

Croatia at an International Crossroads
U.S.-Croatian Policy Forum
28 July 2005

On 28 July, the East Europe Project organized a U.S.-Croatian policy forum to discuss Croatia's relations with the United States, the EU and NATO. The roundtable, chaired by CSIS East Europe Director Janusz Bugajski, hosted Croatian Foreign Minister Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic, who presented her views on the challenges facing Croatia.

In his brief introductory remarks, Bugajski outlined some major concerns for Croatia and for the Balkan-Adriatic region as a whole. He believes that Croatia can set a good example for the whole region by qualifying for EU membership and all the benefits that this would entail. However, Bugajski cautioned that Zagreb could fall victim to the EU's internal disarray if the country is excluded from the EU on a long-term basis, and this would send a negative signal throughout the West Balkan region.

In her remarks, Minister Kitarovic focused on three major issues: Croatia's progress toward EU and NATO accession, its compliance with the ICTY (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia) in The Hague, and Croatia's role in regional stability.

Kitarovic described the process of accession as being affected by the crisis around the EU constitution. She expressed hope that the internal deadlock would not distract attention away from the EU enlargement process and affects Croatia's candidacy. Kitarovic stressed that acceptance for membership should be based on individual achievements. Croatia has gained broad approval from the European community for its achievements in building democracy and a market economy, and has been praised for its success in implementing structural reforms. The integration process can further strengthen Croatia's achievements. Croatia hopes to open accession negotiations by the end of this year. Some other challenges lie ahead, such as reforming the judiciary, but the Minister expressed confidence that this would prove successful.

Kitarovic detailed the steps the government has taken to improve its cooperation with The Hague in apprehending the indicted war criminal suspect General Ante Gotovina. In Kitarovic's view, Zagreb has largely complied with the ICTY and has handed over a number of senior figures to the tribunal. The government has also paid for the return of about 90 percent of Serbian refugees and seeks to continue providing reparations and the return of the rest.

On a regional level, the foreign minister pointed out that Croatia sees itself as a leader and active participant in the stabilization process. The country and the region should not burden NATO and the EU with regional instability. Croatia has recently reached an agreement with Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia-Montenegro on the return of refugees and property reparations, and has helped its neighbors Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia-Montenegro, and Macedonia to achieve stability and position themselves for their future EU integration. Croatia intends to establish an environment in which countries from the

region will share expertise on specific issues and build administrative capacity. The start of EU negotiations would send a powerful message to Zagreb's neighbors and improve the image of the region.

Kitarovic also stressed the vital role played by civil society in policy decisions in the West, which she considers a positive example for Croatia. However, she added that Croatian citizens are becoming increasingly euro-skeptic, although support for the EU and NATO still prevails. Kitarovic detailed the steps that the government needs to take in order to build on the momentum and improve communication with the public. In her conclusion, she appealed to U.S. policymakers to help Croatia deal with the challenges that lie ahead.

Discussion

Negative aspects of the delay in EU accession:

The increased politicization of the ICTY can delay or jeopardize Croatia's EU entrance. Indefinite delay will send negative messages to other countries in the region that are building democratic systems and will compromise the image of Croatia and the Western Balkans as a whole

Government-citizen outreach

Kitarovic reiterated her country's commitment to enhance the role of its citizens in the EU integration process as a way to curb growing euro-skepticism. The leadership organizes forums to reach out to the public and address their concerns. For example, the government recently conducted polls that found that about 90 percent of Croatian citizens are concerned with their employment, social security, and social benefits as the country enters the Union. The authorities will make sure to address those issues during the EU accession process. In terms of Croatia's regional role, citizens need to understand that cross-border cooperation serves Croatia's best interests.

The status of Kosova, Serbia and Montenegro

Kitarovic reemphasized Croatia's leadership in regional stability. She stated that her country is interested in helping to strengthen institutions and support human rights. However, Croatia has no specific interest in the internal arrangements of neighboring states, but will provide support in all manner of reform issues including military restructuring and modernization. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, Zagreb would like to see a strengthening of central government institutions and in Macedonia Zagreb is interested in the full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement.

Croatia's contribution to NATO and counter- terrorism

The Minister stressed the importance of Croatian-Slovenian bilateral cooperation and offered examples of her country's commitment to regional and international security, such as the medical and military expertise it contributes to the US-led operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as its involvement in UN peace-keeping missions.

Security reform

The Croatian Minister of the Interior has presented the EU with an Action Plan, which involves the restructuring of the intelligence services and the military. This would help combat organized criminal networks and foster cooperation with neighboring countries. Croatia has proven its willingness to cooperate with the EU and The Hague in sharing information with the Tribunal and other bodies.

Croatia-U.S. relations

Kitarovic described Croatia's relations with the U.S. as good and improving in various arenas, including exchange programs and military cooperation. She hopes that the U.S. can help resolve the outstanding issues with the ICTY but stressed that Washington should not compete with the EU in security issues.

Croatia's vision of Europe

There are three dimensions to this vision. First, Croatia in a united Europe will expand economic opportunities among new member states and foster political cooperation. Second, Croatia will work toward the EU original vision, which is to prevent conflicts. This aim is especially important for countries in the former Yugoslavia. And third, Croatia will work within the Lisbon Strategy to raise living standards for all European citizens.