present its position and caused this issue to be removed from the agenda of the EU Working Group, benefiting from the fact that decisions about the opening of a chapter require the unanimity of all EU member states. Consequently, this question was not debated at all during that session. From a statement by the Croatian foreign minister, Miro Kovac, it may be inferred that Croatia took this action in order to force Serbia to change its policies in three areas: respect for the rights of national minorities (e.g. guaranteed seats for representatives of minorities at the communal, regional and national levels), the lifting of regulations which enable the Serbian judicial system to prosecute war crimes also committed in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (and thus to prosecute Croatian citizens), and to improve in its co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

### Commentary

- The Serbian regulations regarding the reservations made by Croatia are basically in line with international standards. However Croatia would like to induce Serbia to make larger concessions. Questions regarding minorities are regulated by the Serbia-Croatian agreement of 2003, even though neither country has yet implemented all its provisions and national minorities in Serbia are not bound by an electoral threshold in distributing seats at the national level. The provisions with regard to the prosecution of war crimes have been agreed with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and both Croatia and Serbia apply them in sentencing persons *in absentia*, including citizens of other countries. As for the ICTY, it is currently discontinuing its activity.
- Belgrade responded rather calmly to the measures taken by Zagreb, particularly considering there is a parliamentary election campaign underway in Serbia (polls open on 24th April). The government in Belgrade is hoping, above all, that pressure from EU member states will make Croatia change its position, at least at the present stage of the accession negotiations. Furthermore, Serbian Prime Minister Aleksandar Vucic and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, which is seeking to secure an absolute majority in parliament, believe that they are facing competition mainly from Eurosceptic and pro-Russian parties. Drawing attention to the dispute with Croatia would lead to an increase in support for these very parties.

- The fact that Croatia has raised contentious issues at an early stage of the accession negotiations indicates that it will use the EU enlargement policy to force its neighbours to make concessions. This involves the risk that it will have negative implications for its own long-term goal, that being stabilisation and EU membership for the remaining countries of the Western Balkans. This concerns not only Serbia but also Bosnia and Herzegovina, with which Croatia is involved in many disputes regarding the demarcation of the border, the division of the former Yugoslavia's assets and the interpretation of their common history and the wars of the 1990s (including the prosecution of war crimes and the issue of people who went missing during the war). Croatia's policy will substantially hamper EU measures intended to support the democratic transformation of these countries by way of European integration. Zagreb's uncompromising position already led to the suspension of EU exceptional trade measures with Bosnia and Herzegovina on 1st January 2016.